

## Black as the New Dissonance: Heidegger, Adorno, and Truth in the Work of Art

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This essay will take up Theodor Adorno's idea of "truth" in the work of art, in explicit contrast with the most ambitious competing account of aesthetic truth in the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art." Through a reconstruction of Heidegger's theory of the artwork as a critique of the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel, I will seek to demonstrate the necessity of a materialist aesthetics, grounded in an account of artistic technique as productive force. To this end, I will turn to Moishe Postone's theory of historical time as the temporal, rather than material, dimension of use-value, in order to pose the question of truth in art and its relation to the forces of production. I want to argue that the modernist artwork, grasped as a peculiar form of commodity, is able through dissonance to explicitly exhibit this temporal dimension of use-value as a unique form of social knowledge, what Adorno calls the "truth content" of the work. Finally, I will use this framework to make sense of the debates surrounding the work of Frank Stella, whose Black Painting *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* is, in my view, an exemplary interrogation of the "reason" (exchange value) and "squalor" (use-value) of the commodity-form. By reading Stella this way, I hope to defend his body of work against the critique articulated by J.M. Bernstein, and to critique the defense of his work provided by Michael Fried, whose famous claim that "presentness is grace" should — according to my reading of Stella and of modernism in general — be revised. To carry out this revision, I want to draw on a little-remarked passage from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, in which the experience of shock occasioned by modern works is theorized as the possibility of knowledge of their truth content, and forms the basis of a new form of aesthetic judgment I will call "dialectical judgment." To state things all at once, the inability of Heidegger's theory to come to grips with modernism demonstrates the necessity of Adorno's historically specific, critical theory of the dissonant artwork, while Heidegger's *transcendental* categories of earth and world should be understood as rendering intelligible the very possibility of a Marxist aesthetics committed to preserving the traces of freedom in

the blackened art of late capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

### Heidegger's Concept of Truth in Art

Heidegger's essay on the work of art draws on the account of truth as "disclosure" developed in paragraph forty-four of *Being and Time* in order to demonstrate the unique status of art as an *explicit* form of such disclosure. The artwork, on this account, is "true" inasmuch as it opens a "world" or context of significance determined by a historically specific form of subjectivity in the light of which objects and practices become intelligible as such objects and practices. For instance, in his famous reading of a painting by Van Gogh, Heidegger argues that the pair of worn boots it depicts is illuminated as a piece of "equipment" that gains its significance in the practical context of the world of a peasant woman, whose labor determines the form of her life and thereby establishes the conditions for her experience of reality. While the boots are disclosed as reliable equipment to the peasant woman through her actual practical engagement, that disclosure *itself* is disclosed to the beholder of the work of art. In other words, the painting is true not because it is an accurate rendition of the boots of a peasant, but because it illuminates the historical conditions for the intelligibility of the boots as boots, letting us know "what the shoes, in truth, are."<sup>2</sup> In Heidegger's parlance, the "being" (*Sein*) of this "being" (*Seiendes*) or shoe-entity is explicitly unveiled in the artwork, so that the shoes are disclosed in and through their "world," or on the basis of conditions that — as historical and thus finite — are subject to change.

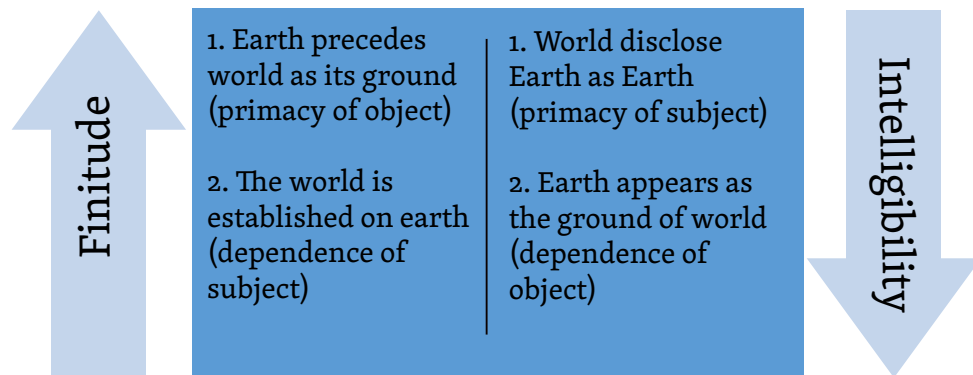
This account of truth in the artwork is critically engaged, both implicitly and explicitly, with the two most prominent aesthetic theories of German Idealism, Kant's *Analytic of the Beautiful* (in the *Critique of Judgement*) and Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. A brief rehearsal of Heidegger's critiques of these theories will help to establish the stakes of his essay and to clarify his arguments, while also laying the foundation for the reconstruction below of Adorno's own critical inheritance of the Idealist tradition.

Heidegger's critique of Kant contains two main components, which parallel the subjective and objective aspects of Kant's theory of the beautiful while underscoring and radicalizing their interdependence. Kant is explicitly mentioned twice in the essay, but only in connection with his conception of thinghood in the *Critique of Pure Reason* rather than his aesthetics. In the second of the two references, Heidegger rejects the "Kantian-transcendental" interpretation of the thing "in terms of matter and form," claiming that "it represents an assault on the thing-being of the thing."<sup>3</sup> This contains an important clue concerning the "objective" dimension of Heidegger's critique of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, which implicitly makes use of Kant's notion of the thing in defining the object of beauty.

In his summary of the "Third Moment" of the judgment of taste, Kant articulates his conception of aesthetic form: "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end."<sup>4</sup> The object of a

judgment of taste, for Kant, is defined by the *form* of purposiveness: it appears as if it were designed for a purpose, without actually having one. The experience of beauty in the judgment, moreover, is also free of “charm and emotion,” which arise from unreflective sense impressions of the object, such as a lone perception of the “tone of a violin,” isolated from the compositional whole.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the purposiveness of the object of beauty is subjectively generated through a “reflective” judgment on the form of the object — or the process of giving matter form — but without the guiding concept of a purpose (*forma finalis*). The form of the purposiveness of the object, therefore, characterizes the subject’s *representation* of the object. In paragraph nine, Kant calls this process a “free play” of the imagination and understanding, arguing that the “truth” expressed by beauty — that is, the objective criterion that allows us to expect our judgments to resonate with others — is the very animation of our faculties for the sake of the constitution of an object of experience.<sup>6</sup> Rather than experiencing a particular determinate object, or merely enjoying an indeterminate sensation, we experience in the object of beauty — determinate in its indeterminateness — the power of “cognition in general” to constitute the *objectivity of objects* (the “thing-being of the thing”) and thus the power of reason to give form to our experience as such.

In the second part of the “Origin” essay, “Truth and Art,” this conception of the aesthetic object receives a thorough renovation. Heidegger defines the “work-character” of the artwork in enigmatic terms as the “strife between earth and world,” which can be elucidated as the tension between the space of meaning or intelligibility and the material limits of such intelligibility — as embodied by the irreducible materiality of the work — that also serve to “delimit” and make possible the space of world. Earth is, as it were, the material reminder unique to art of the *finitude* of any world, which must *sustain itself* in light of the ever-present possibility of its failure or collapse.<sup>7</sup> Earth signifies the dependence of social meaning on a material substrate that can never be fully mastered, like the trembling hand that belies the avowed steadfastness of one’s commitment to a deed to be performed. More fundamentally still, earth expresses the elemental senselessness that can overtake the substrate of any purposive entity, whether a tool, a living being, or a world. A glass can shatter into meaningless fragments; the wings of a bird will lose their animating purpose upon its death; the corpse of a collapsed community is its ruined infrastructure and the dead it leaves behind. The artwork “brings [earth] into the open as self-secluding” by explicitly disclosing the *a priori* threat of senselessness as the condition for the possibility of sense, and it is able to reveal this condition — to render earth intelligible as the constitutive limit of intelligibility — by disclosing a particular world in its fragile state of dependence.<sup>8</sup> World is dependent on earth for its self-maintenance, while earth is dependent on world for its intelligibility.



