

Martin Jay
*Drifting into Dangerous Waters:
The Separation of Aesthetic Experience from
the Work of Art*

Modernization, runs a familiar story, is typified by the increasing differentiation of value spheres, each with its own immanent logic and relative autonomy. Initially expressed in philosophical terms by Kant, whose three critiques neatly divide the mental world into cognitive, ethical and aesthetic realms, the process was given sociological grounding in the writings of Max Weber, who explored the institutional underpinnings of the differentiation based on specialization of function and the creation of separate cultures of expertise. In his more recent defense of the project of modernity, Jürgen Habermas has soberly appraised the benefits and costs of the splits among the spheres as well as between them and an allegedly prior lifeworld of unreflective practices out of which the spheres emerged. In the tradition broadly circumscribed by these three names, the differentiation of value spheres is by and large acknowledged as a progressive or at least irreversible process, which has allowed the clarification of theoretical issues and the increased efficiency that often accompanies a division of labor. While what Habermas has called the troubling »colonization« of one realm by another may be problematic, the solution has been the restoration of a balance rather than an overcoming of the distinctions themselves.

Against such a reading, a formidable array of critics has bemoaned the loss of the allegedly integrated world that preceded the split into distinct and incommensurable value spheres. Mobilizing the now familiar rhetoric of dissociation of sensibility, alienation or diremption, these critics yearn to dedifferentiate, or at least render more permeable the boundaries between the spheres. They have sought ways to restore a condition of reconciliation or harmony that they believe once existed or at least posit it as a normative goal for a future in which the putative wounds of modern life would be healed. What has become transcendent and abstract, they hope to restore to immanent concreteness, and perhaps in so doing reenchant a world from which meaning seems to have fled or retreated into isolated enclaves. Even those critics normally placed in the postmodernist camp, who dismiss such a quest as little more than nostalgia for an imaginary prelapsarian bliss that never obtained and never will, are no less hostile to the alleged autonomy

and self-sufficiency of the three value spheres, whose boundaries and limits they eagerly transgress or rather claim are always already self-transgressed.

In what follows, I do not want to add another round to this now familiar debate, which has taken many different forms and at times spilled out over the walls of the academy to inspire fervent movements of cultural, religious and political renewal. Instead, I want to hone in on one corner of it, in which a differentiation within a differentiation has taken place. That is, I want to examine the consequences within the aesthetic sphere of the distinction between works or objects of art and what has come to be called »aesthetic experience.« I will have to ask your indulgence for not attempting a serious analysis of what might count as an object or work of art, itself a distinction that cannot be entirely ignored. I simply don't have the time to rehearse the debates generated by Nelson Goodman's path-breaking *Languages of Art* with its opposition of »autographic« and »allographic« works, the former understood as singular, material objects, like paintings, with claims to authenticity based on their production history, the latter as ideal objects, like musical compositions or works of literature, with the ability to generate an infinity of valid instantiations.¹ Nor will I be able to consider the further refinement between immanent and transcendent works recently introduced by Gérard Genette, the former implying identity between the work and its material instantiation (or, if allographic, instantiations), the latter suggesting the ways in which works can exceed those instantiations and produce plural aesthetic effects.² I will simply take as given the heuristic usefulness of the distinction between art object, however it may be defined, and the experience it generates. In so doing, I hope to provide some insight into the dangers involved when either the differentiations of modernity become too firmly reified or conversely when the desire to overcome them results in a problematic confusion or conflation of categories, leading to that drift into dangerous waters suggested by my title.

Although an awareness of the specificity of a variant of experience that might be called aesthetic has been discerned as far back as Pythagoras, it was perhaps not until the 19th century that the center of gravity in aesthetic discourse decisively shifted from the idea of beauty assumed to reside in objects in the world to the experiences of the humans who responded to them. The shift was evidenced, *inter alia*, by the ascendancy of psychological accounts of that experience in the scientific work of Gustav Fechner and others

¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, 1968).

² Gérard Genette, *The Work of Art: Immanence and Transcendence*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Ithaca, 1997).

in the 1860's and the general cult of experience in the so-called »philosophies of life« later in the century, in which intensity of experience (in the sense of vital *Erlebnis*, rather than cognitive or dialectical *Erfahrung*) was the highest value.³ The ground, however, was already laid in the 18th century with the development of a distinct branch of philosophical discourse focusing on »art,« a generic category under which all of the separate Muses were subsumed.⁴ That discourse, it is often noted, emerged at a time when objects that had previously been revered as sacred and played a role in religious worship or were appreciated as emblems of social or political power were redescribed and newly legitimated as works possessing purely artistic value. As Hegel was among the first to point out in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, the cadavers of dead cults could be revived through redescription as living works of art. No longer expected to imitate an ideal world, illustrate a mythic story, or recreate a historical event, they could be justified in self-referential terms privileging form over content or function. The recontextualization of such objects in the heterotopic, atemporal space of the public museum, the classical example being the transformation of the palace of the Louvre during the French Revolution into a repository of the nation's cultural patrimony, accompanied and abetted the new discourse, which also emerged in the wake of an accelerated market for objects of beauty by private collectors outside of the aristocracy or church. Concomitant with the change was the new distinction between a fine artist and merely skilled artisan, neatly symbolized by the decision to exclude engravers from the newly created Royal Academy of the Arts in London in 1768.

These aspects of the story have been widely remarked. What is perhaps less frequently realized is that at virtually the same moment that freshly redefined artworks were being freed from their entanglement in religious, political or utilitarian contexts, allowed to circulate in a new network of value, at once cultural and economic, and housed in secular temples of culture open to the people, they were paradoxically losing their integrity as self-sufficient entities in the world, definable in intrinsic terms as objective exemplars of universal beauty. In the vocabulary made familiar by Walter Benjamin, this loss meant the progressive dissipation of the cultic aura that

³ See the discussion in Władysław Tatarkiewicz, »Aesthetic Experience: The Early History of the Concept,« *Dialectics and Humanism*, 1 (1973); and »Aesthetic Experience: the Last Stages in the History of a Concept,« *Dialectics and Humanism*, 1 (1974). The importance of the »philosophy of life« is argued in Richard Shusterman, »The End of Aesthetic Experience,« *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55, 1 (1997), p. 29.

