

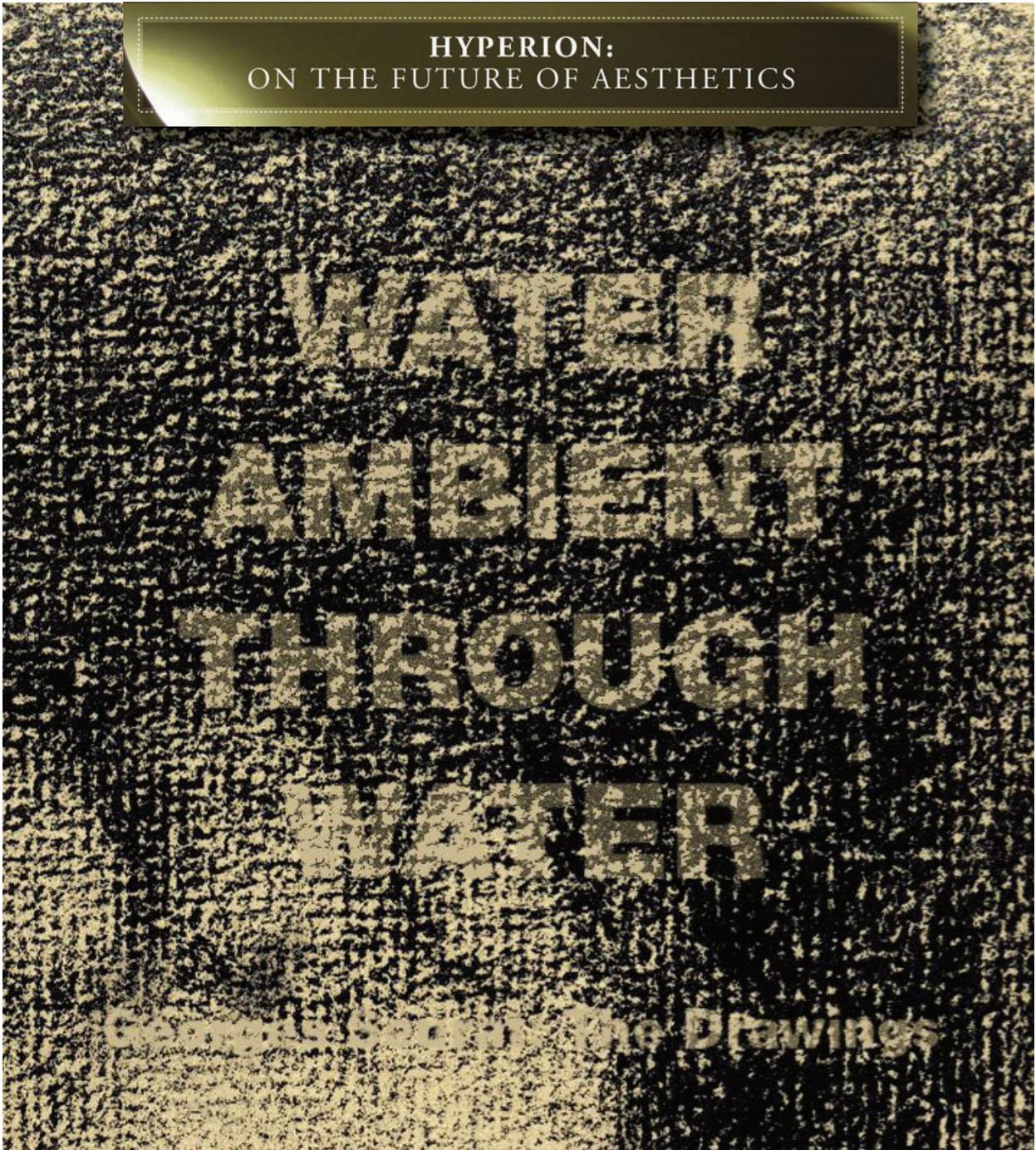
Water Ambient Through Water

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Georges Seurat: The Drawings

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**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



Georges Seurat: The Drawings
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by Mark Daniel Cohen



| What we were water ambient through water.