**Figure 1: The Disclosure of a World in its Finitude as the “Work” of Art**

When Heidegger tells us that this strife constitutes the “fundamental design” of the artwork, and that “the structured rift is the jointure of the shining of truth,” he is intimating a critique of Kant’s claim that the formal purposiveness that defines our representation of beauty manifests the form-giving power of our cognitive faculties.<sup>9</sup> For Heidegger, it is Van Gogh’s particular arrangement of materials, his distinctive stylization of paint, that both generates the world of the peasant and exposes its fundamental contingency, its fragility in its dependence on a material substrate. The raggedness of the peasant’s boots, for instance, as uniquely “formed” by the painting, allows for a recovery of their initial reliability in the face of the elements (what Heidegger calls the “steady pressure” of “earth”) as a condition for their meaningfulness as equipment.<sup>10</sup> If, then, for Kant the beautiful is a heightened awareness of subjectivity in its power, Heidegger conceives of the beautiful — what he calls “the shining that is set into the work” — as an expression of a historically determinate form of the subject in its constitutive vulnerability.<sup>11</sup>

According to Kant, a pure judgment of taste produces a sense of pleasure that arises strictly from reflection on the purposiveness of form, and is combined with no “interest” in the object, whether culinary or instrumental. In several places in the third *Critique*, Kant ascribes to this “disinterested” form of satisfaction a moral significance. Paragraph forty-two contains one of the most striking of these passages, when Kant argues that, in finding no purpose or “end” externally, in the object of beauty, “we naturally seek [it] within ourselves, and indeed in that which constitutes the ultimate end of our existence, namely the moral vocation.”<sup>12</sup> The moral vocation to which Kant refers here is the “highest good,” defined as maximal happiness and worthiness of happiness, or virtuousness. Playing the role of a regulative principle in our practical experience as the “final end” of morality, the idea of the highest good

dictates that we act in accord with the moral law, which demands that the maxims by which we act have universal validity and treat others as ends, and that the law itself be the principal incentive for our actions. The disinterestedness that defines our experience of the purposiveness of beauty, Kant argues, fosters our morality by preparing us to act without interest (or with a strictly moral interest); while the purposelessness of beauty attunes us to an end within ourselves, the moral law. Kant's claim, then, at the end of his analysis of aesthetic judgment, that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good," establishes the second "truth" expressed by beauty, the moral vocation of man.<sup>13</sup>

Heidegger develops a very different theory of reception, in the concluding pages of his essay, by way of a concept he calls "preservation," which is defined as a "standing within the openness of beings that happens in the work."<sup>14</sup> The position occupied by the beholder standing within such openness might be called the *view from being*, in which beings are what they are "in truth" because they are made to disclose the historical conditions for their intelligibility. Preservation is for Heidegger structurally necessary for the constitution of artworks as artworks and can take two different forms. When a work loses its grip on us and is itself graspable as a work only in its foreignness and antiquation, it takes the form of *oblivion*. Such a work is rendered intelligible, consequently, as essentially unintelligible, as no longer reflecting who we are or as reflecting a loss of historical consciousness.<sup>15</sup> But preservation can also take the form of *actual disclosure*, in which case the work transports us "into [our] appointed task," through its knowledge of the collective commitments that make us the historically specific subjects that we are.<sup>16</sup> The latter form of preservation can be undertaken either implicitly or explicitly. For example, one can imagine the success of a certain opera, or the controversy surrounding it, as *implicitly* attesting to its capacity for disclosure of truth, for telling us something essential about who we are. By contrast, the interpretation of an artwork, like Heidegger's reading of Van Gogh, would represent an *explicit* form of preservation, as a philosophical articulation of the painting's truth.

In conceiving of aesthetic experience as preservation, Heidegger determinately negates Kant's characterization of the experience of beauty as disinterested, not in the sense that the interest of Heidegger's beholder is of the culinary or instrumental varieties rejected by Kant, but in the sense that if a work succeeds, it does so by disclosing to us historically specific norms and commitments that, in forming an "invisible" substructure of sense, are ours to take up, sustain, or even relinquish. Indeed, in a lecture on the misreading of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* that Nietzsche inherits from Schopenhauer, Heidegger remarks that

Kant's interpretation of aesthetic behavior as "pleasure of reflection" propels us toward a basic state of human being in which man for the first time arrives at the well-grounded fullness of his essence. It is the state that Schiller conceives of as the condition for the possibility of man's existence as historical, as grounding history.<sup>17</sup>

While Kant argues that the disinterested satisfaction that arises from the "purposiveness of form" helps us to cultivate respect for the moral law and to thus act "without interest" and solely for its sake, Heidegger's point is that the work of art enables us to see the concrete *historical* norms — collectively "self-legislated" — that govern our practices and constitute who we are (or could and should be). Finally, Heidegger's notion of a historically "appointed task" should be read as a critique of Kant's conception of man's "moral vocation," especially in light of Heidegger's explicit reformulation of the moral law in *The Essence of Human Freedom*: "Thus the categorical imperative says: before anything else, in all your actions, always act in your essence."<sup>18</sup> Heidegger conceives of essence not as static and unchanging, but rather as "promissory": it refers to a *practical identity* comprised of the various fundamental commitments (rather than Kant's single, overriding commitment, man's "moral vocation") that govern one's engagements with others and comportment toward the world; that constitute one's sense of self *at* and indeed *for* a time; and that cease to be so constituting if one fails to sustain them, if one's practices change.<sup>19</sup>

This critical inheritance of Kant anticipates Heidegger's critique of Hegel in the Afterword to his essay, where he affirms Hegel's thesis that "art, considered in its highest vocation [that is, the expression of truth], is and remains for us a thing of the past."<sup>20</sup> In Hegel's account of "absolute spirit," art constitutes the first of three historical forms through which spirit represents itself to itself, followed by religion and philosophy. Hegel argues further that the "romantic" art of modernity, defined as it is by irony and self-reflexivity, is no longer a properly "aesthetic" or sensuous expression of spirit's self-understanding, pointing, in its "excessive" self-consciousness, to philosophy-as-spirit's true modern medium. By way of philosophy, then, spirit grasps itself for the first time as spirit, or the collective, historical subject that, as "free" or self-determining, is the product of its own practical activity. Art ceases to be an adequate medium for the expression of spirit's self-understanding because in recognizing itself as free, it comprehends itself conceptually rather than sensibly-affectively ("aesthetically"), and comes to understand the normative structure of reality as neither imposed by nature nor divinely ordained but as legislated to spirit *by itself* in progressively more conscious forms over the course of its history.

Heidegger's affirmation of the end-of-art thesis takes the form of a critique of Hegel's project. As he writes:



A decision concerning Hegel's judgment has not yet been made; for behind the judgment there stands Western thinking since the Greeks, a thinking which corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. The decision about the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about this truth of beings. Until then, the judgment remains in force. But for this very reason we need to ask whether the truth it expresses is final and conclusive, and what then follows if it is.<sup>21</sup>

The thesis is affirmed as true only inasmuch as it expresses a historical condition that in itself is false. Heidegger calls this false condition the "oblivion of being" and ascribes it to "the essence of modern technology," which, as he puts it in his essay on the subject, "is itself nothing technological."<sup>22</sup> Said all too quickly, Heidegger claims that this essence lies in a process of "enframing" (*Gestell*), which produces the form of objectivity in modernity. As a collective practice that determines our self-understanding and, *ipso facto*, our understanding of objects, enframing "frames" objects in terms of their instrumental value as "standing reserve" (*Bestand*). Accordingly, Heidegger suggests that the understanding of nature typified by industrial production and modern scientific inquiry now serves as a schema for human experience in general. Enframing is, then, considered a form of "misrecognition" in this account because it conceals its status as a historical form of practice. Because it is "naturalized," its character "as a claim" forgotten, enframing "threatens to sweep man away into ordering as the ostensibly sole way of revealing."<sup>23</sup> The "being" of the subject is, consequently, itself occluded, such that its fundamental historical mutability, the dependence of its "essence" on its practices, is veiled.

Heidegger's skepticism about the possibility of art in the twentieth century is a corollary of his pessimistic theory of modernity. Preservation in the sense of the disclosure of truth becomes questionable in the age of modern technology because enframing has greatly diminished our capacity for understanding ourselves as historical beings formed by institutions we sustain and transform through our practices. Hegel's philosophy of spirit, according to Heidegger, is predicated on an understanding of experience informed by enframing, the principle of the intelligibility of reality under the rule of technology over man.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Heidegger believes that Hegel's judgment "remains in force" not because he shares his view that we have achieved self-consciousness, but because artistic practices themselves have been so reshaped by enframing that art — now abstract and conceptual — has lost its defining capability, its power to disclose a world.