⁴ For a recent discussion of the problematic implications of that generic subsumption, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Ca., 1996).

surrounded such entities, an aura predicated on the presence of a unique object that was distant and distinct from the beholder. Although it is undeniable that some of the numinous atmosphere clinging to sacred objects was transferred to certain fetishized works of elite art, whose cultural capital was accordingly high, the philosophical legitimation of that transfer tacitly abandoned the claim that such objects possessed an aesthetic version of the religious notion of »real presence,« an incarnation of ultimate value that was prior to the beholder's response to it. In a context of increased openness to cultural difference, which mirrored the uneven, but widening toleration of religious pluralism and appreciation of geographical diversity, absolute and universal hierarchies of beauty were harder to maintain. The classical standards of a Boileau, confidently grounded in an objectivist belief in the order of nature, were challenged by the »sentimentalism« of a Dubos, who focused instead on the feelings of those who responded to specific works.⁵ Increasingly, in fact, 18th-century aesthetic theory shifted attention to the experience of that beholder or the community of beholders. As David Hume famously put it in his essay »Of the Standard of Taste,« »beauty is no quality in the things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.«⁶

The Greek *aísthesis*, the origin of the Latin word *Aesthetica* used by Alexander Baumgarten for his two-volume work of 1750 and 1758, implied gratifying corporeal perception, the subjective sensual response to objects rather than objects themselves. One of its antithetical terms was *noesis*, which signified pure conceptual thought separated from the senses. Another was *poiesis*, the active making of objects artistic or otherwise. Some of that activism may have been retained in the ancillary notion of taste, with its connotation

⁵ For a still useful account of the transition, see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Boston, 1955), chapter 7.

⁶ David Hume, »Of the Standard of Taste,« in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 230. Later in the essay, Hume does retreat from the anarchic implications of this statement and asserts the likelihood that »the principles of taste [are] nearly, if not entirely the same in all men,« (p. 241), but adds that few are educated to realize what they are. Here in a nutshell, we have the perennial problem of reconciling Hume's skeptical side with his naturalist one. For a good short account of his thoughts on aesthetics, see Peter Jones, »Hume's Literary and Aesthetic Theory,« in David Fate Norton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge, 1992). He underscores the importance of social context and conventions in Hume's account of judgment. For a defense of his position against Kant's, see George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1996).

of tactile intervention in the world,⁷ which implied experience as experimentation. But even here the emphasis was on the emotional, even irrational reception of art epitomized by the »je ne sais quoi« attitude of ineffability that became emblematic of the retreat from conceptualization and production. As John Dewey was later to note with chagrin, the very concept of the »aesthetic,« when set apart from the overlapping, but not equivalent term »artistic,« tends to render experience as »appreciative, perceiving and enjoying,«⁸ rather than productive or creative. Although the discourse concerning aesthetic judgment that culminated in Kant's third *Critique* went beyond the passive and conventionalist subjectivism of taste represented by Hume and sought more universal criteria, it too focused on the response rather than the object *per se*. Kant did, to be sure, provide an account of the genius who created without criteria – a productive correlate of the beholder, who, as we will see, judges without them as well – the main emphasis of his aesthetics was on reception.⁹

This is not the place to trace the complex ways in which the concept of aesthetic experience was developed by such Enlightenment theorists as Baumgarten, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Kames and Kant, or to untangle the web of meanings surrounding the crucial term »taste,« but a few central points need to be made.¹⁰ First, whether the ground of aesthetic experience was assumed to be an innate capacity, an unmediated, non-rule-bound sense of what was beautiful comparable to an inbred moral sentiment, as it was for the neo-Platonist Shaftesbury, or understood instead to derive from purely empirical encounters with the world, as the more skeptical Hume believed, it was irreducible to a mere recording of what was intrinsically there in objects deemed artistic or beautiful. The same conclusion was shared

⁷ For a discussion of the origins of taste in these terms, see Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgment* (Oxford 1989), chapter 2.

⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), p. 47.

⁹ It is true that what Kant called »productive imagination« plays a role in aesthetic appreciation, as it does in normal cognition, albeit under the guidance of the understanding. But what was produced was a mental synthesis, not an active intervention in the world. For a discussion of its importance, see Michael R. Neville, »Kant's Characterization of Aesthetic Experience,« *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33, 2 (Winter, 1974), p. 197.

¹⁰ For useful accounts, see Dabney Townsend, »From Shaftesbury to Kant: The Development of the Concept of Aesthetic Experience,« *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48/2 (April-June, 1987), pp. 287-305; and Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1982). For a more general history, foregrounding the questionable political implications of aesthetic discourse, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990).

by those who saw the source of the aesthetic sense in personal psychology, communal, intersubjective consensus, or the more philosophically grounded »reflective judgment« that had been posited by Kant as a way to get beyond the apparent antinomy of taste, at once personal and universal. In all of these cases, the stress was on the one or ones who did the experiencing rather than on the intrinsic qualities of the object that was experienced. »The beautiful,« as Kant would argue, appeared only as the predicate of a judgment, not as a quality of an object. In some ways reminiscent of the epistemological limits on knowing objects in themselves, whether couched in the Empiricist vocabulary of lacking access to primary as opposed to secondary qualities or the transcendental Idealist vocabulary of unknowable noumena, the object as such was less important than its aesthetic appreciation or enjoyment. Here too a kind of »Copernican revolution,«¹¹ to cite the famous metaphor identified with Kant's first *Critique*, took place in which ontological or axiological questions were subordinated to those concerning the epistemological or, in this case, aesthetic subject. Objects were admired not for what they were in themselves, but for what they could do to us. The telos of this Copernican reversal was an increasing indifference to the object as such, perhaps even extending to its very existence.

Before that endpoint was reached, and this is the second point worth emphasizing, the sensual pleasure produced by the object in aesthetic experience had to be distinguished from that enjoyed in other relations between self and world. As early as Johannes Scotus Erigena's 9th-century »De divisione naturae,« the spectatorial, non-instrumental nature of the aesthetic attitude had attracted attention.¹² Although one might also covet the same objects for what a later age would call their commodity or exchange value, they were appreciated qua objects of art only from a more lofty point of view. Rejecting the egocentric anthropology of a Hobbes, Shaftesbury stressed the fallacy of reducing everything to the question of private interest or need. Instead, and this was related to his belief that aesthetic experience was intertwined with civic virtue and moral sentiment, »disinterested« benevolence was its crucial characteristic.¹³

¹¹ Whether or not the metaphor, which in this precise form did not appear in Kant, adequately describes the innovations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* need not concern us now. For a skeptical account of its applicability, see Robert Hahn, *Kant's Newtonian Revolution in Philosophy* (Carbondale, 1988).

