

The situation of Modern art in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

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Short Introduction Adorno thesis:

Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory" to be discussed in this thesis makes extraordinarily stimulating reading. I propose to show how Adorno *umspühlt* [washes around] the classic modern in an essayistic manner using the concept of fragmentation as a basic form of his theory and further, how he formulates a universal need of man to reach a stage of humanity not yet achieved.

Introduction

"The call for binding statements without a system is a call for thought models, and these are not merely monadological in kind. A model covers the specific, and more than the specific, without letting it evaporate in its more general, generic concept. Philosophical thinking is the same as thinking in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of analysis of models."¹

Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory" to be discussed in this thesis makes extraordinarily stimulating reading. I propose to show how Adorno *umspühlt* [washes around] the classic modern in an essayistic manner using the concept of fragmentation as a basic form of his theory and further, how he formulates a universal need of man to reach a stage of humanity not yet achieved.

The image of the author, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903-1969), is pictured as a very ambivalent one in literature. On the one hand he is captured as the genius, one of the wittiest of a transitional period but on the other hand he is seen as the failed artist, the melancholic who remains essentially the grey theorist.² Adorno was a personality of imposing multiplicity: philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, musical scientist, literary critic, composer and above all a radical critic of society.

The main intent of his contemporary analysis was to think sociologically in models, that means, interpreting phenomena, but not in order to determine facts, organize or classify or to state information as facts.³ He practised sociology as an object-based reflexion to disclose the functioning mechanisms of modern society.⁴ Dialectics shouldn't do anything else, as the attempt to experience without methodological and conceptional restrictions, causes the specific to lose its own right of existence by employing

¹ [Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York, 1983), p. 29. — trans. modified]

² See Detlev Claussen, *Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Ein letztes Genie* (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 14; M. Horkheimer, *Theodor W. Adorno zum Gedächtnis*, GS 7, p. 289f; Jean- Francois Lyotard, *Postmoderne für Kinder* (Vienna, 1987), p. 103; Works by Adorno are characterized by nostalgia according to Lyotard (Jean- Francois Lyotard, *Intensitäten* (Berlin, 1978), p. 46.

³ See Th.W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II. Eingriffe. Stichworte*, in: *Wissenschaftliche Erfahrungen in Amerika*, GS 10.2 (Frankfurt, 197), p. 703.

⁴ See Th. W. Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften I*, in: *Soziologie und empirische Forschung*, GS 8 (Frankfurt, 1972), p. 196.

generalizations. The whole is the untruth⁵, that's why a theory should be strong enough to face the historic fact, that its object is determined by fusion of rationality and irrationality. Adorno's contemporary analysis consists of three main issues: He debates on the social integrative mechanisms of the culture-industry, the loss of autonomy and identity of the individual and the anonymous mechanisms based on rules of a society of exchange.⁶

Adorno tried to uncover the split nature of art in his "Aesthetic Theory" which is a critique of society, terminology and knowledge. In October 1966 he had started to intensify working at the "Aesthetic Theory". In 1968 the rough draft existed already. He wrote in a letter to Marcuse in 1969 that, as a consequence of the critique of the *prima philosophia*, he could only write practically, reaching into the microstructure of language itself. The "Aesthetic Theory" composes itself as an open, comprehensively connected net of concepts with lots of entries and accesses. Partial complexes are equally positioned next to each other and circle around a core.

Adorno's wife, Gretel, along with Rolf Tiedemann, published the theory posthumously one year after Adorno's death. It remained a fragment, a mixture of metaphorical force of language and abstract constructions, and is considered a masterpiece of dialectic writing, even or so the author considered it unfinished.

If it is published the way Adorno would have liked it, will remain unsolved. The fragmentary character of its exterior appearance is definitely coherent with his discontinuity in developing central themes, such as the music of Beethoven or Schoenberg, the paintings of Klee or Picasso, the literature of Beckett or Celan. By circling round these themes he asked the question about the *Wahrheitsgehalt* [contents of truth], and of art with its exceptional position, as well as the possibility of autonomous artwork in contemporary society in general. He used the traditional aesthetic theories of Hegel and Kant and transformed their knowledge into our time using avant-garde art.

The primacy of the object in comparison to the subject is conspicuous. This led to a diminishment of aesthetic reception. "The primacy of the object is affirmed aesthetically only in the character of art as the unconscious writing of history..."⁷ Art is obliged to its own historiography and as such, to reality. Nevertheless, it is paradoxically governor of utopia which, analogous to its *Rätselcharakter* [enigmatic nature], never expresses itself positively.

The theoretical analysis of the aesthetic subject was a constant in his work. In times of an apparent diminishment of the traditional meaning of art, one should be reminded of Adorno's expression that writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. He actually wanted to save art from its downfall and to show a way for art to remain a channel to express the prevailing humanitarian ethos. "Central to aesthetics therefore is the redemption of semblance; yet no artwork has content other than through semblance,

⁵ See Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, GS 4 (Frankfurt, 1980), p. 57.

⁶ See Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno, Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 670/ 671.

⁷ [See Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London, 2004), p. 336 — hereafter cited in the text as AT.]

through the form of that semblance.” (AT 141) The redemption of art and its semblance is a necessity because only the artwork is free of untruth.