Scholar Ingvild Torsen has shown in her essay "What Was Abstract Art?" that Heidegger's refusal to recognize abstract art as art was indeed grounded in his views concerning technology. But she also emphasizes that Heidegger gestures towards a different potential for the artwork in "The Question Concerning Technology": "the potential to challenge and make us aware of [enframing]."<sup>25</sup> Heidegger turns

to the Greek word *techne*, which denotes both technology and art, in order to argue that the artwork is a species of technical making that is also more than the mere application of technique, inducing a unique space for interrogation of our relation to technology by disclosing to us the *ontological* conditions — historicity rather than history, worldhood rather than actual social worlds — that render normative practices possible, but also defeasible and subject to change.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on his late writings on Paul Klee, Torsen suggests that Heidegger did not regard the abstract artworks of late modernism as *works* at all, but rather at best as occasions — precisely because of their abstractness and distance from the everyday — for reflection on such abstract ontological conditions, on “what it is to be a world or site that human Dasein can inhabit in a meaningful way.”<sup>27</sup>

Heidegger’s refusal to engage abstract art as art is, I want to argue, an indication of the limits of his philosophy of art. For all the sophistication of his account, it is nevertheless predicated on an antinomy of the abstract and the concrete. Because Heidegger strictly opposes world, as concrete and practical, to the “abstract” and technical form of understanding governed by enframing, he is unable to grasp the modern artwork, such as the one by Stella to be explored below, as disclosive of a world founded on concrete practices that give rise to, and are reshaped by, abstract, impersonal forms of domination. Moreover, Heidegger fails to ground in a historically self-reflexive manner his own theory of the dissonance intrinsic to the artwork, the strife between earth and world, which, I will argue below, only becomes articulable in the moment of modernism. His theory is, consequently, *historically indeterminate*, failing as it does to recognize its own ground in the modernist artwork it rejects.

Relatedly, Heidegger’s philosophy of art is *theoretically vague*. First, because of the abstractness of his historically indeterminate categories, his conception of dissonance often suffers from obscurity. It is not clear, for instance, what degree of consciousness different historical societies have had of the strife between earth and world, and whether it has had the same significance throughout history. But the instance of Heidegger’s theoretical vagueness most fateful for his philosophy of art concerns his account of technology. His failure to theorize the historical specificity of modern technology entails an under-determination of his key concept, enframing. Heidegger’s critique of Kant and Hegel is truly pathbreaking, but it remains crucially incomplete, I want to argue, because he does not undertake that critique on the basis of the historical condition that made it both possible and necessary, *capitalism*. Indeed, Heidegger’s notion of enframing is an attempt to account for the modern social relations that give rise to industrial technology, but in order to properly ground enframing, he would need to theorize those relations themselves, as the *relations of production*. In the absence of such a theory, enframing remains an empty placeholder, a mere promissory note.

In the opening paragraph of Georg Lukács’ essay on reification, a *tour de force* that does successfully ground its own critique of Kant and Hegel in a theory of capital, he



writes that “at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back... to the riddle of the commodity-form.”<sup>28</sup> One can make good on Heidegger’s insights into the end of art, I want to argue, only by reframing, and thus transforming, them in light of Marx’s theory. By turning now to the work of Moishe Postone and Theodor Adorno, I will complete my critique of Heidegger through a demonstration of the superiority, on the level of social and historical consciousness, of a materialist aesthetic theory, whose resources enable it to understand the modernist artwork as art and anti-art *simultaneously*. What Heidegger considers the “ontological truth” disclosed by the “non-works” of modernism becomes in Adorno the *truth content* of the dissonant work, its unique knowledge of social and historical contradiction. This is not, however, the final pronouncement on Heidegger: Adorno’s theory of dissonance itself remains incomplete without the transcendental ground established in Heidegger’s account of the strife between earth and world. Adorno’s historically self-reflexive account of art under capitalism requires as the condition for its possibility the categories set forth by Heidegger in his *philosophically* self-reflexive account of the work of art. *A materialist aesthetics is not opposed to but rather presupposes the transcendental categories of an ontology of art.*<sup>29</sup>

### Adorno’s Materialist Aesthetics

Postone reinterprets the contradiction between the forces and relations of production identified by Marx as a contradiction between two forms of objectified time that correspond to the two dimensions of the commodity-form, use-value and exchange-value. Briefly, then, under capitalism workers exchange their labor power for a wage: through their concrete labor, they produce specific “use-values,” while the time they expend to produce those specific articles for use constitutes the measure of their value. If use values are the product of specific forms of concrete labor, then their exchange-value is the product of *abstract labor*, characterized by the expenditure of time.

So the famous argument goes, workers do not receive the full value of their labor, since they are paid for their *labor power* rather than for what they produce. Each hour of labor in advanced capitalism is divided into necessary and surplus labor time: the condition of the labor exchange is that in order to earn a wage, the worker must also spend part of her time working *gratis*. The surplus-value that workers produce is either consumed by the capitalist or reinvested in the production process, in the form of constant or variable capital. Constant capital comprises the means of production, such as the raw materials to be valorized and new machinery: the introduction of new technology gradually changes what Marx calls the organic composition of capital, through the gradual replacement of labor by machines. Production time is greatly diminished, but paradoxically, the labor performed by workers is intensified: owing to mass unemployment engendered by the shift in the organic composition of capital, competition increases for even the worst-paying jobs.

Postone's point, in brief, is not that workers are dominated by rapacious capitalists, but that workers are dominated by their own alienated labor, which comes back to haunt them in the form of technology that actually renders labor superfluous instead of necessary. The abstract time of living labor is objectified in the alienated form of new productive forces, which, it is important to note, are *form-determined* by capital: they are shaped by their purpose, the valorization of value and expansion of the production process.

Yet while this alienated form of objectified time dominates the proletariat further, by decreasing its share of the value it produces, it also makes use of "the social labor and knowledge of the past," preserving what Postone calls *historical time*, which indexes the "general intellect" — the capacities, forms of knowledge, and technologies that result from the development of the productive forces — at a given moment in the history of capitalism.<sup>30</sup> In its alienated form, the general intellect is shaped by its purpose under capitalism, the extraction of surplus-value, but as Postone argues, because "historical time" is preserved in but not expressed by objectified labor time, it represents a "potentially liberating accumulation of human power and knowledge." Accordingly, Postone writes:

The course of capitalism drives technological development forward, whose concrete form remains an instrument of domination — yet whose growing potential allows for a transformation of society, of a reflexive utilization of this potential on the social division of labor such that *not only the goal of machine production but the machines themselves will be different*.<sup>31</sup>

To frame this in terms of the commodity-form, by way of transition to discussion of the artwork, use value is not neutral or "natural," but shaped by the principle of exchange, whether in the form of the "planned obsolescence" of popular electronics or in the degrading and deskilling forms of concrete labor performed by the proletariat. With respect to the commodity, then, the contradiction of capitalism can be expressed as follows: the material form of use value that is molded by exchange preserves a temporal moment — historical time — that points to what use value could be were it not for exchange.

Over the course of his career, Stewart Martin has developed a reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* which centers on the following passage: "The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity."<sup>32</sup> For Martin, this striking claim is key to understanding Adorno's theory of modernism, and explodes the antinomy between two contemporary, countervailing aesthetic theories, one that insists that the artwork is, as a commodity, insuperably determined by capital, and one that claims that the artwork is autonomous and insulated from the process of exchange. Martin, then, reconstructing Adorno, claims that the autonomous work of art is "both a commodity and not, both destroyed by *and* a product of capitalism, both its critique

and its ideology.”<sup>33</sup> The commodity is not an empirical category that attaches to some objects and not to others, but *the form of the intelligibility of objects* under capitalism. Art is, in Marx’s terms, “unproductive” intellectual labor, whose relative autonomy is determined by the alienated wage labor that makes it possible: artworks are, in other words, defined by that which they oppose. In order to understand Adorno on dissonance, it will first be necessary to rehearse Martin’s account more fully.

Following Kant, Adorno understands “autonomy” in art as its independence from any external use or purpose. The autonomous work exists solely for itself, not for any political or didactic end, nor even for entertainment. Yet the artwork is a commodity exchanged on a market, a product of the social division of labor that is made possible by the surplus-value that wage labor generates. Its autonomy is, precisely as Marx defines it, a “fetish,” inasmuch as, through its autonomous appearance, the artwork conceals its social determination and origin in the division of labor and does so precisely as a commodity, in accord with the logic of commodity fetishism. Because, however, the work insists on its autonomy from any external end, it mobilizes fetishism against its own commodification. In this way, as Martin argues, the exchange-value of the artwork becomes a means for criticizing capital’s implicit claim “that exchange-value is the only possible value.”<sup>34</sup>

The fetish of autonomy, then, makes the artwork appear as an exchange value detached from any use value whatsoever. Inasmuch as capital strives to produce as much value as possible out of the fewest possible resources, the impossible contradiction at the heart of the commodity-form is the idea of a pure exchange-value, divorced from a material carrier and even from the concrete labor that makes it possible: capital is production for the sake of value, not for the sake of use. In its apparent uselessness and autonomy, the absolute artwork converges with this idea of an absolute commodity, and in a further ironic twist, precisely because of its claim to independence from exchange, the fetish of autonomy allows the artwork to appear as a use-value that cannot be exchanged, on account of its apparent uselessness.

