INTRODUCTION

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In art, as for society more generally, it is harder to define a new and unprecedented situation than to tack on a 'post-' to mark the passing of a period or the obsolescence of a conceptual apparatus become familiar and convenient. Contrary to the belief of certain intellectual currents of the seventies and eighties, modernity isn't a fashion that can by jettisoned by changing style or giving up certain dogmatic rigours. The collapse of certainty being as liable to induce intoxication as its advent, the deflation of today—still marked, in the negative, by the absolutes that have departed—already sometimes takes itself for a new certainty. The consequence of the irrevocable decline of pre-modern traditions and of the political and economic instability of industrial societies, the problems however persist, or return in other guises, preventing any going back to the past; but the nature of conceivable responses and solutions has changed.

The arts have seen the emergence of no convincing work capable of outflanking the moderns, whose tradition is not in any case 'traditionalist'. Inherited genres once allowed artists to concentrate above all on technical problems. With the passage of time, innovation was, one might say,

an inevitable by-product. Since Duchamp, Joyce and Cage, the arts have been faced with the choice of either offering variations on traditional models, as an adornment to life, or reinventing art as the object of an undivided attention, useless as decoration, divertissement or background. Hence the dissolution of the alliance between decoration and ambitious artistic research, which Matisse was the last to reconcile and which design, today, has not succeeded in reuniting.

To this significant rupture, masked by the mass culture that has developed around contemporary art as if it were still an adjunct to style, must be added its management by the public authorities. Ignored as a deliberate insult to the established order during the first half of the twentieth century, contemporary art has been reclaimed for the national heritage and granted a triumphal entry into the public galleries. This integration of subversive art has a number of features in common with the pacification of social conflict through the welfare state. Whatever their shortcomings, the subsidies accorded to the arts at the municipal, regional and national levels are the equivalent of the social gains of the post-war period, sharing the same fluctuating destiny. Contemporary society feels obliged to display open-mindedness, understanding and tolerance towards practices that through modernist and avant-gardist experiment have learnt how to put their finger on the most vulnerable and contestable aspects of social reality, revealing what in our private and public lives we would rather not look at directly.

Aesthetic theory, most often a purely academic exercise, has thus found itself obliged to enter an arena that goes beyond its own exclusive competence. Traditionally, the art-lover was not concerned with the significance and status of art as a human activity. Today, however, the upheaval in the 'spheres of value' has led to a questioning of the social role and

intrinsic meaning of an activity organized and subsidized by the authorities that promises an indefinable pleasure yet obstinately refuses it. The difficulty is to understand why government and private investors support a culture that by definition can come to no peace with its patrons nor with the public in general—a situation that has disoriented criticism and undermined the status of art in the eyes of the public. It is unlike that which obtained in the pre-modern period, when art was largely in the service of Church or Court, or the modern, where it had to survive in the face of a hostile market and a lack of institutional support.

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A distinction has to be drawn, then, between the internal structure and problematic of art and the impact of the new institutional context, identifying first of all the necessity intrinsic to art, its own distinctive logic or rationality.

In his theory of the rationalization of Western societies, Max Weber located the rationality of art only in the rational organization of its techniques and its modes of institutionalization, ignoring the inner logic of the individual work. In art too, for him, rationality meant calculation and rational economy of means to achieve a given end. He never envisaged the possibility of a logic of the artwork itself, a reconstruction of its own claim to success and of the criteria by which it is to be judged.

For Theodor Adorno, 'aesthetic rationality' represented—by virtue of a kind of 'Pascal's vase' mechanism—the rationality expelled by the instrumental spirit of society: that of a *mimesis* in sympathy with nature. This is why the logic of the artwork had always to signify something other than itself: a criticism of, or compensation for, what was missing in the social.

Aesthetics was a way of continuing by other means the social theory of Marx and Weber. Yet while it is true that the concerns of a work of art are not those of another world than this, it is wrong to attribute to art in its diversity the role abandoned by the working class as the initiator of social subversion.