The starting point of this thesis should be modern art, looked at from the perspective of the “Aesthetic Theory”. On the one hand, *Kulturindustrie* [culture industry] produces the “deaestheticization of art” (AT 22) ⁸ through mass entertainment and consumer productions such as Hollywood movies and the aestheticization of merchandising material. On the other hand, since the turn of the century the radical, modern avant-garde takes itself out of this process by opening, and at the same time closing itself, as new art in the manner of not-yet-existing. This one is surrendered by utopia and forms its otherness. The aesthetic modern breaks radically with styles and traditions, which can be seen in the profusion of the new “isms”. It shocks the classical work idea of organic unity in its expressive moments and undermines the obligation of usage of conventional forms and categories. The artistic *Invarianten* [givens], as unchangeable quantities in art, become the material itself and are used experimentally and constructively producing for example montage. ⁹

Within this context the constituents of the historic avant-garde should be reflected and criticized in the way Adorno did, such as in the category of the new, the disintegration of the materials by using the montage technique, the suffering and utopia as well as the experiment. The final excursion, using the neo-avant-garde example of Joseph Beuys, is going to illustrate Adorno’s thinking in a practical way but also by pointing out the difference between the philosopher and the artist.

With regard towards the fact that Adorno circles around his themes in a fragmentary and essayistic way, the repetition of themes was also hard to avoid in this thesis and recalls in a wider sense, his style. Furthermore, Adorno’s publications and secondary literature about him and his work form a tremendous body of literature from which I had to make choices. That’s why it will be problematic, if not impossible, to bring the attempts and characteristics of modern art precisely to the concept. Adorno’s path will be followed to *umspühlen* [wash around] his themes in a fragmentary manner. They will appear again, from time to time, because they are part of, and make sense in relation to, wider contexts. This work will circle around main themes without ever claiming to produce a complete image of Adorno’s diverse, stimulating thoughts and his concept of modern art.

The category of the new

“In an essentially non-traditional society (the bourgeois one, ALK ¹⁰), aesthetic tradition a priori is dubious. The authority of the new is that of the historically inevitable.” “It (the modern, ALK) does not, however, negate previous artistic practices, as styles have done throughout the ages, but rather tradition itself; to this extent it simply ratifies the bourgeois principle in art. The abstractness of the new is bound up with the commodity character of art.” (AT 27)

⁸ [“Entkunstung”: Literally, the destruction of art’s quality as art. — trans.]

⁹ See Jens Walter (publ.), *Kindlers Neues Literatur Lexikon* (Munich, 1988), p. 101–103.

¹⁰ [„ALK“ cited as Anna-Louise Kratzsch, used in the text to mark alterations of quotations and translations.]

The “Aesthetic Theory” isn’t a concept of the avant-garde. It demands wider universality. The category of the new in modern art has an important role. “Yet since the mid nineteenth century and the rise of high capitalism, the category of the new has been central....” (AT 25/26)

Adorno sets the new against the renewal of themes, motives and practices, which defined art already before the modern. He does that by postulating animosity of the avant-garde towards tradition, which stamps the bourgeois-capitalistic society. The universal law affects this one, which is timeless like ratio itself. It means that remembrance, time and memory will be liquidated as a kind of irrational rest.¹¹

Newness has been existing long before the modern, also as a programme, but here the *Durchbruch* [break through] tradition, the negation of art, is meant rather than further development.¹² Adorno writes, that Schoenberg freed sounds in his Pieces for Orchestra, op. 16. It is unthinkable without them. They have meaning to all succeeding composing and at the end would eliminate the traditional language. One could realize, looking at Beckett’s works, “how much the new is a nonjudging judgment.” (AT 26)

An artist has to be knowledgeable of and able to work with the achieved standards of his period. The abstraction of the new is a necessity within this process because it encapsulates something crucial in its content. “Only in the new does mimesis unite with rationality without regression: Ratio itself becomes mimetic in the shudder of the new and it does so with incomparable power in Edgar Allan Poe, truly a beacon for Baudelaire and all modernity.” “If in monopoly capitalism it is primarily exchange value, not use value, that is consumed, in the modern artwork it is its abstractness, that irritating indeterminateness of what it is and to what purpose it is, that becomes a cipher of what the work is.” (AT 28/27) The break with the tradition, which occurs because of the new, is an expression of the *Gleichmachens* [making itself] the mimesis, with the rational world and the simultaneous criticism of it.

The avant-garde artwork is, in the opinion of Adorno, the only possible authentic expression of the contemporary world condition. He refers to Hegel’s theory but doesn’t incorporate his appraisals (esteeming antique art in opposition to romantic art). Adorno takes up Hegel’s radical historicism of art by saying further that he doesn’t allow any historical emerging type of the form-content dialectics to be of higher importance than the other. The avant-garde artwork appears as a necessary expression of alienation in a late capitalistic society. It would be inadequate to measure it compared to the closed unity of organic (classical) artwork.¹³ “All the same, nothing is more damaging to theoretical knowledge of modern art than its reduction to what it has in common with older periods. What is specific to it slips through the methodological net of ‘nothing new under the sun’....” “Since that moment no artwork has succeeded that rebuffed the ever fluctuating concept of the modern.” (AT 25/26)

This can be criticized. Adorno has the tendency to declare the *Durchbruch* [break through] of tradition to be a principle of development of modern art in general and

¹¹ See Th. W. Adorno, Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit, in: ders. Erziehung zur Mündigkeit..., publ. V. G. Kadelbach (Frankfurt, 1970), p. 13.

¹² See Peter Bürger, Theorie der Avantgarde (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 81–86.

¹³ Ibid., p. 120.

postulates an absolute demand which he should actually deny with his fragmentary approach.

Of course he knows that under the protective cover of newness the ever-repeating commodities are offered to the human being and proclaims that art appropriates the trademark of commodities. “Only by immersing its autonomy (Baudelaire’s poetry, ALK) in society’s *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronymous market. Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated....” (AT 28) Mimesis means demonstrating what is the fact. Adorno constructs the category of the new directly out of the commodity-society. “The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity.” (AT 289) The new is the necessary doubling of what has power over it. The products attract by the appeal of the new in order to be bought. Also art is subjected to this compulsion. Adorno thinks in recognizing resistance towards modern society and its commodities by a dialectic turn, that modern art adapts to society’s ruling law. The way it makes itself, being an adaptation of the world of commodities, it turns itself into an objective expression of suffering.