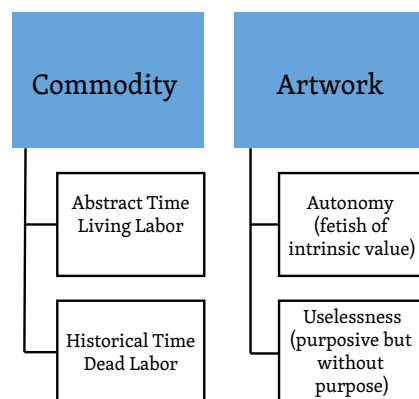


Figure 2: Artwork as Commodity

Through its fetishistic claim to independence, the autonomous artwork suspends its own exchangeability and appears in its specificity. But rather than rescuing use-value from exchange, the modernist artwork actually explicitly exhibits use-value in its stuntedness. Aesthetic autonomy, like value, is derived from the artwork's internalization of abstract labor. As a commodity, it is thus objectified labor time, and this determines the artwork's form: in light art, the work is standardized in accord with the demands of the commodity, while in serious art, the work bears the scars of its failed resistance to commodification.

The most paradigmatic and well-known example Adorno gives is the twelve-tone technique developed by Arnold Schoenberg, which "dominates" the musical material by disallowing the predominance of any one tone, requiring that the composer adhere stringently to a "row," or a specific ordering of the twelve-tones of the tempered half-tone system. Such rationalization of the material reflects, as Adorno writes in "The Dialectical Composer," the achievement in Schoenberg of "Hegelian 'self-consciousness,' or, better, its measurable and exact showplace: musical technology."<sup>35</sup> The status of musical technique as *productive force* is discovered in the invention of the twelve-tone system, which thereby also makes explicit the relation of such technique to historical reality.<sup>36</sup> ("Hegelian self-consciousness" would in this context be consciousness of the "historicity" of musical forms and techniques, the fact that they are expressions of a historically specific social form. Or put in Postone's Marxian idiom, the "historical time" that is "in-itself" in the forces of production becomes "for-itself" in music conceived explicitly as "musical technology.") As Adorno argues, the rational integration of the material in twelve-tone compositions results in a sonic disintegration that registers, in a "depositional" rather than expressive form, the shock, anxiety, and loneliness that define the experience of alienated individuals in the rationalized society of late capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

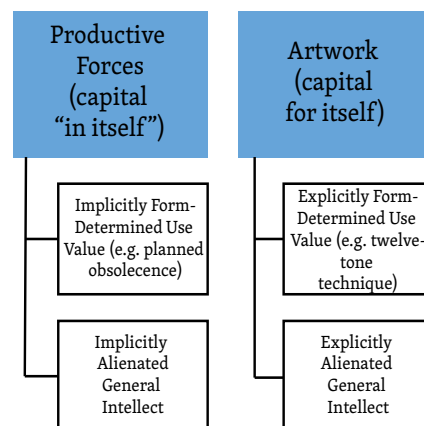


Figure 3: Artwork as Productive Force

Precisely by way of its objectified labor time, the artwork appears as an autonomous exhibition of its own specificity (a unique “in itself”), but because, in its specificity, it is still form-determined by capital, it is the explicit presentation of the *deformation* of use-value in its *formation* by exchange and thus of the *deformation* of the general intellect in its *formation* by capital itself.

Adorno’s notion of “dissonance,” worked out in the context of his analysis of serialism, can help us to better understand the relationship between the artwork as commodity and what he calls its “temporal nucleus” or “truth content.” In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno famously claims that “dissonance is the truth about harmony,” which I read as indicating that the modernist artwork retrospectively illuminates the integral or harmonious works of art’s “heroic” period as also intrinsically, if only latently, dissonant.<sup>38</sup> Modernism, in other words, makes explicit what has always been implicit in art, the dissonance that allows a work of art to *be* a work of art, to be more than an everyday object of use. This is why, for Adorno, it becomes necessary to listen to the *Missa Solemnis*, for instance, from the standpoint of the Second Viennese School, or to hear in Bach not a stringent traditionalism, but a modern sound achieved through the free and individuated employment of archaic techniques.

But what exactly is dissonance? I will perform an analytic reconstruction of this notion in Adorno by turning to key passages in his work. By way of such a reconstruction, I will argue that Adornian dissonance consists in a quasi-temporal process comprising three logically distinct moments; and that by making the constitutive dissonance of the artwork explicit, modernism also makes explicit art’s essence as a historically specific form of truth, or as *knowledge* of history as the self-contradictory unfolding of human freedom. Following this discussion of dissonance, I will return to Heidegger’s account of the strife between earth and world in order to render intelligible the possibility of Adorno’s theory.

As Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “[w]hat appears in the artwork is its own inner time; the explosion of appearance blasts open the continuity of this inner temporality.”<sup>39</sup> This “explosion of appearance” is key to understanding the first moment of dissonance. In Martin’s account, the autonomy of the artwork derives from its fetish character, or the appearance of its intrinsic value apart from the abstract labor it has internalized. The initial appearance of the artwork as an artwork is thus characterized by the *primacy of autonomy*, through which the material form of the work determined by concrete labor appears in its auratic specificity.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the artwork appears as an immanently meaningful unity, in which the parts are the cause of the whole, and the whole the cause of the parts. In Kant’s famous phrase, it appears as “purposive but without purpose,” and such purposiveness signifies the work’s “lawful” character, which, Kant argues, in a rare hermeneutic gesture, symbolizes that of the subject who acts in conformity with the moral law. Yet the phrase “explosion of appearance,” as a double genitive, is ambiguous, suggesting both an “explosive” appearing and the explosion of appearance, or appearance exploded. The subjective

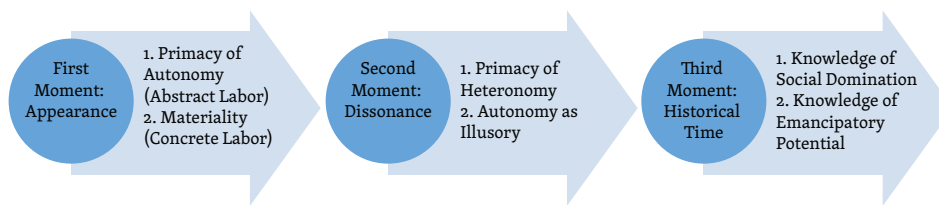
genitive indicates the first moment, that of autonomy, which is “explosive” in its disruption of the everyday, but the objective genitive points toward the “truth” of this first moment, the revelation of appearance as appearance, in the second.

The second moment of the artwork, then, is the moment of dissonance proper. The same techniques through which the work is unified and its materials integrated function dialectically as a force of disintegration. Even the appearance of unity is only possible on the basis of constitutive non-identity, without which the illusion of autonomy could not be generated in the first place. Absent the tension between semblance and material, there would be no semblance, just material. In the moment of dissonance, the autonomy of the work is revealed to be illusory and *heteronomy gains primacy*: by exploding the appearance of autonomy, dissonance reduces the work not to its bare materiality, but rather to the *dead labor* it contains.<sup>41</sup> In the social forces of production, dead labor is the constant capital that, in reducing necessary labor time, actually *intensifies* the labor of the worker through the enhancement of productivity, which results in an increase of relative surplus-value.<sup>43</sup> “Vampire-like,” Marx writes, dead labor “lives only by sucking living labor.”<sup>44</sup> In the dissonant work of art, in its second moment, it dissolves its fetish and reveals its own character as dead labor. This is tantamount to a commodity laying bare the stuntedness of its own use-value dimension, or the way in which that use is both formed and deformed by exchange. Said one final way, in the moment of dissonance, the work of art discloses its heteronomous determination by capital.

The third moment, then, is the disclosure of the “inner temporality” of the work of art, or of what Postone called above “historical time.” While the potential for emancipation preserved in the dead labor that makes up the productive forces remains, in Postone’s account, largely unconscious, the dissonant artwork is, as it were, the self-consciousness of dead labor as historical time. In the sphere of production, historical time implicitly indexes emancipatory potential; in the artwork, it explicitly indexes historically specific forms of domination and deformation. As Adorno puts it, “What results from the disintegration of the auratic or closed artwork depends on the relation of its own disintegration to knowledge.”<sup>45</sup> Dissonant techniques, like abstraction in painting, stream-of-consciousness in literature, and serialism in music, are sensible-affective forms of social knowledge; they disclose to us the discrepancy between who we take ourselves to be and who we actually are. In the case of Frank Stella, as I will argue below, abstractness registers that of the world, remade in the image of the commodity-form. Nevertheless, the revelation by dissonance of dead labor in its deadness, or less elliptically, the revelation of the material features of the artwork as form-determined by capital, retrospectively illuminates the moment of autonomy as the preservation of the emancipatory potential of historical time in the artwork. In the work of art, the two contradictory dimensions of historical time are explicitly expressed in the dissonance between autonomy, as what could be, and its deformed material support, as what is.