¹² See the discussion in Tatarkiewicz, »Aesthetic Experience: The Early History of the Concept,« p. 23. Jauss points to other examples of medieval anticipations of aesthetic experience, which produce anxiety because they are linked with idle curiosity about the world rather than immersion in the word of God. See *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 4.

It was, of course, in Kant's aesthetic theory that the concept of disinterestedness was fully articulated. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant claimed that our ability to experience pleasure took three forms. The first he called the »agreeable« or »the pleasant« (*das Angenehme*), which was caused directly by sensual stimulation. It involved a purely private and subjective response of attraction and aversion, without any meaningful cognitive or intersubjective dimension. Here the individual body with all its appetites and antipathies was the arbiter, not a cultural or universal norm. Personal gratification or lack thereof was all that mattered. The second variety connected pleasure to the question of the »good.« That is, we can derive »delight in the good« (*das Wohlgefallen am Guten*) through working for and achieving a beneficent goal, which is set by ideas and principles external to sensual gratification. In this case there is always a functional or utilitarian dimension to our pleasure, which is not an end in itself. The real end is the good that is realized, not the pleasure we have in realizing it, although that pleasure may be a subsidiary part of our motivation as well.

The third form of pleasure (*das Wohlgefallen am Schönen*), Kant argued, is what we can properly call aesthetic. As in the case of the »agreeable,« the senses play a role and the body is involved, but with a crucial difference. Whereas in the former the object that produces the pleasure must actually exist – we cannot find a meal pleasant unless there is real food on the table – in the latter, it may not. Or more precisely, our perception of the aesthetic object, and its intrinsic properties or qualities need not coincide, as they must with an agreeable meal (food may look appetizing, but it must taste good to bring us genuine pleasure). Because of this distinction, we have no direct interest in the object, only in its representation or semblance. Or to be still more precise, since the media of representations can themselves be understood as objects (a gold statue is, after all, made of a substance whose value we find difficult to forget), what is important is a certain kind of experience of it. Our pleasure in beauty, in short, is disinterested because we are indifferent to the actual object, which is not itself an object of direct sensual desire. We are no longer immersed in being – *inter-esse*, as the etymology of the word »interest« suggests – but rather somehow outside it. We enjoy an aesthetic meal, as it were, without having to taste and swallow the food, as in the case of certain variants of nouvelle cuisine in which visual more than gustatory pleasure, let alone actual nutrition, seems the main purpose of what is on the plate. It is the same disinterestedness that permits

¹³ For a history of the concept, see Jerome Stolnitz, »On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'« *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XX, 2 (Winter, 1961), pp. 131-143.

the transformation of the lust-arousing naked human form into the idealized, marmoreal nude and allows us to distinguish between pornography and high art (both of which may be representations of real objects, but are differentiated according to our interest or disinterest in their referents as objects of desire).

Aesthetic experience is, however, also akin to the second form of pleasure in its going beyond pre-conceptual sensual gratification or remaining on the level of what Kant dismissively called the mere »egoism of taste.« Aesthetic experience mobilizes cognitive powers, synthesizing transformations of pure sensation evolve into truth or at least value claims, which are then assumed to have universal validity. But it does so without subsuming specific cases under discursive rules, a priori categories or general principles, as is the case with the determinant judgments of the understanding. The latter seem to come from above, as if through the coercive dictates of a ruler. In contrast, aesthetic judgments, singular rather than categorical, are allowed a kind of unhierarchical, free play in which universal claims of beauty can be made by each of us on the basis of analogical and paradigmatic rather than subsumptive or deductive reasoning. We move from particular to particular rather than from universal to particular, as was the case with the synthetic a priori judgments of cognition discussed in the first *Critique*. The concepts involved are thus »indeterminate« because they cannot be expressed in schematic form, as can the cognitive concepts of the understanding. They appeal to a virtual *sensus communis*, an intersubjective community which is to be made, not simply found, as innatist neo-Platonists like Shaftesbury had thought possible. A crucial aspect of disinterestedness for Kant – although not, as we shall see, for the devotees of *l'art pour l'art* – was precisely this assumption that aesthetic judgments evoked an enjoyment and appreciation that was not just one's own, but that could be shared by all. To the extent that judgment was an inherent dimension of aesthetic experience, and not something added to it after the initial response of the senses, disinterestedness had this crucial communicative implication, which was lacking in expressions of idiosyncratic taste.

What also distinguishes aesthetic experience, Kant argued, from the delight in the good, where practical outcomes are sought, is the intrinsic nature of the purposes involved, which are akin to the immanent telos of play rather than work, whose end is a transformation of the world. Kant's celebrated definition of art as »purposiveness without purpose« was designed precisely to set it apart from those activities in which extrinsic purposes dominate and real objects are there to be produced, consumed, possessed or exchanged.

Whether or not the distinction between determinant and reflective judgments really solves the riddle of the antinomy of taste, at once subjective and objective, or provides a useful model for intersubjective consensus rather than merely an ideological simulacrum of one, are not questions I want to address now. Nor do I want to rehearse the debate over whether or not aesthetic judgment and experience are based on a purely psychological concept of the beholding self or a more logically generated one, comparable in some ways to the transcendental, synthesizing self introduced in the first *Critique* to provide a foundation for epistemology. I am equally reluctant to take sides in the argument over the extent to which Kant's position can be reduced to nothing but a defense of an aesthetic attitude or mental state, which has exercised commentators like Jerome Stolnitz, George Dickie and Mary McClosky.¹⁴