In reconsidering Weber's thought so as to establish the basis for a critical theory of society, Jürgen Habermas did not attempt to reconstruct the 'aesthetic rationality' that Adorno had made too much of; rather, he developed, in relation to moral and legal questions, a model of differential rationalization no more than adumbrated in Weber, a model not without consequences for aesthetics. In modern society, Weber had said, art is constituted as a 'universe of distinctive, autonomous, conscious values',[1] such that it is capable of developing 'in accordance with its own laws'.[2] But rather than pursuing this idea of a specifically artistic type of rationality, Weber went on to consider only the progress of technique, which precisely cannot be identified with progress in art itself, and the social role of this rationalized sphere, which is precisely minimal.

From the point of view of a theory of argumentation, aesthetic rationalization would seem to be grounded in the 'critical capacity for assessing value', which, like the cognitive capacity to register facts or the moral capacity to refer to norms, is linked to a basic function of everyday discourse; in other words, art would be a provider of values through which

1 Max Weber, 'Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions' in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), cited in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, VOL. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 160. [Translation modified to accord with the French.]

2 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 160. [Translation modified.]

we express our subjective preferences.[3] But these values are in fact only the secondary by-products of an 'aesthetic rationality' deployed in the creation and appreciation of works of art themselves according to criteria of artistic success.

Unlike the evaluative conception, the idea of art as a means of 'access to the world'[4] takes up the Weberian notion of the 'non-quotidian' nature of the aesthetic sphere, in this respect analogous to the religious and the erotic. As a mere possibility, such an opening must prove itself by casting new light on the everyday. Furthermore, the power of affording access to the world is not exclusive to art: philosophy; religion and the human sciences also have it. It is independent of the artistic quality of the work, so that the fact of presenting a new perspective on the world is neither the sole nor a sufficient aesthetic criterion.

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Politically, the non-quotidian in Weber is associated with personal charisma, based on magical power and incapable of stable institutionalization.[5] Modern rationalization and desacralization confine the religious, artistic

3 Habermas thus reproaches Nietzsche for not having recognized 'as a moment of reason the critical capacity for assessing value that was sharpened through dealing with modern art—a moment that is still at least procedurally connected with objectifying knowledge and moral insight in the processes of providing argumentative grounds' (see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, p. 960).

4 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, p. 69.

5 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 1111ff.

and erotic non-quotidian to the domain of subjective experience, without direct purchase on the cognitive and normative orders, which follow another logic. Such is the dominant vision of modernity. In Georges Bataille, on the other hand, religion as 'inner experience', eroticism, art, literature and poetry are the subject of one single study concerned with 'excess energy, translated into the effervescence of life'[6] or 'nonproductive expenditure'.[7] Like the great aesthetic theorists informed by early-twentieth-century sociology—Simmel, Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin and Adorno—Bataille too starts with Weber, only to invert his conclusions: 'it is certain that the revolution effected by the Reformation has, as Weber saw, a profound significance: It marked the passage to a new form of economy. Referring back to the spirit of the great reformers, one can even say that by accepting the extreme consequences of a demand for religious purity, it destroyed the sacred world, the world of nonproductive consumption, and handed the earth over to the men of production, to the bourgeois.'[8] For Bataille, as for the Benjamin of the *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, the destruction of the sacred, far from being definitive, is no more than a subjective appearance: 'It can be said, finally, that starting from then *things* dominated man, in so far as he lived for enterprise and less and less in the present time. But domination is never total, and in a deep sense it is only a comedy: It never deceives more than partly, while in the propitious darkness a new truth turns stormy.'[9] In the same way, Walter Benjamin sees announced in baroque allegory an inversion of sacralization and the

6 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, VOL. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 10.

7 Ibid., p. 12.

8 Ibid., p. 127.

9 Ibid., p. 133.

triumph of subjectivity in the modern world. The hell of modernity is only a subjective illusion, and 'in the image that allegory gives of the world the subjective perspective is . . . totally included in the economy of the whole',[10] a theological economy that remains intact despite all the social changes wrought by modernity.

These philosophers thus attempt to relativize the logics of modern science and law in the name of an aesthetic vision supposed to maintain the ascendancy of the sacred. In the face of such a resacralization of the world—one that does not recognize that modern societies, Protestant or not, have done away with the sacred foundation of social life—it is easy for positivism to insist that in modern society the work of art no longer has any normative value, and answers only to the subjective criterion of pleasure. And it is indeed true that nothing obliges us to subscribe to the visions offered by works of art, and that deprived of their sacred functions they now answer to profane criteria.