The category of the new in the society of commodities is only pretended. It is only an artificially produced appearance. If art adjusts to the exterior appearance it expresses resistance but only for those who want to see this resistance! Warhol’s depictions of 100 Campbell soup cans might have this potential of resistance or might not.

It turns out to be problematic according to Adorno’s critics, that he needs an educated recipient as a precondition who is able to ‘read’ the artwork within his philosophy and recognizes its resistance through the premise that art is supposed to be captured in a compulsion of renewal similar to the one of consumer goods. This resistance should be difficult to be found; it stays a stating of the critical subject that thanks to its abilities of dialectical thinking is able to detect positivity in negativity.¹⁴

My point of view here is that his art conception is elitist because it depends on connoisseurship of the recipient. Furthermore, Adorno points out examples almost only out of the *Hochkultur* [highly cultivated] in his “Aesthetic Theory” such as Beethoven, Schoenberg, Beckett, Picasso, Braque and many more. It becomes also difficult to distinguish between art and pure fashion. The neo avant-garde, which initiates the break with the tradition even once more, turns out to be a meaningless arrangement, which allows any creation of meaning.¹⁵

Mimesis doesn’t express adjustment but demonstrates what is part of the objective culture. Adorno has realized the aporetic in this case: “There is no general test for deciding if an artist who wipes out expression altogether has become the mouthpiece of reified consciousness or of the speechless, expressionless expression that denounces it.” (AT 154)

The new as a category would be applicable while depicting the change of the usage of working material, but because it comes to a break of tradition and so to a change of the illustrating system itself, the category to describe the situation is unsuitable. In this

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

respect that even an abolition of the institution of art was intended by the avant-garde, the concept of the new is too unspecific and general to describe the actual break with the tradition. It doesn't offer the opportunity to differ between fashion and historic necessary newness. Adorno says the rapid changes of artistic styles are a historic necessity. There is an irritating conformity of art-fashions and commodity-fashions.¹⁶

Adorno's theory could be only thought of in a limited way because the art succeeding the avant-garde would necessarily have to meet the historic requirements of the development of all artistic techniques being used so far. This turns out to be problematic because in contemporary society with its plurality and diversity it seems impossible to determine such a historic mark of artistic development of artistic practices. The simultaneous existence of the radical differential can be rather stated.

Furthermore, there is nothing to investigate against the usage of realistic techniques within the state of artistic techniques.¹⁷ The tendency to it can be recognized by looking at the boom of realistic painting at recent art fairs where painters like Neo Rauch and Tim Eitel of the "Leipzig School" have reached enormous popularity and even seem to start a new renaissance of realistic painting.¹⁸ In this case Adorno turned out to be historic himself by considering the avant-garde movements as up to date into the contemporary period.¹⁹

The disintegration of the materials

"Along with the categories, the materials too have lost their a priori self-evidence, and this is apparent in the case of poetic language. The disintegration of the materials is the triumph of their being-for-other. Hofmannsthal's *The Lord Chandos Letter* became famous as the first striking evidence of this." (AT 21)

The organic artwork appears as a product of nature. Kant writes, that beautiful art has to be looked at as nature even so one captures it as art.²⁰ It tries to hide its "being made". The opposition can be stated for the avant-garde artwork. It presents itself as an artificially made thing, as an artifact. The montage can be seen as the basic principle of avant-garde art, which consists of fragments taken out of reality. That's how it breaks through semblance of totality. The intention of destroying the institution of art is

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 85/ 86.

¹⁷ [The Lukács-Adorno-debate refers to many issues of the „expressionism-debate“ in the mid 30ies; see Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 117–123; After experiencing nationalism and the change from socialism to totalitarianism Adorno considers the avant-garde artwork as the only possible, authentic expression of alienation in a late capitalistic society. Lukács sees the avant-garde art as an expression of blindness of the bourgeois intellectuals in opposite to the real anti-powers of a socialistic transformation. With those he connects the possibility of a realistic art form in contemporary times.

Adorno doesn't have this political perspective.]

¹⁸ [See Holger Liebs, "Tristesse Royale", in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, German Edition (Munich, Friday, 10th December 2004), No. 287, p. 13; The high demand of the painted doubling and enigmatic nature of the visible world, of the dark allegories of Neo Rauc ...the urgent desire to own paintings by these painters (Eder, Schnell, Eitel and Weischer, ALK) makes it impossible to supply the demand. — trans. ALK.)

¹⁹ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 86.

²⁰ See I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in: *Werke in zehn Bänden*, publ. V. W. Weischede (Darmstadt , 1968), Bd. 8, (KdU, § 45), p. 405.

paradoxically realized in the artwork itself. While the single moments obtain a high degree of independence, in the organic work they can only be regarded in relation to its whole in order to make sense. Single elements always point to work unity.

The precondition of the montage demands the reality to be fragmented. The very means of creating the form describes that. Historically it first appeared in cubism in which the montage received the status of an artistic principle in comparison to the movie, in which it is a basic technical practice. Cubism destroys most obviously the system of presentation established within the renaissance. The contrast of two techniques is an issue in the *papiers collés* of Picasso and Braque, illusionism of the pasted-in fragment taken out of reality and abstraction of the cubistic technique in which the objects are depicted. The pasting-in of images into an artwork has a provocative character, which shouldn't be overemphasized because the elements are still ordered after certain aesthetical rules and are subordinated under a composition, which strives for balance. The reason for fragmentation is to destroy the organic, the depiction of reality, but not like the historic avant-garde movements, to question art in general. The montage artwork draws away from traditional rules of judgement but it is also an aesthetically designed object. This theory of the avant-garde has to be seen through the earlier establishment of collage in the cubist movement.²¹

In that respect the new would be that since the renaissance fragments of reality, materials that aren't created by artists and are incorporated into images the first time. They are taken objectively out of society and are a piece of the "fait social", the historical process.