What I want to do instead is focus on the implications of disinterestedness for the art object, which must be distinguished from objects in general, and the larger question of the differentiation of value spheres in modernity. For although aesthetic judgments are normally made by means of a rhetoric of objectivity – »'The Mona Lisa' is a beautiful painting,« not »I think it is a beautiful painting« – Kant stresses that it is the subject who is really the source of the judgment. Objectivity, as one of Kant's recent interpreters Eva Schaper has pointed out, is merely an »as-if« concept in his understanding of aesthetics.¹⁵ That is, such judgments act as if they were directed at objects, but those objects are never analyzable for Kant entirely in intrinsic terms, and become important solely for what they produce in their beholder. Or as another student of the *Critique of Judgment*, John Zammito puts it, »While Kant stresses the degree to which the subject is affected (*affiziert*) in the experience, nevertheless it is striking how not merely the object but even the representation of the object shifts far into the background. Its form serves as the occasion, becomes at most a catalyst, for a complex subjective response.«¹⁶

It is often argued, as we have seen, that the nature of that response is inherently contemplative, passive and spectatorial, distancing the self from

¹⁴ See, for example, Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston, 1960); George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, 1974); Mary A. McClosky, *Kant's Aesthetics* (London, 1987). There were many other issues in the long-running debate between Stolnitz and Dickie. For a useful overview, see Peter J. McCormick, *Modernity, Aesthetics, and the Bounds of Art* (Ithaca, 1990), pp. 147-157.

¹⁵ Eva Schaper, *Studies in Kant's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh, 1979), chapter 6. The concept of »as-if« is, of course, taken from Hans Vaihinger, but Schaper wants to restrict it to aesthetic judgments, not to the cognitive ones discussed in Kant's first *Critique*.

¹⁶ John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago, 1992), p. 113.

the world and our appetite to possess or consume it. Although this primarily visual characterization may seem an odd way to describe ways in which some art can seize us and invade our interiority – an experience perhaps most obviously undergone in aural terms when listening to music – even here the subject may not always be actively and productively engaged in intervening in the world. Attentive listening, as James Johnson has recently shown,¹⁷ was an acquired skill in the 18th century based on the suppression of the kinesthetic body and the concentration of faculties on only one sensory input. The experience of passive listening was carefully segregated from that of dancing or communal singing as the ear was educated to have contemplative aesthetic experiences. The public concert hall worked like the museum to deracinate works that had their origins in the church or aristocratic chamber, turning them into what 19th-century aestheticians like Eduard Hanslick would call »absolute music.« In literature as well, the habit of looking for actual personal references in concocted narratives had to be lost and what Catherine Gallagher has called »nobody's story,« the realization of acknowledged-fictionality, put in its place before the novel could come into its own.¹⁸

There is, in short, no practical or possessive intention realized in the act of listening, reading or beholding qua aesthetic experience. We may, to be sure, also want to own the object for its value in the marketplace or because of our passion to collect, but this is not the same as a purely aesthetic response. The possibility of that experience may be situated in an institutional context or cultural field, as philosophers like George Dickie and sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu have argued,¹⁹ but the experience itself cannot be reduced to a mere reflex of that enabling context. For it entails precisely the distance from extrinsic functionality that such reductionism wishes to impose on it from without. It is for this reason that Habermas can claim in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* that »the problem of grounding modernity out of itself first comes into consciousness in the realm of aesthetic criticism.«²⁰

¹⁷ James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1995).

¹⁸ Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Woman Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Berkeley, 1994).

¹⁹ George Dickie, *Aesthetics* (Indianapolis, 1971); and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed., Randal Johnson (New York, 1993). For a critique of Dickie, see Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Cambridge, Mass, 1990, pp. 38-41. For a critique of Bourdieu, see Paul Crowther, »Sociological Imperialism and the Field of Cultural Production: The Case of Bourdieu,« *Theory, Culture and Society*, 11, 1 (1994).

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 10.

This is not, to be sure, to deny that the boundaries of aesthetic experience themselves may not be entirely impermeable. Recent scholarship has stressed how the third *Critique* itself struggled to find a way to bridge the gap between cognitive and moral judgments and their aesthetic counterpart.²¹ The larger project of the third *Critique* was, after all, to explore the ways in which nature could be understood teleologically rather than mechanistically, thus going beyond the rigid limitations on knowledge set by the first *Critique*. The purposiveness in art could thus be found in nature as well, which suggested a possible reunification of the varieties of reason. »Beauty,« Kant also went on to claim, could be understood as »the symbol of morality,«²² because of its emphasis on purposiveness without extrinsic purposes, which was parallel to the moral ideal of treating every person as an end itself implied by the categorical imperative. Although the link between art and ethics could not be established discursively, drawing on rational arguments, it could be suggested symbolically and analogically. In both cases, the self-reflective subject had to achieve a certain distance to allow judgment to occur. Even more decisively, that dimension of aesthetic experience Kant followed Longinus in calling »the sublime« provided a link with the noumenal origins of practical reason, because it got us in touch with supersensible realities that could not be grasped by synthetic a priori judgments, helping produce a feeling of respect for the moral law that was also beyond cognitive understanding. Here the objective correlate to our feelings is even more remote than it is in the case of the beautiful, as the paradoxical attempt to represent the unrepresentable is the essence of the sublime, which registers both the grandeur and the futility of the quest.

How successful Kant's *Critique of Judgment* actually was in reintegrating what his earlier work had seemed so powerfully to split asunder is, of course, a matter of some dispute; the entire subsequent history of German Idealism suggests that at least his immediate successors thought it was a failure. Beginning as early as Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, they sought to reunite art with the other spheres in the hope of reenchanting life, a project that continued well into the 20th century with not much success to show for it. It has often been remarked that when Kant's ideas were vulgarized in the 19th century, as they were by certain French philosophers like Victor Cousin, they could easily be taken to countenance the opposite conclusion, the extreme aesthetic separatism that became the mark of the *l'art pour l'art*

²¹ See in particular, Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* in which he discusses what he calls the »cognitive and ethical turn« in the third *Critique*.

²² This was the title of §59 of the third *Critique*.

movement.²³ With Schopenhauer's 1818 *World as Will and Representation*, aesthetic experience was reduced to the attitude of non-practical contemplation, a way to fend off, at least temporarily, the meaninglessness of the world.²⁴ Perhaps one of the reasons for this outcome was the difficulty of reconciling the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience – now understood without the public, communicative moment Kant had attributed to it²⁵ – with the interested qualities of both its cognitive and moral counterparts. In the case of the former, it was impossible to suspend for very long our interested involvement with the world, which gratified or frustrated our corporeal needs and desires. In the case of the latter, real objects or at least other human beings were necessary to test our will to act morally and be involved in the world of practical consequences. As Paul Crowther has noted, »for Kant the burden of emphasis in moral existence falls on obstacles and responsibilities in relation to the expression of freedom. In aesthetic experience it does not... Hence, whilst the pure aesthetic judgment might figure in a moral image of the world, it could just as easily, if not more so, incline us to a life of self-indulgent or indolent contemplation, wherein the demands of moral duty were the least of our preoccupations.«²⁶ There was, in other words, a certain tension between the aristocratic leisurely premises of aesthetic disinterestedness – the ability to see a beautiful landscape where peasants toiling in the fields could only see recalcitrant soil – and the moral imperative to treat everyone as an end in him/or herself.