Dissonance, therefore, is expressive of what was defined earlier as the self-contradictory general intellect, or the collective subject grasped in terms of the objective forms — whether technological, cultural or political — through which it constitutes itself. As Adorno puts it: “The aesthetic We is a social whole on the horizon of a certain indeterminateness, though, granted, as determinate as the ruling productive forces and relations of an epoch.”<sup>46</sup> This “aesthetic We,” explicitly conceived here in terms of the forces and relations of production, is the self-consciousness of the general intellect in its alienation; it exists on “the horizon of a certain indeterminateness” inasmuch as the artwork, as an impossible attempt to form a whole from conflicting or “dissonant” fragments, models a self-conscious general intellect that has returned to itself from its alienation. In the third moment of the analytic of dissonance, autonomy returns as the memory of the possibility of collective freedom.



**Figure 4: Three Moments of the Analytic of Dissonance**

With this analytic of modernist dissonance now in place, Heidegger’s categories of earth and world can be reintroduced. As the transcendental articulation of the finitude of any world, earth is the condition for the intelligibility of the deformed material support of the dissonant work *as* deformed. The deformation of the support makes explicit our collective failure to “act in our essence,” or to fulfill our practical identity. Earth is the categorial condition for the historically specific aesthetic expression of our finitude under late capitalism. It signifies our finitude in two related senses: (1) our *misrecognition* of the material conditions of capitalism as the conditions of freedom and (2) the *precariousness* of our commitment to such freedom in the face of the possibility of our failure to achieve it, its erasure from memory through the disintegration of historical consciousness, or even the loss of our capacity for freedom through collective self-destruction. Earth, then, is the condition for the intelligibility of what Adorno calls “blackness,” which names the aesthetic expression of the threat of collapse faced by the world of late capitalism.<sup>47</sup>

In a short paragraph in *Aesthetic Theory* entitled “Black as an Ideal,” Adorno meditates on the enervation suffered by art in its increasingly strained endeavor to seek out new possibilities for autonomy, employing an unusually (for Adorno) painterly metaphor to describe a condition besetting art as such, in all its media. He writes there that

radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black.... The ideal of blackness with regard to content is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction.... Art indicts superfluous poverty by voluntarily undergoing its own; but it indicts asceticism as well and cannot establish it as its own norm. Along with the impoverishment of means entailed by the ideal of blackness... what is written, painted, and composed is also impoverished; the most advanced arts push this impoverishment to the brink of silence.<sup>48</sup>

As these lines make clear, “blackness” is an aesthetic convention that registers and thereby indicts the literal poverty that historical time renders superfluous. It is “dissonant” inasmuch as the impoverishment of means reflected in blackness is an explicit form of dead labor that makes possible the moment of autonomy that it also disrupts. That is, the blackened work of art achieves the distance from empirical reality that defines aesthetic autonomy, but paradoxically, at the price of that autonomy. Blackness is thus not just one form of dissonance, one way in which the dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy unfolds, but is rather a deepening of the crisis of art, an intensification of dissonance. Approaching the point of indifference between autonomy and its absence, blackness transforms autonomy into the means by which the artwork reveals its heteronomy, its determination by capital. And yet it should be emphasized that the most advanced arts push the impoverishment of means to the *brink* of silence, and not to silence itself. What is disclosed by the blackening of art is the *threat* of the breakdown not just of aesthetic meaning, but of *social meaning* and the collective capacity for self-legislation — for binding ourselves to norms — that makes such meaning possible.

Adorno’s conception of blackness, then, is crucial for understanding the way his project both differs from and yet requires Heidegger’s: blackness is the condition for the emergence of dissonance as dissonance, since it is only in the face of perceptibly deficient materials — of a use value that renders its own stunted character explicit — that the dissonance between those materials and aesthetic autonomy becomes manifest. Said precisely, in the language of Marx, blackness marks the *real subsumption* of art under capital. In blackness, in addition to unveiling itself as illusory, autonomy becomes the revelation of the rottenness of its own foundation.

At the same time, it is Heidegger’s category of earth that grounds the possibility of understanding blackness as an expression of both the threat to and the demand for freedom. If blackness is to be understood as indicting superfluous poverty, it is because we understand such poverty as contradicting our practical identity and as posing an existential threat to our collective project. Adorno’s powerful account of blackness interprets the dissonant artwork as posing the old Marxist question: socialism or barbarism? Yet it is only in light of Heidegger’s categories of earth and world that the possibility of the urgency of the question can be rendered intelligible.

If the project of realizing socialism is urgent, it is because the condition of superfluous poverty essential to the dynamic of capitalism menaces what matters to us most, the idea of collective self-determination and the idea of leading our lives. The historical time explicitly embodied in the dissonant works of modernism allows us to begin to understand our world as a world, as a set of normative practices we institute and sustain; and to understand earth as earth, as the fragility of our collective project and our freedom. In modernist dissonance, the strife between earth and world first comes to consciousness.

### **The Marriage of Reason and Squalor**

At this point, I want to turn to Frank Stella and, briefly, to the debates surrounding his irregular polygon paintings from the 1960s, whose significance for the present discussion lies in what the clash of views reveals about aesthetic autonomy and historical time under late capitalism. Michael Fried, Stella's staunchest defender, authored two famous articles in the late 60s about his paintings, since republished in *Art and Objecthood*. As Fried argues in "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," the power of the polygon paintings lies in the fact that they overcome the distinction between literal and depicted figure, or the literal shape of the canvas and the shape of the figure depicted within its space. By overcoming this distinction, so the claim goes, Stella manages to reinvigorate the medium of painting in face of the threat of its dissolution by minimalists like Donald Judd and Larry Bell. Through the creation of figures that acknowledge their literal support, Stella divorces "literalness" from the support and generates a new illusionism on the basis of it.

In the essay "Art and Objecthood," published in 1967, just months after his text on the polygon paintings, Fried grasps Stella's achievement as preserving the possibility of "absorption," which I read as a neo-Kantian conception of the subjective effect of the autonomy of the art object. Very briefly, the illusion generated by artworks like Stella's is one in which their objecthood is suspended. They confront their beholders with the illusion of their separateness, engendering a moment of "presentness," as Fried calls it, in which one experiences the "depth and fullness" of the work at hand.<sup>49</sup> In the experience of presentness, which resembles Kant's notion of the "free play" of the faculties in the experience of beauty, it is as if we were encountering another subject rather than an object. Just as the human soul or identity of the subject is a bodily practice sustained over time, an effect of the way we use our bodies in the world, the autonomous artwork likewise appears as an embodied form of significance that, like the deed of the social actor, "happens" in the instant of presentness.

The minimalists, by contrast, influenced by Stella's own early stripe paintings, like the one I will treat below, actively sought to suspend the illusion of autonomy and to underscore the objecthood of the artwork, effectively, for Fried, dismantling its character as art. Rather than producing an instantaneous moment of "presentness" and reflection, their "literalist" creations induce a sense of "endless or indefinite

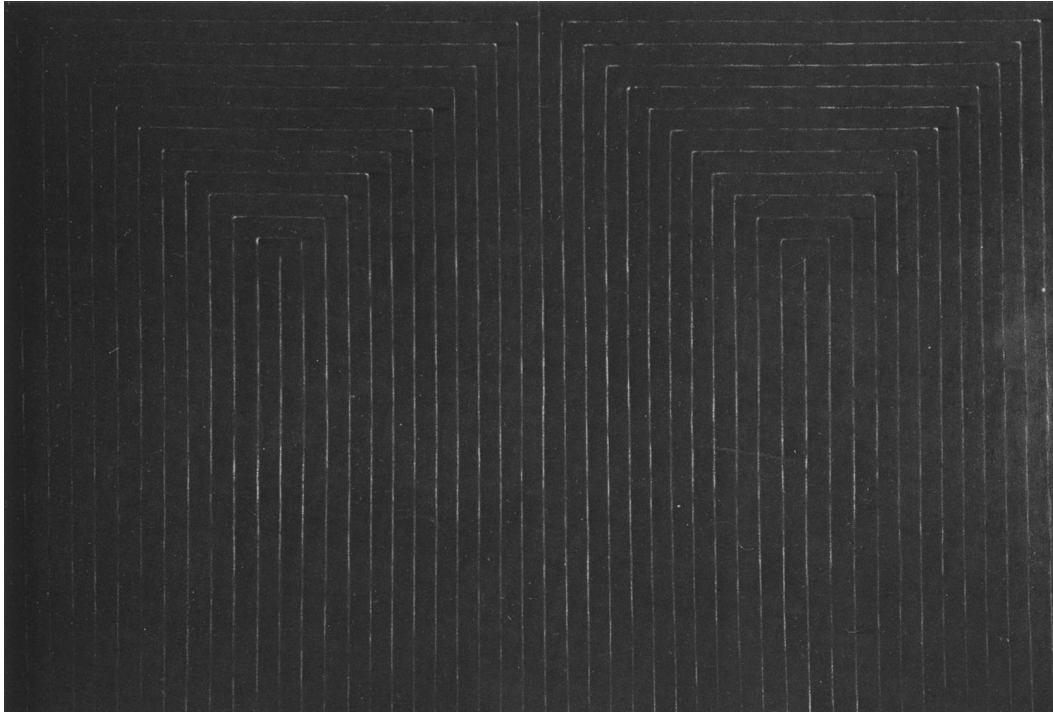
*duration*,” blurring the line between experience of the work and experience of everyday time.<sup>50</sup>