Therewith unity, created as a whole by the artist and being distant to daily life, is destroyed because the part of the basket that stays an objective part of reality is even used in a collage. The principle that the subject has to deliver the transformation of reality into the medium of art is broken. The total design of image space as a continuum is resigned. Adorno provided important clues to capture this phenomenon.

He realized the revolutionary of this practice: "The semblance provided by art, that through the fashioning of the heterogeneously empirical it was reconciled with it, was to be broken by the work admitting into itself literal, illusionless ruins of empirical reality, thereby acknowledging the fissure and transforming it for purposes of aesthetic effect." (AT 203) It doesn't create the Schein [semblance] of reconciliation anymore like the organic work did and doesn't refer by use of symbolic language to reality, but uses it as an artistic medium.

Adorno also gives political dimension to the montage. "Art wants to admit its powerlessness vis-à-vis late-capitalistic totality and to initiate its abrogation." (AT 203) Therewith he makes a highly absolute demand on art. Bloch in opposition to Adorno concedes the artwork that in historically different contexts their methods could have

²¹ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 104.

different effects and not only or primarily political ones. Methods can't be determined to just one significant meaning.²²

The following statement by Adorno doesn't provide such a fixed meaning: "The negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form." (AT 232) Aesthetic captures in its production what was conventionalised as a denial of reconciliation by the aesthetical effect. Adorno understands negation of synthesis as a negation of meaning. It still has to be kept in mind that a denial of meaning still is a type of meaning.²³ Subsequently the risk of art without consequences should be debated.

An organic artwork can be only understood out of its work-whole and this one only out of its single elements. As a precondition there is the conception of a necessary agreement between the meaning of these single elements and the whole. This precondition is cancelled by the non-organic artwork. The elements "emancipate" themselves from the superior whole but they also lose their necessity and carry the risk to be without consequences. The specific of the elements is then the principle of their construction. Art responds to the loss of its self-evidence not simply by concrete transformation of its procedures and compartments but by trying to pull itself free from its own concept as from a shackle: the fact that it is art." (AT 22)

The recipient experiences that his method to appropriate meaning isn't suitable anymore. The denial of meaning is experienced as a shock. Therewith the avant-garde hopes that this would lead to the incidence that the recipient starts questioning his own life and realizes the necessity to make changes. The shock is intended to be a stimulant of change of social behaviour and provides the procedure to destroy the aesthetic immanent. Finally a change in the daily practice of life of the recipient should be initiated.

With regard towards Dada happenings the recipient might respond with blind anger but the evidence that his daily life has been changed by the experience is not proven. Furthermore, this shock tactic is not guaranteed to work more often than once. "The enduring perished and drew the category of duration into its vortex." "Artworks have no power over whether they endure; it is least of all guaranteed when the putatively time-bound is eliminated in favour of the timeless." (AT 35) The shock is bound to the unique experience, that's why its character changes with its repetition and loses its effect. At one point the audience expects the shocks of the avant-garde. Then it is institutionalised and consumerable.²⁴ It happens when one tries to grant duration by making the shock objective. "Artworks were always meant to endure; it is related to their concept, that of objectivation." (AT 35)

Taking a look at the book of art scandals, one will find the actions of the happenings of artists such as the Viennese, Hermann Nitsch. His happenings are not able to take themselves out of the electric field of provocation and consumerism. The body is now used as a canvas in a completely new medium. In Vienna happenings take place since the 1960's in which there is suffering and slaughter. Cows are opened, chicken are

²² See E. Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*. Erweiterte Ausgabe: Gesamtausgabe, 4 (Frankfurt, 1962), p. 221–228.

²³ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p.106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107/ 108.

plucked and naked take baths in blood. The audience gets also sprinkled with blood. It is intended by the happening. Hermann Nitsch stages since 1960 the “Orgien-Mysterien-Theater”. Shock paired with disgust seems to be immediate because one deals with organic material as an artistic medium, which gets reduced to a pure source of the production. The happenings refer to the conventional genre of painting whose tradition is *durchbrochen* [broken through] by the new media of presentation. A well-known artistic genre is used in an unknown form; theatre and painting mingle and create the happening. Hermann Nitsch breaks with the tradition of the medium in order to criticize the Austrian society which at that point of time denies its political history as consequently as the German does.²⁵ At the beginning he could count on disturbances and resistance of Austrian politicians, nearby artists and international animal protectors while having his bloody orgies but its repetition the recipient gets used to his principle. He simply knows what is in the programme. Additionally there is the possibility to buy a special edition with a unique piece of artwork with the value of 350 Euros, an extensively illustrated 400-pages long book about the “Six day play” (Publisher Hatje Cantz, 1998). The objectivation allows the passion of collecting and placing in museums (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum Moderner Kunst, Wien)²⁶ The potential of resistance is institutionalised, the shock is illustrated and with it banned, disgraced to the bare commodity and with it consumerable. “Nothing remains of the autonomy of art....” “...other than the fetish character of the commodity.” (AT 22)

That way the of the bloody orgies of Hermann Nitsch became collectable items and historic. It is strange that Adorno never mentioned the neo-avant-garde specifically. It can be argued that the radical break with the traditional media for expression here and the criticism of concealment, of the awful Nazistic regime wasn't considered by Adorno. The question can therefore be posed; why did Adorno favour high culture without explicitly referring to the neo avant-garde tendencies of his time — the 1960's in which the “aesthetic theory” was written.²⁷

From nowadays perspective, the question would have to be asked; what can actually be shocking? “They (the duped by the culture-industry, ALK) push for the deaestheticization of art. Its unmistakable symptom is the passion to touch everything, to allow no work to be what it is, to dress it up, to narrow its distance from its viewer. The humiliating difference between art and the life people lead ... must be made to disappear....” (AT 22) This conflict is exactly what Adorno considers to be the integral part of art and wherein lies its political potential. It expresses itself in its *Rätselcharakter* [enigmatic nature], which specifies the conceptional underdeveloped logic of the artwork. In the *Rätselcharakter* the utopia of art and finally its *Wahrheitsgehalt* [content of truth] is placed.