But whether or not a successful reintegration of the three spheres was achieved by Kant or anyone else, the tacit uncoupling of aesthetic experience from the art object within the sphere of the aesthetic allowed a problematic slippage between spheres that is the real subject of this paper. Schematically put, there were two implications that could be drawn from the withdrawal of emphasis on beauty in the object itself in favor of subjective or

²³ See John Wilcox, »The Beginnings of *l'art pour l'art*,« *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11 (June, 1953), and Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Art for Art's Sale and Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990* (Lincoln, Neb., 1996).

²⁴ For an account of the debates concerning the reduction of experience to attitude initiated by Schopenhauer, see Bohdan Dziemidok, »Controversy about Aesthetic Attitude: Does Aesthetic Attitude Condition Aesthetic Experience?,« in Michael H. Mitias, ed., *Possibility of Aesthetic Experience* (Amsterdam, 1986).

²⁵ According to Jauss, »as the new ideal of aesthetic pleasure, self-enjoying subjectivity abandoned the *sensus communis* as the expression of a sociable sympathy at the same moment the aesthetics of genius finally replaced the aesthetics of rhetoric.« *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 26.

²⁶ Paul Crowther, »The Significance of Kant's Pure Aesthetic Judgment,« *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36, 2 (April, 1996), p. 118.

intersubjective response. One, to which we have already alluded, was the progressive obliteration of the object, which paralleled the disappearance of the thing-in-itself in post-Kantian epistemology. Not only was the real world referent of the artwork bracketed in the service of pure fictionality, so too the materiality of the representation itself was often suppressed and forgotten. The second and seemingly opposite implication was the indiscriminate elevation of all objects into potential works of art, depending on the attitude of their beholder. In either case, the specificity of the work of art as such was undermined. Let me take each tendency in turn. Technologies of simulacral mechanical reproduction like photography and the cinema may have abetted the first outcome, leading to what has been called the »immaterialization of reality,«²⁷ but it was already foreshadowed, I want to argue, in the privileging of disinterestedness in aesthetic theory. For an object that was prohibited from soliciting any desire or interest, an object that could never be possessed or consumed, was an object that would ultimately squander its power to engage the very corporeal response that *aisthesis* had sought to explore. Further erosion followed from the leveling of the distinction between works of art and their critical reception, a tendency that culminated in deconstruction's pan-textualist breaching of the boundary between *ergon* and *parergon* (work and frame). By 1981, the literary critic Murray Krieger could loudly lament in a work called *Arts on the Level* the »obliteration of the realm of art, its objects, its museums...everything immersed within the indivisible flood of experience.«²⁸

In the visual arts, the same alarm bell was sounded a few years earlier in Michael Fried's celebrated and controversial essay »Art and Objecthood.«²⁹ According to Fried, the specificity of pictures as such »was being undermined by a new literalness, which foregrounded the anti-illusionist, material support of the flat canvas, and a style of beholding he called »theatrical.« By the latter, he meant an indifference to the specific media of the separate arts and a willingness to privilege the experience of the beholder over time rather than the art object itself. The often cited example he gave of the new sensibility was an account given by the artist Tony Smith of a car ride he had taken on the New Jersey turnpike, in which he realized that traditional art was dead. In Fried's gloss, the result was that »the experience alone is what matters.«³⁰

²⁷ Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford, 1993), p. 18. See also Arthur Danto, *The State of the Art* (New York, 1987).

²⁸ Murray Krieger, *Arts on the Level: The Fall of the Elite Object* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1981), p. 56.

²⁹ Originally published in 1967, it is included with other essays of that period and a long introduction answering subsequent criticism in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Review* (Chicago, 1998).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Fried's fierce resistance to this trend was not very successful, as he would be the first to admit. If postmodernism has meant anything, it has meant a further erosion of the integrity of the work of art.

When the Minimalist art Fried bemoaned was joined by an even less pictorial Conceptual Art, the radical potential of leveling was still more powerfully realized. Artists like Joseph Kosuth or Michael Asher abandoned the materiality of the work entirely in favor of a textual surrogate (with only a residue of the acknowledgment that inscribed texts can themselves be treated as material objects). Marcel Duchamp's readymades, in which random objects from everyday life rather than ones designed by artistic intention and fashioned by artistic talent were imbued with artistic value by the fiat of the artist, was a way-station to this end. Duchamp's famous visual indifference, his disdain for mere »retinal« pleasure, meant that not only the art object was being obliterated, but so too was the sensual dimension of aesthetic experience, which became a more cerebral, theoretically driven game like the chess he began playing seriously in the 1920's as an alternative to producing – or rather designating – even readymade works of art. Here, ironically, the end of aesthetics turned out to be a kind of anaesthesia in which not only the object stimulating the senses had vanished, but so too were the senses it was supposed to effect. Hegel's notorious claim that philosophy would and should replace art seemed fulfilled by this outcome.

Duchamp's elevation of urinals, snow shovels and bottle racks into objects worthy of being included in the sacred space of the museum was, however, more than a parodic gesture mocking the pretensions of art objects to possess inherent qualities of beauty, more than a denial of the pleasure of the gaze, more than a victory of the concept over the image. From a different angle, it exemplifies the second main implication that could be and was drawn from the privileging of aesthetic experience over art objects, which involved the drifting I have invoked in my title. That is, rather than debunking art by bringing it down to the level of ordinary life, using, as Duchamp provocatively recommended, »The Mona Lisa« as an ironing board, it could seek to elevate life by bringing it up to the putative level of art. In other words, it could promote the promiscuous reenchantment of the entire world, the »transfiguration of the commonplace,«³¹ as if any object or event, however mean, were a legitimate occasion for aesthetic experience. As Jauss has noted, »aesthetic experience does not seem to develop 'organically,' on a field of its own, but to progressively expand and maintain its area of meaning at the expense of bordering experiences of reality, and this by usurpations and

³¹ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

compensations, the crossing of boundaries, the offer of competing solutions.³² The result was a leveling up rather than down, a conflation of representation with reference, a kind of imperialism of aesthetic sublimation in which every object could be redeemed in aesthetic terms.