All attempts to return to art the cultic and cultural authority it once enjoyed have failed. More recently, every social sphere has been overtaken by a hedonistic aestheticization, from shop-windows and packaging to advertising and the media, to the office, sports and politics. Between a sacred desperately resuscitated and such generalized hedonism, is there still a place, necessarily within art itself, for a logic profane yet independent of the pleasure principle, demanding yet without any pretension to dogmatic authority, free of any social obligation yet susceptible of rigorous critique?

10 Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 234.

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Such then is the paradox of aesthetic argumentation, to be concerned with a rational necessity that has no basis in quotidian discourse and behaviour and whose rationality is founded upon an openness to the sphere of art, an openness that cannot however be demanded of anyone. No one is obliged to create a remarkable work, or to devote time and attention to it; but once we do attend, we are engaged by its logic, judging it good, admiring or appreciating it, or bad, as if any imperfection were a fault comparable to an untruth or a moral failing, so that the self-critical artist bears a weighty responsibility and finds him/herself liable to a quasi-excommunication by criticism.

This is another aspect of the fundamental paradox of artistic 'beauty': unlike natural beauty, which claims nothing, the work of art puts forward the claim to be beautiful, successful and absolutely relevant—to everyone, that is to say, rather than to one person or to a few friends, like the work of the amateur. Otherwise, as Kant correctly insists, one would be wrong to use the word beautiful, which implies an intersubjective validity. However, there are few if any works that evoke not only the expert admiration of the critics but also the spontaneous assent of all. Every work of art irreducibly arises from a partial point of view on the world in which only a part of the public happily discovers a possible meaning of life. Whether a work is a success or a failure can be rationally justified; whether it speaks to me depends on another kind of discourse. This kind of legitimate preference escapes rationality in the strict sense, involving reasons that bind no one and which each individual may invoke in support of their own evaluations and their own personal taste.

Reflection on contemporary art comes to reveal what is an ensemble of structural constraints. At the first level, there is the *situation* created by

the emancipation of art, more particularly since the early twentieth century, characterized by an apparently limitless freedom, gained since the days of the early avant-gardes. Criticism, however, has had difficulty in following the development of art beyond the reach of any established definition. Having had to abandon all traditional criteria, successively identified as prejudices and put into question by artists, it takes refuge today either in an attitude of rejection, in the expectation of a 'return to order', or in a blind and unquestioning solidarity with whatever at any time passes for 'important', or again in an anaesthetized neutrality, indifferent to contemporary art and concerned only to commit as few faux pas as possible. It is in this context that there have emerged voices, some timid and worried about notions of quality, others authoritarian and ready with censure, that call for the re-establishment of something like criteria.

At a second level, aesthetic judgement attempts to arm itself in the face of the new situation, constructing the elements of an 'aesthetic logic' or the central concepts with which to *argue* about works of art. If today a beginning has been made on the delineation of such a logic, it could not have been as clearly conceived without the experience of the art of the twentieth century, which precisely gave the lie to the constitutive prejudices of the most prudent of earlier aesthetics. It is opposed at the same time to those discourses that claim that aesthetics no longer has anything to say about contemporary works, or, going even further, that any rational discourse is defeated by the structure of the image.

It is not however enough to have criteria of what is art and of what counts towards its quality. For at the last stage, the *institutional and political* context of contemporary art tends to neutralize these criteria. Unlike in pre-modern periods, which subjected artists to the control of their patrons, and unlike too the modern period, which made the emancipated

and subversive artist the victim of a generally obtuse society, the contemporary period endeavours to institutionalize revolt, subsidizing subversion. This society that claims to have laid social conflicts to rest also claims to accept the systematic anti-conformism of the emancipated arts. It must be required to prove that it has not opened its temples to an insubordinate art only in order to neutralize its explosive force.

Contemporary art, for its part, has to assume its two contradictory inheritances: that of a sovereignty dearly bought by a heroic modern art, virtually independent of any institution, and that of a new dependence on public and private institutions, more or less generous depending on the economic conjuncture, and which, following in the footsteps of the Vatican, whose museums have exhibited the anti-papist paintings of Francis Bacon, are greedy even for insulting novelties, happy to boast of the artist's subversion and to subsidize the 'hostile' culture that contemporary society offers itself as a little luxury.

PART ONE } situation