²⁵ See Heinz Peter Schwerfel, *Kunstskandale: über Tabu und Skandal, Verdammung und Verehrung zeitgenössischer Kunst* (Cologne, 2000), p. 59; Hermann Nitsch, *Das bildnerische Werk* (Salzburg/Vienna, 1988).

²⁶ See Karlheinz Schmid, *Auftrieb für den Altmeister der Aktionisten*, in: *Kunstzeitung*, No. 85/September 2003.

²⁷ [Exceptions might be in the field of music. Adorno writes: “Key events may include certain musical works such as Cage’s Piano Concerto, which impose on themselves a law of inexorable aleatoriness and thereby achieve a sort of meaning: the expression of horror.” (AT 202) Here it is visible that the author expects an educated reader who knows that John Cage is meant here.]

Suffering and utopia

“Suffering conceptualised remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany.” “Hegel’s thesis that art is consciousness of plight has been confirmed beyond anything he could have envisioned.” (AT 24)

Adorno and Hegel considered philosophy of art to be one of aesthetics which is part of human culture. For Adorno it functions as criticism of rationality and redemption of the non-identical. Adorno reached a culture-pessimistic attitude because of the catastrophies of the 20th century, especially because of the horror of the Nazi regime that “culture proved unsuccessful for precisely those who produced it.” (AT 193)

The purpose of culture is humanisation of mankind, Adorno maintains that the claim humanises mankind cannot be sustained. That’s why neither artistic production nor aesthetic theory can be continued as before. Adorno mentions the impossibility to write a poem after Auschwitz.²⁸ To write poetry isn’t possible anymore with an unbroken trust to a humanizing effect of poetry. He wanted to mark the historic breakage, which took place because of the barbaric. Art has lost its matter of course of its existence with this breakage. If it wants to continue to be truth it has to block itself towards affirmation.²⁹

“Art becomes human in the instant in which it terminates this service. Its humanity is incompatible with any ideology of service to humankind. It is loyal to humanity only through inhumanity toward it.” (AT 257) Incomplete humanity shouldn’t be affirmed but should remind of the critical potential, which hasn’t been obtained yet. This implies also the right to use the shock, destruction, confusion and irritation to offend against humanity. Inhumanity and humanity of art clarify that its autonomy is a precondition to actively criticize society. Its independent being makes its status to criticize more difficult. Necessarily art is emancipated from cults and other institutions. The form of autonomy also gives it its unwanted affirmative characteristics. In an unfree society affirmation leads to untruth.³⁰

With regard toward Herbert Marcuse art is then affirmative when it captures the semblance of fiction of an uninjured world in an image because then the distance between a human being and the pro-and reproduction-process is expressed. Art carries a moment of freedom and non-obligation, the characteristic of consequencelessness so to speak. If passion dissolved completely in experience of daily life, it would lose its distance to it completely and also its ability of criticism. This problem of arbitrariness has expressed itself especially in the culture-industry in which the wrong abolition of the distance between art and life develops.³¹ “What the enemies of modern art ... call its negativity is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn.” (AT 25)

²⁸ See Th. W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I*, in: *Die Kunst und die Künste*, GS 10.1 (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 452.

²⁹ See Scheer, Brigitte: *Einführung in die Philosophische Ästhetik* (Darmstadt, 1997), p. 171/ 172.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171/ 172.

³¹ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 68.

“Just as art cannot be, and never was, a language of pure feeling, nor a language of the affirmation of the soul, neither is it for art to pursue the results of ordinary knowledge....” (AT 41) As long as art raises a claim of truth, it has to bear the dialectic conditions. Everything which is constitutional of it is applied to the exchange and reference of its opposition. Therefore art is always antithesis to the empirical existing. It has to refer to the empirical. Also Kant means that the human being creates out of the elements of the first nature a second one. The “heightened order of existence” means, “art opposes the empirical through the element of form.” (AT 6)

After the catastrophe of meaning, which culminates in Auschwitz in Adorno’s opinion, the appearance (form) turns to abstraction, which executes the modern because of its relation to the existing. It makes itself the irrational toward the administered world by mimesis. Opposed to myths art transforms reality into fiction consciously. It doesn’t reach its autonomy only by forming but also by subordination of its own fiction. The concern of art has to be its own form, the itself created one. It is a genuine aesthetic, a creation on its own. “Forms, that by which artworks seek to become artworks, themselves require autonomous production. (AT 389) A painting like *Picasso’s Guernica* receives its eloquence by its power of expression by depicting reality in its ruins. That’s how it escapes the basic tendency of autonomous art to be affirmative and ideological. As *Kafka* postulated for the *Jugendstil*, which appeared to him “as a lighthearted journey going nowhere.” (AT 21) Such a danger exists in the case when the autonomous works leave the empirical world only because they want to be beautiful. That is the reason for their fundamental character of semblance which the expression opposes to. “In expression they reveal themselves as the wounds of society; expression is the social ferment of their autonomous form. The principal witness for this is *Picasso’s Guernica* that, strictly incompatible with prescribed realism, precisely by means of inhumane construction, achieves a level of expression that sharpens it to social protest beyond all contemplative misunderstanding. The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light. It is actually this against which the rage at art reacts.” (AT 310)