Duchamp himself, to be sure, would have scoffed at so lofty a program, but by lowering the threshold of what could be construed as an object of aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment (or at least their conceptual counterpart), he was drawing on, if in some ways also reversing the valence of, a venerable tradition that began as early as the Romantics and continues to our day. It could emerge only when the longstanding disdain for nature as a realm of fallen and debased matter in comparison with elevated spirit was reversed, a transformation that was anticipated by certain heterodox philosophies like Spinoza's pantheism in the 17th century. It was also evident, if in slightly displaced form in social or cultural terms, in that increasing incorporation of formerly »low« subject matter in allegedly »high« art, the democratization of content evident in the genre paintings of early modern Dutch art, the bourgeois, domestic tragedies of the Enlightenment, and most of all the rise of the novel. It was apparent as well in the Romantic incorporation of the fragment, the sketch, and the incomplete or ruined torso into the canon of genuine art. It came into its own with what M. H. Abrams has followed Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* in calling »natural supernaturalism,«³³ the infusing of the natural world with all of the numinous meaning that had hitherto been reserved for transcendent spirit. Now the everyday, the commonplace, could be understood as glowing with immanent significance, or least potentially possessing it through poetic transfiguration, which sought to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of religious sacralization.³⁴

In a recent work entitled *Into the Light of Things*, George Leonard has traced what he calls the »art of the commonplace« from Wordsworth through Carlyle and Ruskin to John Cage, whose celebrated composition »4'33« imbued even seemingly unmusical silence or more precisely, the ambient noise left when no notes were sounded, with aesthetic value.³⁵ In visual terms,

³² Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 111-112.

³³ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971).

³⁴ This impulse was later to be rechanneled into the quasi-political project of the avant-garde to imbue life with the energies of art, a project whose problematic implications have been foregrounded by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984).

³⁵ George J. Leonard, *Into the Light: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage* (Chicago, 1994).

Leonard detects a similar transition already taking place between the time of Sir Joshua Reynolds and John Constable. Although he notes that Wordsworth more likely got his anti-hierarchical ideas about aesthetic experience from the English critic Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* of 1790 than directly from Kant, whose German he could not read, the end result was similar. For Alison also argued against elite art objects and in favor of the subjective reaction we can have to anything, however trivial or mundane. Even the sublime, which had been reserved for awesome and unfathomable experiences in the 18th century, could now be applied to the commonplace, just as long as the aesthetic sensibility of the beholder was capable of appreciating it in this manner.

There was, to be sure, an important distinction between natural supernaturalism and the Kantian notion of aesthetic experience, which Leonard does not remark. Whereas the former implied a pantheistic project of reenchanting the world, somehow imbuing it with a secularized religious meaning, Kant had explicitly decried such attempts in his own day. In the famous »Pantheism Controversy,« which divided German intellectuals in the decade after F.H. Jacobi's 1785 attack on Lessing's supposed embrace of Spinozist atheism, he was a fervent critic of the rationalist immanentism implied in the Greek slogan *hen kai pan* (the one is the all) revived by Lessing.³⁶ Kant vigorously resisted what he saw as the determinist implications of that position, which undermined the possibility of human freedom and made practical reason's exercise of will meaningless. He thus never went as far as the natural supernaturalists in reinvesting the world with any kind of aesthetic cum religious »real presence,«³⁷ preserving instead a more orthodox believer's faith in a transcendent God.

But what Kant's stress on the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience did allow, even if unintentionally, was the possibility of having such experiences in the face of objects or events or actions that had not been intended as works of art or deliberately created to provide aesthetic pleasure. In fact, he himself distinctly preferred natural to artificial beauty, the real thing to man-made representations. For this reason, he could be construed as an unwitting precursor of natural supernaturalism. Insofar as this implication was a necessary accompaniment of the redefinition of previously

³⁶ For a good account of Kant's role in the debate, see Zammito, *The Genesis of the Third Critique*, chapters 11 and 12.

³⁷ The urge to do this is still alive, as evidenced by George Steiner's recent book, *Real Presences* (Chicago, 1989), which, to be sure, tries to see art from the point of view of the creator rather than the beholder or critic, and in so doing, stress its links with freedom.

sacred or ornamental objects as purely artistic ones, it produced a valuable disarticulation of the inherent logic of the aesthetic sphere from its cognitive and moral counterparts. The same might be said of the later reevaluation of ritual or utilitarian objects from so-called primitive cultures as objects of formal beauty, which took place during the modernist era. Here too the extension of aesthetic appreciation to cultural artifacts that had hitherto been dismissed as mere examples of less advanced peoples can be accounted an advance in cosmopolitan understanding (however problematic such decontextualization may seem to defenders of the integrity of individual cultures).

But when carried to an indiscriminate extreme, such an extension could lead to a promiscuous aestheticization of the entire world, reducing it to a mere occasion for disinterested subjective pleasure. All objects or events, whether or not they were ever intended as works of art, could be redeemed in aesthetic terms, if they produced an experience that somehow measured up to whatever the common sense of the time called aesthetic. As Jauss notes, »the aesthetic experience of role distance can be intensified and become aestheticism when it is taken up in a real-life situation where the conventions of morality or tact demand a wholly serious involvement. When, for example, a work such as the Isenheim altar is perceived and interpreted solely as a carrier of aesthetic qualities and abstraction is made from everything that makes the representation of the martyrdom shocking, cruel, and thereby exemplary, it is not only a devout sensibility that will be offended. Such an attitude is also inappropriate to the understanding the object itself demands.«³⁸

Perhaps the most troubling implications of this indifference to the qualities of the object were evident in what Walter Benjamin famously called the »aestheticization of politics.« This is not the place to launch a full-fledged rehearsal of its divergent implications, a task I have attempted elsewhere,³⁹ but several points should be made. Benjamin's critique was directed explicitly at what he saw as fascist aestheticized politics, in which human suffering could become an occasion for aesthetic delectation. Most clearly evident in the celebration of war as a spectacle in the work of Futurists like Marinetti, it also appeared in his own day in the threnodies to apocalyptic violence in Ernst Jünger's technological sublime. Perhaps the most frequently cited expression of this attitude was the remark made by the Symbolist poet Laurent Tailhade in reaction to a deadly anarchist bomb thrown into the

³⁸ Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 6.