In a sure testament to the enduring significance of “Art and Objecthood,” in an article published nearly three decades after its appearance, critic J.M. Bernstein attacks Fried’s reading of Stella’s polygon paintings by pointing out that the moment of autonomy they achieve is, to frame it in my terms, simply fetishistic, without a corresponding moment of dissonance. Stella’s paintings focus on an “endogenous history of modernism without adequate acknowledgement of the forces of disintegration besetting it.”<sup>51</sup> In essence, Bernstein’s point against Fried is that Stella’s paintings may shore up the artwork against the encroachment of the standardized, deskilled products of the culture industry, but by failing to point up the fragility of their own achievement, they become just as harmless — or just as pernicious — as mass culture. Hence the ease with which Stella transitioned from leading figure of the Manhattan avant-garde in the 1960s, to the go-to art supplier for the sleek reception areas of many of the borough’s corporate office buildings.

Yet while I agree with Bernstein’s critique, to my mind, the Black Paintings that preceded Stella’s irregular polygons exist today as a sharp rebuke to his later, now assimilated work, “meting out justice, eye for eye, to hedonism,” as Adorno writes about the “ideal of blackness.”<sup>52</sup> In the recent retrospective of Stella’s work at the Whitney Museum (2015-2016), sponsored, unsurprisingly, by Morgan Stanley, the Black Paintings stood out with a certain bleak dignity, throwing into relief the affirmative, arts-and-crafts character of the more recent *Moby-Dick* series, which is surely destined for entombment in a midtown mausoleum.<sup>53</sup> I will now discuss one of the works from the Black Painting series in light of the framework I have developed and then conclude by turning away from the object and toward the subject, in order to briefly — and, admittedly, somewhat cursorily — spell out, by way of juxtaposition of Adorno and Fried, how aesthetic judgment might be reconceived in relation to dissonance.

At Pratt in 1960, in a very brief lecture on his method, Stella remarks that he solved the spatial problem of what to paint on a blank canvas under the pressure of his influences: by seeking to force “illusionistic space out of the painting at a constant rate by using a regulated pattern.”<sup>54</sup> The problem that remained, he continues, “was simply to find a method of paint application which followed and complemented the design solution. This was done by using the house painter’s technique and tools.”<sup>55</sup> *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II*, apparently named after the condition of Stella’s studio, was made using this design solution and the complementary technique. The lines of white were not painted, but are rather strips of the raw canvas appearing between the painted black bands. Despite the industrial precision of Stella’s inexpressive brushstrokes, with which he aimed not only to complement formally the deductive geometric structure but also to evoke the numbing labor of the factory worker, the facture of the painting forcefully betrays the fact of its having been

painted—an eruption of earth that begins to bring our world into view. When Stella tells us, in his memorably physical, ambiguous turn of phrase, that “illusionistic space” is forced out of the canvas at a “constant rate,” he likely means, in accord with his minimalist program, that he is banishing such space from the canvas’ interior, destroying, as it were, the illusion of an interior, but he could also be understood as saying that he is *compelling* illusionistic space *into existence*. This ambiguity, I would argue, is significant, and helps us to grasp a peculiarity of the painting at hand, its permeation in places by a kind of chalky mist, itself an illusion created by the combination of thin strokes and wide ones, the varying density of paint.



**Figure 5: Frank Stella, *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, second version (1959), black enamel on canvas, 7' 6 3/4" x 11' 3/4". © 1996 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.**

The deductive organization of the painting defeats its objecthood by acknowledging the literal shape of the canvas while also projecting the space induced beyond its bounds. But the literalness that becomes the basis of this painting's illusion avenges its usurpation by undermining the integrity of the geometric figure, which is variously erased and distorted all over the canvas. The literal canvas reappears in the illusion of literalness. Or, to translate this back into my own terms, the autonomy of the painting is explicitly undercut by the dissonance between semblance and material support that makes its appearance as a painting possible. The literal impoverishment of the form illuminates the dead labor of the painting in its deadness: when Stella famously



declares that “what you see is what you see,” one should take this to mean not, as the later minimalists thought, that he had simply abolished illusion in favor of objecthood, but that the illusionistic space he does architect terminates in the black abyss of dead labor from which it arose. But what does this black abyss mean?

The title of Stella’s painting, I want to argue, does not actually refer to his studio, but refers instead to the essence of the painting itself. The marriage of reason and squalor is the dissonance between autonomy, as exchange-value, and material form, as stunted use-value. That the two halves of the painting are mirror images, virtually indistinguishable pendants to the two elements in the title, further reflects the condition of standardization effected by the subordination of rational means to an irrational end — the valorization of value. The corrupting repetition performed by the painting is the perversion of reason into squalor. It is no coincidence, then, that Stella refers to his production of illusionistic space as occurring at a “constant rate,” which amounts to an implicit identification of his painting’s illusionism with the temporal expenditure of abstract labor. The black abyss is the painting’s knowledge of capital as an abstract form of social domination, but the deductive structure that the abyss both produces and swallows becomes, through its dissonant articulation knowledge of the emancipatory potential of that same abstract form, the idea of freedom from the same exchange-value in which it consists. The historical time of *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* is explicit knowledge of *reason as the alienated general intellect and of squalor as the deformed realm of use formed by that intellect in its alienation*. As such knowledge, the painting indicts this marriage and becomes, in its abjectness, the call for the divorce of reason from squalor by way of the actual integration of the general intellect with society.

As mentioned, I want to conclude here with some brief remarks on Fried and Adorno. For Fried, a successful painting is one that achieves autonomy through a self-reflexive relation to its literal foundation that allows it to suspend its objecthood; on the side of reception, this success engenders the appearance of separateness that, dialectically, absorbs the beholder, whose own everyday conception of reality is suspended in the “presentness” induced by the work. While this well-nigh Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment might seem to be appropriate to Stella’s later work, the Black Paintings, I would argue, demand a different form of judgment, what I would call “dialectical judgment” — a form of Heideggerian “preservation” appropriate to the contradictory reality of capitalism.

(It should be emphasized, however, that it is not the case that dialectical judgment is applicable to some works and not to others. The point is rather that Stella’s polygons are *not* actually autonomous, that they *are* socially determined, but that they *fail* to bring that determination to speech. It is a mark of their failure that the free play of the faculties and disinterested reflection described by Kant *appear* to be appropriate to them, and that analysis of their social and historical embeddedness *appears* out of place, which is, I take it, Bernstein’s point.)



The germ of the idea of dialectical judgment, which Adorno never explicitly develops, first appears in the “Society” section of *Aesthetic Theory*, in a tacit critique of Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In this essay, Benjamin develops a theory of shock that complements, on the side of reception, what his theory of the dissolution of aura (of aesthetic autonomy) proposes on the side of production. Shock, then, is the state induced in the beholder by the anti-auratic work, whose first, deficient form was the painting and poetry of the Dadaists.<sup>56</sup> The shock effect only comes into its own, according to Benjamin, in film, which rigorously precludes reflection, but without the moralizing intent of the Dadaists, and the residual possibilities for reflective engagement preserved by the traditional forms they employed.<sup>57</sup> In his own account of shock, provided below, Adorno does not oppose shock to reflection, but rather grasps it as the possibility for a form of reflection that produces knowledge of social truth instead of a disinterested satisfaction:

The shock aroused by important works is not employed to trigger personal, otherwise repressed emotions. Rather, this shock is the moment in which recipients forget themselves and disappear into the work; it is the moment of being shaken. The recipients lose their footing; the possibility of truth, embodied in the aesthetic image, becomes tangible. This immediacy, in the fullest sense, of relation to artworks is a function of mediation, of penetrating and encompassing experience [Erfahrung]; it takes shape in the fraction of an instant, and for this the whole of consciousness is required, not isolated stimuli and responses. *The experience of art as that of its truth or untruth is more than subjective experience: It is the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness.*<sup>58</sup>

This critique of Benjamin can also be read in the current context as an account of absorption that avoids the one-sidedness criticized by Bernstein in Fried. The “instant” Adorno mentions recalls Fried’s characterization of “presentness” as instantaneous, but the difference is that, in the moment of shock, dissonance shatters the illusion of autonomy and separateness for the sake of knowledge. The beholder is absorbed by the autonomy of the work, but is simultaneously repulsed by its dissonance, which makes possible “the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness,” or the explicit presentation by the “absolute commodity” of *historical time*. Rather than terminating in the fullness and depth of the work, in the Kantian manner of reflection on the beauty of its form, dialectical judgment inhabits the work in order to comprehend the contradictory reality that stands outside it, terminating in *interpretation of its form as knowledge of history*.<sup>59</sup> If, for Fried, in the face of the vacuous literalism of the minimalists, “presentness is grace,” then for the dialectical critic the present is a literally shocking image of its own beyond.