Form or methods place symbols of the outer artistic reality in other functions and this is a feature of the autonomy of art. A moment of content can be eliminated by an independent artistic performance. If this one is executed in the sense of Hegel that means that quality is not dissolved but transformed and displaced into other functions, then a critical purpose of art will be possible. Kant proved the same development for practical behaviour that applies to art. Both do not evolve arbitrarily but determine their own laws.³²

Art’s double character is both autonomous and fait social, part of an historical process of the entire society. (AT 6) To talk about the historic development of art, it’s gaining of autonomy is essential. The society and its means of artistic production, the position of manufacturers and their technique, express the connection with society. This was

³² See Scheer, Brigitte: Einführung in die Philosophische Ästhetik (Darmstadt, 1997), p. 171/ 172.

previously presented in the discussion of the montage. “Art is the social antithesis of society....” (AT 9)

The experiment

“Art that is radically and explicitly something made must ultimately confront its own feasibility.” “...in fact such progress (art as the process of making, ALK) has been accompanied by a tendency toward absolute involuntariness, from the automatic writing of fifty years ago to today’s tachism and aleatoric music the observation is correct that the technically integral, completely made artwork converges with the absolutely accidental work....” (AT 34)

To “leave oneself to the material”, to “make the involuntary production” a programme is a specific of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art. Also within Adorno’s Theory materiality experiences a new valuation, because the working material is manufactured in society. It is and expresses the social. “The liberation of form, which genuinely new art desires, holds enciphered within it above all the liberation of society, for form — the social nexus of everything particular — represents the social relation in the artwork....” (AT 331) The concept of the avant-garde had something of “aged youth”. In its styles, the so-called “isms”, an “art emancipated from its self-evidence” (AT 32) is expressed.

Art has a *Doppelcharakter* [double character]. On the one hand it is autonomous, on the other “fait social”. The latter imparts itself constantly to the autonomy of the artwork that means the empirical reality is always in all its facets, part of it. The enthusiastic devotion to the material and its accidentally-produced resistance starts with Tristan Tzara’s paper-shaving poems and continued to the most modern happenings. It is not reason but cause of a society’s condition in which only the accidental revelation stays untouched by wrong consciousness. It remains free of ideology and isn’t stigmatised by total objectivation of living conditions.³³ There are different methods to produce chance for example tachism or the action painting of the 50’s. The intention is to create spontaneity. The subject who freed itself from the compulsions and rules of creating, rediscovers itself in empty subjectivity. The result stays arbitrary because the subject hasn’t worked on a given task or a specific material. Finally it leads to the arbitrary especially if producer and recipient stay differential. Art becomes practice of daily life.

In opposition to that there is indirect production of chance. Everything capturing the material is precise calculation but the result stays unpredictable. In the principle of construction there is a renunciation of subjective imagination in favour of giving itself to the chance of construction. This is interpreted as a historic-philosophical reaction to the empowering of the bourgeois subject. “The subject, conscious of the loss of power that it has suffered as a result of the technology unleashed by himself, raised this powerless to the level of a program....” (AT 31) The adaption to empowerment is seen as the only possible form of resistance against this empowerment, “The painfulness of experimentation finds response in the animosity toward the so-called isms: programmatic, self-conscious, and often collective art movements.” (AT 32) Adorno’s

³³ See E. Köhler, *Der literarische Zufall, das Mögliche und die Notwendigkeit* (Munich, 1973), Kap. III; here: p. 81.

primacy of construction as lawfulness could be derived from the methods of twelve-tone music.³⁴ The avant-garde combines fragments with the intention to create meaning. The material determines the lawfulness in which meaning is created. The determination itself doesn't serve a purpose.³⁵

Afterword

“Among the dangers faced by new art, the worst is the absence of danger.” (AT 38)

Finally, the question should be posed generally as to whether art is able to express the inexpressible suffering of the victims: is art with its moral distance to reality justified, or is its absence to direct praxis cynical? Does the inhumane reality actually demand more factual interventions such as practical ones by the artist and perhaps less depiction in images to really express suffering?

Celan's dark poetry doesn't unjustify the suffering of the victims because it is shaming and discreet in its presentation. His poetry is difficult to access by the recipient because of its form, which refuses to conventionalise the horror explicitly. That's why, according to Adorno, he articulates the inexpressible so successfully through his ability with compassionate language. The most important task of art is to objectify suffering and to express reality by truth. Because art has the ability to do that it criticizes the unreasonable reality.

It has to be criticized that Adorno doesn't justify art by disqualifying it if art doesn't meet his requirements to articulate suffering. The multiple and open system which art subsumes can't be subordinated to a homogeneous task and intended purpose. Even if the critical contents of ready-mades or op-art works is questionable, its status to be art can't be taken away of these objects. This would be the logical consequence following Adorno's art-philosophical theoretical concept. Also it is hardly applicable to contemporary works like Dan Flavin's light installations where new media is used. The reason for it is that in contemporary art aesthetical reflections about perception and changes of perception as well as modes of depiction and non-depiction, are a preliminary issue. That often causes the expressive mimetic moment of art, which is essential to determine the articulation of suffering, true knowledge and criticism of social reality, to become marginalized and lose its importance in contemporary works.³⁶

After the Second World War art couldn't possibly connect to pre-war-traditions. Art had to cope with the Nazistic terror and the German responsibility of guilt. Even Jean-Francois Lyotard speaks in the mid 80's of a liquidation of the project of modernity, symbolized by the name Auschwitz.³⁷ Adorno's art-philosophical absolute demand can be seen in relation to the Nazistic horror, Stalinism, Auschwitz and Hiroshima. With regard towards the succeeding development the world hasn't turned any better which can be seen at world catastrophes like Pol Pot or the fatal situation of spreading of Aids in Africa, just to name a few examples. In this respect Adorno's concept of suffering

³⁴ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p.92.