³⁹ Martin Jay, »The Aesthetic Ideology as Ideology: Or What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics,« *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York, 1993).

French Chamber of Deputies in the 1890's: »N'importe les victimes, si le geste est beau.« Here contemplative disinterestedness was given an especially sinister twist because the object to be »enjoyed« was the destruction of human life. The rigid distinction between aesthetic and ethical values, which derived much of its impetus from a reductive misreading of Kant's third *Critique*, combined with the uncoupling of aesthetic experience from works of art, to countenance what in other spheres would be quickly understood as problematic. That is, in the realm of cognition, epistemological judgments about objects that do not exist are normally called hallucinations or fantasies, and are separated from those that can claim some warrant in the world external to the self. If ethical judgments are applied to behavior or events that have not occurred or that did not involve the exercise of human will, we worry about our inappropriately moralizing what should be understood in different terms. The same caution, it would seem, should apply with regard to aesthetic experience, when it seeks its detached pleasure anywhere it can find it. However much we may applaud the democratic expansion of the realm of art objects beyond the limits of their elite predecessors, however much we may recognize the value of learning to salvage objects that have lost their initial functional purpose in aesthetic terms, it may be wise to acknowledge limits to how far the aesthetic reenchantment of the world can go. The natural supernaturalist project, like all pantheist affirmations of immanence, comes up against the radical evil that exists in the world that it tries to valorize. Although violence can be aesthetically transfigured and represented in works of art – how else could we read with admiration *The Illiad* or stand comfortably before Picasso's *Guernica*?⁴⁰ – when the frame is broken, representation is confused with reference, and unmediated reality becomes fair game for aestheticization, the effect is very different. Aesthetic experience, in short, cannot be entirely freed from a consideration of which objects and events may justifiably evoke it, or else it courts the charge that it produces a theodicy of beauty, which is no less problematic than its ethical counterpart.

Or rather, it cannot avoid that rebuke if we remain within the terms set by the 18th-century's version of that experience. But what if another notion of aesthetic experience could be defended that would avoid the privileging of subject over object and thus avoid the dangers of drifting? One such

⁴⁰ Kant himself makes this point when he notes that at least in one respect man-made art is superior to natural beauty: »Where fine art evidences its superiority is in the beautiful description of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like, can (as evils) be very beautifully described, nay even represented in pictures.« *Critique of Judgment*, §48, 5:321.

alternative was, in fact, presented in John Dewey's well-known *Art as Experience*, which has recently been revived in the work of Richard Shusterman, in particular his *Pragmatic Aesthetics* of 1992.⁴¹ Dewey's ire was directed at all aspects of what he took to be the Kantian version of aesthetic experience, which he denounced as the fruit of excessive Enlightenment rationalism with its compartmentalizing mania for categorical distinctions. Against the isolation of aesthetic experience from other variants, he argued for their ultimate integration in an ongoing, participatory interaction between humans and their environment. Against the passive and contemplative notion of aesthetic experience, he argued for an active, practical and productive alternative, which would overcome the gap between artistic creativity and aesthetic reception. Against the tacit elevation of the visual arts through the spectatorial bias of traditional aesthetic theory, he stressed the need to involve the entire sensorium. Against the privileging of disinterestedness and psychological detachment as foundations of the aesthetic attitude, he argued that desire and interest were as integral a part of our sensual encounters with art as with the rest of the world.

But most important for our purposes, against the evisceration of the object in the name of subjective or intersubjective response, he rallied to the defense of the artwork not entirely for itself as an exemplar of a Platonic notion of beauty, but as an integral dimension of aesthetic experience, rightly understood. The extreme separation of organism from world, he argued, »lies behind the idea that esthetic quality does not belong to objects as objects but is projected onto them by mind. It is the source of the definition of beauty as 'objectified pleasure' instead of as pleasure in the object, so much *in it* that the object and pleasure are one and undivided in the experience.«⁴² »There can be no esthetic experience,« he argued, »apart from an *object*, and that for an object to be the content of esthetic appreciation it must satisfy those *objective* conditions without which cumulation, conservation, reenforcement, transition into something more complete, are impossible.«⁴³

⁴¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934); Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*. See also Shusterman, *Practising Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York, 1997), and »The End of Aesthetic Experience,« and his exchange with Alexander Nehamas in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 1 (1998).

⁴² Dewey, *Art and Experience*, p. 248. It is passages like this that allow Shusterman to argue that ultimately Dewey privileges »dynamic aesthetic experience over the fixed material object which our conventional thinking identifies – and then commodifies and fetishizes – as the work of art....art gets defined as 'a quality of experience' rather than a collection of objects or a substantive essence shared only by such objects...« (*Pragmatist Aesthetics*, p. 25).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 146-147.

Whereas a preliminary distinction between self and world may be justified in certain other areas of endeavor, such as natural science, »the uniquely distinguishing feature of esthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is esthetic to the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears.«⁴⁴

Such a disappearance does not, however, betoken the same thing that is implied by the loss of the referential object in 18th-century aesthetic theory or the religious/cum aesthetic reenchantment of the world in the natural supernatural tradition. For although Dewey hoped for the ultimate reconciliation of life and art, he also recognized that it had not yet happened. Therefore, the artwork as object set apart from subject represented a covert protest against the unfulfilled potential for integrated experience in the modern world. The possibility for genuine experience in that world, he paralleled Benjamin and Adorno in lamenting, was severely limited: »Zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface. No one experience has a chance to complete itself because something else is entered upon so speedily. What is called experience becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name.«⁴⁵ The work of art, as Dewey described it, provided a promise of the order, completeness and integration of experience that was missing in everyday life and that was wrongly projected onto the world in its present state.