Dialectical judgment is, therefore, the speculative product of Adorno’s critique

of Kantian formalism and Hegel's conception of truth, which enabled him to do what Heidegger failed to: to articulate the dialectic of content and form specific to capitalism, which I have explicated here in terms of historical time. The Hegelian notion of "truth content" Adorno advances is intended as a determinate negation of the Kantian conception of taste: while taste for Kant, as I showed in the first section, derives its objectivity and universality from (1) the *sensus communis* of beholders, or the faculties they share that generate the form of purposiveness, and (2) the concept of man's moral vocation that serves as an implicit criterion for judgment of the beautiful; for Adorno, the *quality* of artworks is determined by their *truth content*.<sup>60</sup> Put schematically: (1) The Kantian *sensus communis* is superseded in Adorno's account by a critical form of the Hegelian notion of objective spirit, the general intellect, which is grasped as self-contradictory, and (2) Kant's indeterminate concept of morality is superseded by Adorno's determinate conception of truth, which I have attempted to present in this essay.

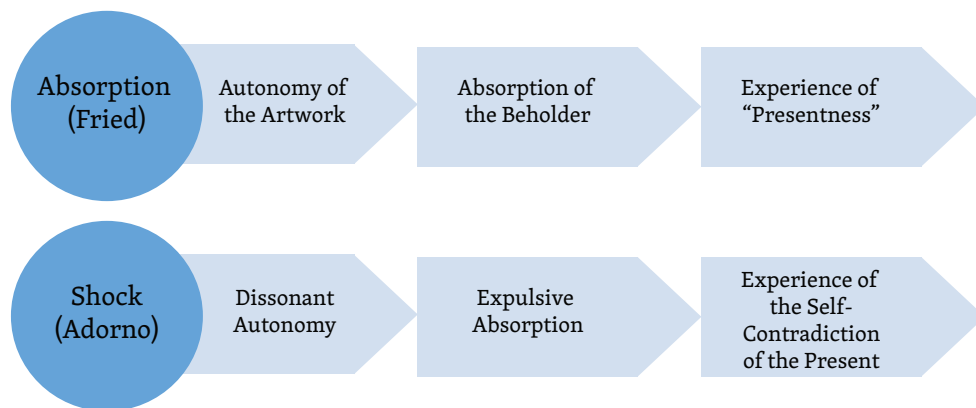


Figure 6: Absorption Versus Shock

Yet as I have shown, Heidegger's critique of Kant also provides the transcendental basis for grounding that of Adorno. In the final pages of "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger describes the process of "poeticizing projection," whereby the practical identity of the collective subject — the self-conception in light of which it acts — is preserved by the work of art:

The truly poeticizing projection is the opening up of that in which *Dasein*, as historical, is already thrown. This is the earth (and, for a historical people, its earth), the self-closing ground on which it rests, along with everything which — though hidden from itself — it already is. It is, however, its world which prevails from out of the relationship of existence to the unconcealment of being.<sup>61</sup>

By laying bare the “earth” on which a historical people founds itself, the work of art discloses the *precariousness* of its collective commitments and thereby those commitments themselves. In Adorno’s account of the artwork under late capitalism, he articulates the practical identity of the modern collective subject, its explicit commitment to freedom, as well as the threat to that identity posed by its practices: self-domination through production for the sake of value. The condition for the possibility of the affective response of shock in dialectical judgment is the category of earth, which lends to the question that every effective artwork poses—socialism or barbarism?—its urgency and force. What shocks us in our experience of the self-contradiction of the present is the reality of collective breakdown and the risk of total collapse posed by the perpetuation of the capitalist form of social life.

Pace Heidegger, then, it is modernism that fully reveals truth as the criterion for beauty. Frank Stella’s Black Paintings are, accordingly, more beautiful than the irregular polygons that succeeded them. Their beauty paradoxically lies in the disruptive force of their ugly industrial blackness, which allows for an instant convergence between the private intellect of the beholder and the self-contradictory general intellect with which the work is soaked through. That beauty must be black bears witness to the severity of art’s crisis: it can only be itself by ceasing to be.

Stella’s painting, then, which Heidegger would identify as yet another example of the domination of art by enframing, becomes from an Adornian standpoint a compelling expression of the self-alienation of objective spirit. Nevertheless, it is Heidegger’s categories that render intelligible the possibility of Adorno’s: the painting discloses the *world* of late capitalism, and the blackness of *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* is its colorless color, the eruption of *earth* as the threat of the breakdown of social meaning and to the possibility of freedom on which such meaning depends. To experience Stella’s painting as art and anti-art simultaneously is to experience the aesthetic particular as the unfolding of the self-contradiction of the concept, of freedom under capital. Through its encounter with the marriage of reason and squalor, in a moment of shock, the subject *preserves* the possibility of making good on the promise of this unholy union, of effecting the reconciliation—however provisional—between who we are and who we could be.

## Notes

I want to thank Ksenia Sidorenko for her invaluable comments and suggestions, without which the discrepancy between what this essay is and what it ought to be would be far greater.

1. I have borrowed this locution from Robert Pippin, "Brandom on Hegel on Negation," unpublished essay. <http://home.uchicago.edu/~rbp1/publications.shtml>.
2. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and eds. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 15.
3. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" 11.
4. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Guyers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 120.
5. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* 108.
6. *Critique of Judgment* 102-104.
7. The account that follows presupposes Martin Hägglund's forthcoming reinterpretation of Heidegger's project, and was influenced by his recent lectures on "The Origin of the Work of Art" at Yale University. My analysis has also greatly benefited from several conversations with Hägglund about Heidegger's text.
8. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 25.
9. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 38.
10. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 14-15.
11. For a compelling revisionist reading of the Kantian account of the beautiful, see Hägglund's "Beauty That Must Die," where he argues that the experience of beauty, by increasing the subject's "feeling of life" (*Lebensgefühl*), attunes it to its finitude, which first makes that experience possible (106). Martin Hägglund, "Beauty That Must Die: A Response to Michael Clune." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.3 (2015) 101-108.
12. *Critique of Judgment* 181.
13. *Critique of Judgment* 227.
14. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 41.
15. *Antigone* is a powerful example of a work that has been preserved precisely as unintelligible in light of our current commitments. As Hegel's famous reading of the play shows, if it is *self-consciously* preserved as antiquated and alien, its foreignness becomes an occasion for self-clarification in the present as regards our commitment to freedom.
16. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 49.
17. Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) 113.
18. Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002) 200-201.
19. Following a general trend in recent American Heidegger scholarship, I adopt Christine Korsgaard's notion of "practical identity" here, from *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 102. See Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 174; and Rousse, "Heidegger, Sociality, and Human Agency" *European Journal of Philosophy* 24.2 (2013) 11.
20. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 11.

21. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 51.
22. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*, trans. William Lovitt, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008) 325.
23. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" 332, 337.
24. Heidegger says as much in "Hegel's Concept of Experience," *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 144.
25. Ingvild Torsen, "What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Heidegger)," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72.3 (2014) 297.
26. "The Question Concerning Technology" 339-40.
27. Torsen, "What Was Abstract Art?" 298.
28. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972) 83.
29. For an important discussion of Adorno's implicit dependence on the kind of transcendental categories advanced by Heidegger see Iain Macdonald, "Ethics and Authenticity: Conscience and Non-Identity in Heidegger and Adorno, with a Glance at Hegel," *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions*, eds. Iain Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 6-22.
30. Moishe Postone, "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism," *Social Research* 45.4 (1978) 770. My use of "general intellect," drawn from a famous passage in Marx's *Grundrisse* (285), is to be distinguished from that of the Italian autonomists, such as Paulo Virno in his *A Grammar of the Multitude*, which one-sidedly aligns it with the emancipatory potential of Post-Fordist production. (Virno goes so far as to call Post-Fordism the "communism of capitalism" [110-111].) Postone's own reading of the general intellect has the virtue of being truly dialectical, in that he grasps it as a form of domination, in its alienation under capital, that also points beyond itself. See Karl Marx, "The Grundrisse," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. and ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1978); Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).
31. Postone "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 778.
32. Stewart Martin, "The absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity," *Radical Philosophy* 46 (2007) 21.
33. Martin, "The absolute artwork" 18
34. "The absolute artwork" 18.
35. Theodor Adorno, "The Dialectical Composer," *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 207.
36. Hence Adorno's critique, in "The Aging of the New Music," of the dogma of "total serialism," which reified Schoenberg's technique by elevating it to the status formerly occupied by tonality. For Adorno's notion of a form of music that, it might be said, has achieved "Hegelian self-consciousness," by way of awareness of its condition as a historically contingent productive force, see his "Vers une musique informelle." Adorno, "the Aging of the New Music," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 188; see also, Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011) 269-322.
37. That is, in Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University

of Minnesota Press, 2006) 42-43, he argues that Schoenberg's compositions "depose" objective reality instead of imitating, through the tonal conventions of traditional music, the dramatic passions and emotions of the bourgeois subject. See also Robert Hullot-Kentor, "The Philosophy of Dissonance," *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor Adorno*, ed. Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 75.

38. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, eds. Gretel Adorno, Robert Hullot-Kentor, and Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Continuum, 1997) 110. In the unfinished manuscript for his projected book on Beethoven, in a discussion of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Adorno claims that the appearance of Beethoven's compositions as integral totalities corresponds to the transfiguration of political reality by the bourgeoisie during the French Revolution. The "heroic classicism" of the bourgeois class manifested in its attempt to "repeat" the Roman Republic, which acted as "the means of self-deception they needed, that they might hide from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the struggle in which they were engaged" (79). Just as the proletarian struggle for socialism would retrospectively reveal these limitations of the bourgeois revolution, so does modernism reveal the cracks in the closed, bourgeois work of art. See Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
39. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 85.
40. As Adorno writes in a surprisingly schematic footnote in the *Philosophy of New Music*, "Benjamin's concept of the 'auratic' artwork largely coincides with that of the 'closed' artwork. The aura is the uninterrupted contact of the parts with the whole that constitutes the closed artwork" (183).
41. I thus disagree here with J.M. Bernstein's reading of Adorno's concept of dissonance in "Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism," where he writes that "dissonance is the crumbling of form, its dissolution; it is that moment in which the elements composed in a work return to their elementality, their abject separateness" (208). Even if there is such a moment of dissolution in the radical artwork, the emphasis Bernstein places on its demonstration of art's supposed status as "the refuge of sensuous particularity" seems to me to miss Adorno's point that the "anti-art" tendency in modern art reflects its alliance with knowledge and its character as a *sui generis* form of cognition. Adorno makes clear his opposition to romantic valorization of particularity throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, in lines like the following: "The untruth attacked by art is not rationality but rationality's rigid opposition to the particular" (98). See "Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism (Thierry de Duve and Marcel Duchamp)," *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 194-222.
42. Like Bernstein, Robert Pippin reads Adorno as arguing for "some retrieval, or memory, of sensuous particularity as the proper function of modernist art" (*After the Beautiful* 54), but rather than espousing Adorno's position, he rejects it from a Hegelian standpoint as a "romantic regression" (55). Pippin is best understood, I would argue, as critiquing not Adorno, but recent liberal appropriations of his project that locate in his thinking an ethics of empathy based on a critique of instrumental reason. Pippin's Hegelian interpretation of the "weakened presence of animated subjectivity" in modernist painting as an expression of "the failure of the historical world to allow for the realization of such subjectivity" is a less rather than more dialectical theory of modernism than Adorno's, which grasps the true severity of art's crisis as a historical institution as well as what that crisis tells us about the historical beings that



we are (57). Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). For a critique of Pippin along these lines, see Gregg Horowitz, "Review of *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*," *Platypus Review* 71 (2014).

43. Fredric Jameson's recent book *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* underscores that this intensification of the labor process is grounded in unemployment, what Marx calls "the industrial reserve army of labor," whose desperation is a structural condition for the devaluation of labor and augmentation of relative surplus value. This point cannot be pursued further here, but in its "uselessness," as an object that illusorily enacts its emancipation from exchange, the work of art resembles the unemployed worker, grasped as a subject whose exclusion from capitalist production is the contradictory form of its actual emancipation. Thus Marx's comment, in his early *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, that "when the proletariat announces the dissolution of the existing social order, it only declares the secret of its own existence, for it is the effective dissolution of this order" (65). See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2014). See also Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. and ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978) 53-65.
44. Marx, *Capital Volume One* 342.
45. *Philosophy of New Music* 183.
46. *Aesthetic Theory* 168.
47. The account of earth I have given should be contrasted with Pippin's critique of earth in *After the Beautiful*. On his view, Heidegger's notion of earth articulates an insuperable restriction on knowledge and sense-making that allows meaning to "happen" in artworks only by concealing it at the same time. Heidegger's account is held to run athwart Hegel's in its supposed denial that we can ever provide a satisfying account of our historical conditions and projects and the reasons for their failure (114-115). Pippin's critique of Heidegger's account takes the form of an interpretation of Cézanne, whose paintings, he suggests, do not demonstrate some "ontological truth," but show instead that in our historical situation, "earth is 'winning'" (129). Pippin proceeds to tell us that "the failure of meaning is therefore... always itself determinately comprehensible, for a historical society, at a time, in a certain relation to its own past. ... Whatever *Erde* [earth] turns out to be, it too is a concept, a *Begriff*, ultimately fully transparent" (130). What is surprising about this critique is Pippin's unmistakable reliance on the very category he rejects. Without Heidegger's notion of earth, which he explicitly employs, the possibility of such a reading of Cézanne's paintings — as expressing a historically specific form of the threat of senselessness — would be unintelligible. The category of earth does not signify the impossibility of satisfying accounts of collective failure, but the constitutive finitude that makes the attempt to provide such accounts necessary. Earth signifies not that failure cannot be explained (though, of course, not every failure can be); it signifies instead that the facticity of failure — the fact that we fail — cannot be explained and overcome, at least not without our ceasing to be the free beings that we are. As Heidegger puts it, "Every decision is grounded in something that cannot be mastered [...]. Otherwise it would not be a decision" (31). Far from foreclosing the kind of robust account of historical conditions Pippin sketches, Heidegger's concept of earth articulates a condition for its possibility.
48. *Aesthetic Theory* 39-40.
49. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 167.

50. Fried, "Art and Objecthood" 166.
51. J.M. Bernstein, "Aporia of the Sensible—Art, Objecthood, and Anthropomorphism: Michael Fried, Frank Stella, and Minimalism," *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 140.
52. *Aesthetic Theory* 40.
53. Wrong life, as Adorno tirelessly reminds us, cannot be lived rightly. Consequently, all artworks are "guilty," no matter how critical they might be. That the retrospective of an erstwhile radical artist was bankrolled by one of the finance giants bailed out by the Federal Reserve following the 2008 financial crisis is a truly stunning demonstration of art's dependence on the same alienated labor whose existence it immanently protests. But it is precisely the *structural necessity* of this contradiction that should reveal the limits of indignation at or opposition to "Wall Street" or condemnation of the Whitney or Stella's work. Comprehension of such necessity should touch off not moral outrage, but recognition of the absence of political forms capable of effecting radical structural change.
54. Stella, "The Pratt Lecture," *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Auping (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 153.
55. Stella, "The Pratt Lecture" 153
56. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, *Selected Writings: Volume 3 1935-1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 119.
57. See Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) 172-179, where it is argued that Benjamin's categories in the "Reproducibility" essay are derived by way of critique of Kant's in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*. The distracted experience that defines shock marks the impossibility of reflective judgment under capitalism.
58. *Aesthetic Theory* 244-245.
59. For a non-dialectical approach to the relationship between materiality and conceptuality in abstract painting, see Henry Staten's "Clement Greenberg, Radical Painting, and the Logic of Modernism" *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 7.1 (2002) 73-89. Staten seeks to sever the idea of art from the idea of craft in the name of the latter, and to separate the good judgment "this is a good painting" from the bad judgment "this is art." Staten thus wishes to reduce painting to a "non-artistic" craft to be judged solely in accord with banausic criteria such as virtuosity and craftsmanship. The problems with such a *purely* "immanent" approach, that is, an approach that consists strictly in technical or formal analysis, are innumerable and cannot be dealt with in this space, but the argument I have attempted to present in this essay could be read as an implicit critique of thinking like Staten's.
60. For a contrasting view, see Peter Hohendahl's "The Presence of Hegel in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," which argues that Adorno failed to adequately address the Kantian concept of taste, since his "response remains at the empirical level, namely, the actual taste of concrete social groups and the opportunity of training the observer to become a discriminating judge of art" (42). Peter Hohendahl, "The Presence of Hegel in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," *Telos* 174 (2016) 33-53.
61. "The Origin of the Work of Art" 47.