³⁵ See Th. W. Adorno, *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*, (Frankfurt/ Berlin/ Wien, 1972), p. 63.

³⁶ See Manuel Knoll, *Theodor W. Adorno. Ethik als erste Philosophie* (Munich, 2002), p. 73–75.

³⁷ See Jean- Francois Lyotard, *Postmoderne für Kinder* (Vienna, 1987), p. 33/ 73.

hasn't become obsolete at all, but rather unacceptable in its absolute form. Auschwitz is central to Lyotard as well as it is to Adorno but he criticizes the persistence on sorrow, nostalgia and pessimism in art, which doesn't allow philosophy any orientation to open up to a positive perspective.³⁸

Adorno postulates that realistic techniques don't meet the actual historic state of artistic production anymore because the avant-garde and its techniques such as the montage have already challenged them. Realistic techniques belong to tradition in the opinion of Adorno. This is unacceptable because by doing this, Adorno as a theorist of the epoch of the historic avant-garde, becomes historic himself while actually considering the avant-garde as being up to date until contemporary times.³⁹

Also Peter Buerger mentions that Adorno captured the significance of the avant-garde for the aesthetic theory without doubt, but only applied it to the new type of artwork, not the actual demands of the avant-garde movement, to eliminate the institution of art by leading it back to praxis of life. Only that way it gets a modern type of art. The neo-avant-garde example of Joseph Beuys illustrates that. Joseph Beuys said that everybody is an artist. Not economic interests nor, materialism, but creativity, should become the daily basis of life of human beings. It should create a peaceful and democratic society.⁴⁰

The historic avant-garde couldn't destroy the institution of art but it eliminated the premise that a certain style of art is able to be considered to be of higher validity. The "being next to each other" of realistic and avantgardistic art is a fact today. It can be seen especially well at the recent valuation of figurative painting in the "Leipzig School", which even seems to dominate the art market momentarily.⁴¹ There is no aesthetic norm to be set to be the only current one.

It is questionable if there is such a progress of art like Adorno posits when he mentions a historically conditioned state of the artistic material which art shouldn't fall behind. Art draws itself away from modernity and world history to its post-modern salon. Aesthetics turn away from historic philosophy towards theory of the system.⁴² What is left behind of the end of the historic avant-garde? The new aesthetics can recapture its prehistory. It can use what art has always governed — perception and observation. This is also the direction of current aesthetics, which is striving for aisthesis, the theory of perception.

The total availability of material and forms, which is characteristic of the art of bourgeois society, should be examined within this context. If this total availability of all traditions still allows aesthetic theory in the way of Kant or Adorno is questionable because one of its preconditions is to structure its object in order to capture it

³⁸ [Ibid., p. 103; Works by Adorno are characterized by nostalgia according to Lyotard, Jean- Francois Lyotard: Intensitäten (Berlin, 1978), p. 46.]

³⁹ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p.86.

⁴⁰ See Lange, Barbara: *Joseph Beuys, Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft*, in: *Der Akademiestreit- und das gesellschaftsreformerische Anliegen von Joseph Beuys* (Berlin, 1999).

⁴¹ See footnote No. 17.

⁴² See Hannes Böhringer: *Attention im Clair- obscur. Die Avantgarde*, in: *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik* (Leipzig, 1990), p. 16.

scientifically. Adorno's statement that late capitalistic society turned to be irrational in a certain manner that it might even not be able to be captured theoretically anymore, might especially have significance for the neo-avant-garde art.⁴³

Joseph Beuys excursion or Adorno's thoughts-continued

"The freedom of spirit and of culture stands for the goals that can only be achieved through praxis and that are the binding standard for praxis itself. Understood correctly, the real goal would ultimately be its own abolition...." "...the overcoming of the contradictions of theory and practice, the separation of intellectual and physical labour."⁴⁴

In respect of the experiment whose significance for the historic avant-garde has already been demonstrated, I would like to read Adorno practically in opposition to his primacy of theory. The "ÖÖ-programme" of Joseph Beuys should be therefore used as an example. Tuesday, the 30th of November 1967 the matriculation festivities took place at the federal art academy of Düsseldorf. Speeches were given and Joseph Beuys was supposed to do so as well. He performed a happening with the Danish composer Henning Christiansen, which was later on called "ÖÖ Programme". Beuys presented himself to the public the first time as a reformer.

The happening was performed as following: Both of them stood standing in front of a microphone a small distance from each other. Joseph Beuys wore his typical clothes: jeans, fishing vest and hat and, unusually, to carried an axe with a wooden handle. For four minutes he made roaring sounds, which he yelled repeatedly into a megaphone. At the same time Henning Christiansen synchronized his compositions on four recording tape machines, which were amplified. Sometime later Christiansen's voice was heard on the forth tape repeating the phrase in monotone: "*Rastplatz bitte sauberhalten.*" (Keep the parking lot clean. — trans. ALK). Then Henning Christiansen returned to his microphone and also formed these noises soundlessly into the microphone. After the third repetition, Joseph Beuys having finished his roaring, walked towards Henning Christiansen and put his axe against his own and then Henning Christiansen's chest. The latter repeated this ritual with Beuys. Afterwards both left the stage and the doors to the auditorium opened up with the buffet. A band started to play.⁴⁵

⁴³ See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), p. 130/ 131.

⁴⁴ See Alex Demirovic, *Geist, der fliegen will, Adorno unterm Bann*, in: Nicolaus Schafhausen; Vanessa Joan Müller; Michael Hirsch, *Adorno, Die Möglichkeit des Unmöglichen* (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 17; Th. W. Adorno (1969), *Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis*, in: ders., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 10.2 (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 768f.