This argument, which will be familiar in certain respects to those made by the Frankfurt School, must, however, be set against the relatively optimistic expectations of the pragmatist tradition, in which fulfilled experience is now a possibility, despite obstacles that may prevail in the external world. Dewey may perhaps have been a bit too quick to dissolve the distinction between esoteric fine art, the art of museums and concert halls, from life lived aesthetically. As Shusterman has conceded, for Dewey aesthetic experience »could be achieved in virtually any domain of action, since all experience, to be coherent and meaningful, required the germ of aesthetic unity and development. By rethinking art in terms of aesthetic experience, Dewey hoped we could radically enlarge and democratize the domain of art, integrating it more fully into the real world which would be greatly improved by the pursuit of such manifold arts of living.«⁴⁶ As a result, despite its

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Shusterman, »The End of Aesthetic Experience,« p. 33.

laudable intention to redress the balance lost by Kantian aesthetics, the pragmatist attempt to fashion a new notion of experience, including both subject and object in an equiprimordial interaction, may too easily produce the same outcome as that of the natural supernaturalist tradition: the indiscriminate leveling of the distinction between art work and life world through projecting the qualities of the former onto the latter.⁴⁷

To avoid such an outcome, a certain respect for the continued distinction between the two may be required, at least as long as the reintegration remains more a desideratum than a real possibility. Such a distinction would involve acknowledging that works of art, although inevitably intended to produce aesthetic experience in their beholders, somehow exceed that outcome. To honor this difference does not mean fetishizing the elite object or ascetically denigrating any pleasure in the present, as some defenders of aesthetic experience fear.⁴⁸ It entails instead a recognition of the fruitful constellation that keeps subjects and objects irreducible to each other, even as they cannot be understood in isolation. As formed material objects – a characterization more self-evidently true for certain kinds of art than others, but arguably the case for all – artworks resist reduction to nothing but the form-giving or form-appreciating qualities of the creative or receptive subject. In this sense, they preserve the otherness of the nonhuman world that should not be made into a mere occasion for aesthetic delectation as exemplars of natural beauty.

As specifically *art* objects, they resist leveling – either up or down – with other objects in our environment.⁴⁹ The necessarily illusory quality of works

⁴⁷ Although appreciating many aspects of Dewey's approach, Jauss notes that he »assigns the traditional predicates of the beautiful in art to natural phenomena or those belonging to the world of objects. In other words, he projects them onto these phenomena to then demonstrate that they are everyday 'sources' of aesthetic experience....The shortcoming in Dewey's theory is...that it maintains the illusion of the objectively beautiful without tracing the aesthetic quality of the objects and phenomena of the everyday world back to the attitude of the observer.« *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 113.

⁴⁸ This anxiety is evident in Jauss's critique of Adorno as a champion of ascetic Platonism in *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. For a different view, which shows the importance of experience in Adorno's work, see Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), chapter I. That the rigid separation of aesthetic from other kinds of pleasure in the Kantian tradition can itself be accused of asceticism from a Frankfurt School position is demonstrated in Robin May Schott, *Cognition and Eros: A Critique of the Kantian Paradigm* (Boston, 1988), chapter 11.

⁴⁹ This is not the place to attempt a serious account of the differences between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects. Perhaps the best known defense of the distinction from a

of art – what German aesthetics designates by the word *Schein* (at once semblance and appearance) – sets them categorically apart from the objects that we encounter cognitively or morally. The pleasure they provide, if indeed in all cases they can be said to produce pleasure, is not of the same order as that provided by other objects that satisfy our desires and interests.⁵⁰ The celebrated claim made by Stendhal and repeated by Nietzsche and Marcuse that art is »*une promesse de bonheur*« must be understood not only as a rebuke to the coldness of the tradition of disinterested detachment, but also as a recognition that such happiness is not necessarily achievable in the present.

Moreover, as George Steiner has noted, »the objects of scientific speculation and investigation, however uncertain their reality-status outside the relevant hypothesis and observation, are, nevertheless, *given*. They are prior and determinant in ways which differ fundamentally from the 'coming-into-thereness' of the aesthetic.... Only in the aesthetic is there the absolute freedom 'not to have come into being.' Paradoxically, it is that possibility of absence which gives autonomous force to the presence of the work.«⁵¹ However much we may admire a sunset for its beauty or be awed by the sublime chaos of a battle, the experience we have of works created by human intentionality can never forget their unique status in this regard. Even if such works can no longer be understood as perfectly formed, organic wholes, an assumption that was laid to rest with Modernism (and anticipated by the Romantic cult of the fragment), they nonetheless still possess some residue, perhaps solely in negative terms, of the utopian implications of that impulse.⁵²

phenomenological perspective was mounted by Roman Ingarden, whose work is discussed in B. Dziemido and P. McCormick, eds. *On the Aesthetics of Roman Ingarden* (Boston, 1989). For a recent extension of his argument, see McCormick, *Modernity, Aesthetics, and the Bounds of Art*. See also the different approaches in the books by Goodman and Genette cited in notes 1 and 2.

⁵⁰ For a recent debate over the role of pleasure in aesthetic experience, see Shusterman, »The End of Aesthetic Experience«; Alexander Nehamas, »Richard Shusterman on Pleasure and Aesthetic Experience,« *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 1 (1998); and Shusterman, »Interpretation, Pleasure, and Value in Aesthetic Experience,« in *ibid.*

⁵¹ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 154-155.

⁵² Krieger claims that »the dethroning of the aesthetic object and aesthetic value and the abolition of the aesthetic realm altogether destroy the closed sanctity of such objects as self-fulfilled, instead opening them anew to an immediate relationship to normal experience. With the theoretical disappearance of closure, which is now seen to have been a deceiving myth, all objects, their would-be fictional boundaries dissolved, flow freely into and out of normal experience, now that they are declared no more than a routine part of that experience.« *Arts on the Level*, p. 55. Such a complaint

Not until the world is itself made by humans who can fashion their environment to realize such an outcome – a telos that may well be unattainable, and may even be itself a deeply problematic goal – can we forget the victims and praise the beautiful gesture that led to their demise. For the present, it is wiser to hold on to the irreducible constellation of objects and the experiences they engender that prevent us from collapsing one variant of experience into another. However porous the boundaries may be, however great the yearning for a fully integrated form of life, the differentiations of modernity – not only among value spheres, but within them as well – may have a validity that we sacrifice at our peril.

overestimates the necessity of absolute closure and boundaried immanence in works of art, which ignores the importance of what Genette has called their transcendent potential. See his *The Work of Art*.