⁴⁵ See Lange, Barbara: *Joseph Beuys, Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 1999), p. 84/ 85.

According to Joseph Beuys a sculptural process is expressed by the roaring sounds of the throat with the modified voice-modulations. The happening here is work of a sculptor. The traditional expectations of a matriculation festivity as well as the concept of sculpture is ruptured, expanded and is then presented as something new. Joseph Beuys copes with language and communication of human beings while using technical, objective machines. The usage of objects out of reality (recording tape machine, microphone, axe and so on) points to the fact that also the neo-avant-garde can't escape its *Gemachtsein* [being-made]. This topic has already been discussed within the montage.

The happening corresponds to Adorno's concept of the "fait social". Despite its relative autonomy a social component is articulated. The happening is an artistic manifestation in opposition to the traditional matriculation festivity. It is integrated into a complex programme referring to its *Gemachtsein*, its constructiveness. It has also experimental features because the unusual matriculation speech doesn't have historical models.

The roaring sound into the microphone as a medium of matriculation-speeches hasn't historically existed before. It is new and creates irritation because the action can't be explained by traditional patterns of perception. The form of presentation, the simultaneity and the orchestral arrangement of the sounds focus on equality of the elements. Hierarchies are left out.⁴⁶ A parallel to Adorno's Schoenberg receptions can be found here. He regarded them as opposition to traditional language and rupture with tradition.

According to Joseph Beuys the "ÖÖ-theme", which has been performed a few times but in a modified way, can be interpreted as the creative ability to design reality with the medium of language. The happening of 1967 can be seen as the intention to activate society by means of creativity and uses irritation and the unexpected to provoke. Reactions can be found for example in one of the papers of the gutter press called "The Express" where one could read: "Professor barks into microphone — trans. ALK".

The audience is uncertain if it is experiencing a new art form or a speech. Other professors speaking that day clarify their messages. Joseph Beuys's performance challenges common patterns of interpretation. In opposition to other happenings the "ÖÖ-programme" didn't take place at a proper location for experimental art like a gallery for instance. It was performed at a federal education-institution within its highly official framework but still referred to typical elements of academic festivities only in a modified, alienated way. The objective culture can be recognized here in its difference to the alienated by its own alienation. The speech consists of roaring sounds spoken into a microphone and is broken up by a simultaneous, planned musical programme. The rupture of listening conventions is obvious. The defence of the old order or the responsibility the new student is expected to demonstrate towards the academy as a respectable institution is symbolized in the act of passing the axe. The happening can still be regarded as a matriculation speech but the alienation of it articulates the *Rätselcharakter* [enigmatic nature] art is supposed to have according to Adorno. It can only be looked at as the other in comparison to the traditional matriculation conventions. Its form incorporates the other, *Nichtidentische* [non-identical], which

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

blocks the affirmation of the audience, which can't match its expectations with the experienced. In its discrepancy the recipients are left with the shock. The artwork keeps its authenticity this way. It blocks any demand of power being enigmatic and refers at the same time to a rigid academic system, which strongly needs to be reformed.

In opposition to Beuys and according to Adorno the reconciliation of the objective with the subjective world can't be realized practically but imaged in the utopia. Nevertheless it has to be stated that here two completely different motivations and intentions are discussed. Adorno as a philosopher strives for theory while Beuys as an artist expresses himself practically through his medium. Beuys goes beyond theory. His purpose is to harmonize human beings.⁴⁷ In Adorno's concept this is only possible by reflection through the utopia but not practically realizable, because harmony in its absolute demands decays its other, the rupture, and reaches for power. Adorno expresses this by talking about "ideology sworn to harmony" (AT 11). Harmony is only able to exist because of its other and never absolutely just for itself and according to Adorno, only realizable in the utopia. Compared to this the happening is a call for Beuys to confront oneself with new demands of society in a practical way.

The "ÖÖ-programme" was planned as a provocation. It demonstrates the distance Beuys has to his conventional colleagues at the academy and towards the federal administrative apparatus. It is a distance to the objective given understanding. He categorizes the roaring sound as a prehistoric sound. It has become more and more repressed in human conversation and can be seen as the other now. In its historical context it appears as a natural basis of a more conscious way of human behaviour.⁴⁸ Joseph Beuys positioned himself as a diplomat between being and its spilled potentials to rediscover oneself through the crust of civilisation deficits. Adorno's idea of revelation could be applicable. Joseph Beuys meant that free study is important as well as knowledge of specific possibilities of art in general to cope with the disempowerment by mechanisation and stylised teaching. His basic understanding is that human actions should be considered as art themselves. He formulated this message in Düsseldorf with regard towards older ideals for instance of the arts and crafts movement.⁴⁹

The elementary difference of both is between theory and praxis because on the reflection level the result of Adorno's sociological analysis is the primacy of theory. It is the only form in which the individual can distant himself from the existing power of society. It's the break to breath to think."⁵⁰

Another echo to the "no to praxis" can be found in the image of the "not doing anything anymore": "Rien faire comme une bête, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, 'being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment,' might take the place of process, act, satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace."⁵¹ In Adorno's view the real condition of humanity

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 97.

⁵⁰ See Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, in: GS 6 (Frankfurt, 1997), p. 243.

⁵¹ See Th. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, Aphorismus 100 (Frankfurt, 1991).

stays the utopia. But this is so, not because the beauty made possible by the nihilistic no to life and judgment is an image of humanity, but rather because — and herein lies the negative character of Adorno’s dialectics — specifically as the suspension of the orientation towards humanity, it is an element of humanity.⁵²

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⁵² See Nicolaus Schafhausen; Vanessa Joan Müller; Michael Hirsch, *Adorno. Die Möglichkeit des Unmögliche* (Frankfurt, 2003), p. 69.

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