Drawing is a reduction of visual art to its essentials, a drawing perhaps of the principle of art itself down to the essentials. Its character is the character of art distilled, stripped down to its purest form, to its clearest rendition—to the thing itself. Cleansed to the merest of its means, it is the thing laid bare. To discover what typifies the aesthetic—what constitutes the distinguishing aspects of the artistic provocation, of the lyrical amplification, of the singing of existence—one may study what constitutes an adequacy in the practice of draftsmanship. What a drawing is, is what art does.

For drawing is art done without the assembled technology, without the machinery for the transposition of gesture into something other than gesture—into color, or volume, or stage-set environment. It is the artist left strictly to the artist's own devices, to personal wherewithal, reliant on the thinnest of mechanisms for the laying of the hand—capable, if capable at all, through a stick of burnt wood, or compressed graphite, or medium stained into tones. A drawing is the closest thing to the artist laying hand to the atmosphere—to figures cut in the air. A drawing is merely what the artist does—there is nothing more available to help.

Nothing but gesture, but a drawing is clearly more than merely gesture, and so the gesture is not merely its literal self. This strikes to the core, for in its essential nature art is, and hence drawing is *in extremis*, an alternative to literal-mindedness. Art is an alternate form of thought, another manner of perception and conception, other than the normatives of quotidian/utilitarian negotiation. It is what I once heard love defined as being—a special appreciation. Nothing artistically perceived, conceived, and stated is literally intended, or to be more precise, literally significant. The aesthetic quality of any conception and expression is in the other-than-literal aspect of the statement—in the added substance of it, the superfluous part, the unneeded detail, unneeded for anything but the art of the thing. The art is in the extra resonance.

It is thus that drawing is not to be defined as a copying. It is not concerned with a fidelity to nature, not with a literal rendition, a literal recomposition. Drawing is a composition, a coalescing, of an initial, an anterior stance. An incipient composing, a drawing is then not a matter of realism, not a manner of it. In fact, the devotion of good drawing dissolves the distinction between

realism and abstraction, for if one pole of an opposition is eliminated, both go, each being defined by the other. The very issue of realism is an irrelevance. The art of the drawing lies elsewhere.

Drawing is then definable only in terms of drawing. It is a thing *sui generis*—a thing unto itself, reducible to nothing else, built out of nothing else. It is a result of, an exercising of, a distinctive capability, a unique endowment to see, to conceive—to appreciate. It is a talent, if you will.

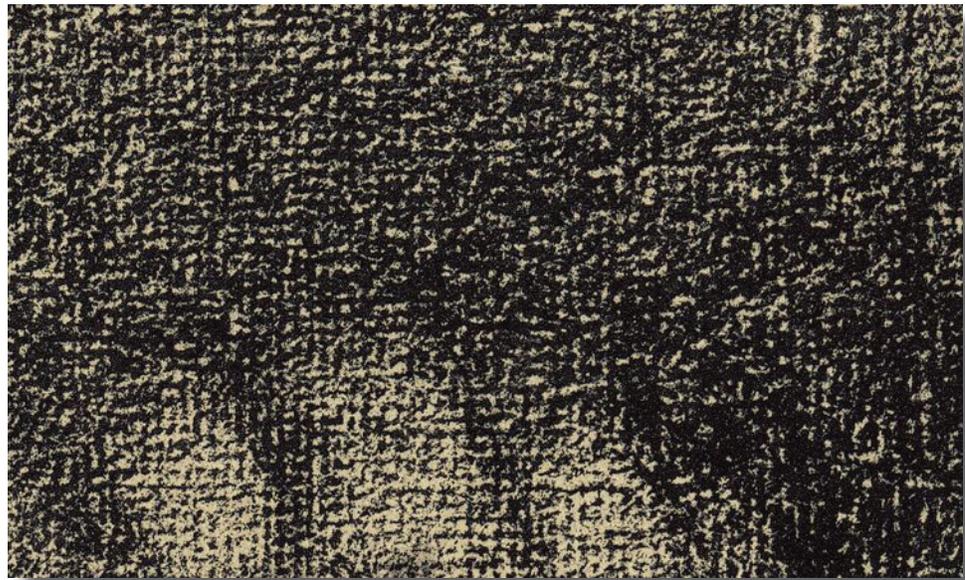
And it is something of astonishment to see the real thing. To witness an authentic drawing is like hearing music in virtuoso performance. One is confronting something almost inhuman, something of the essence of what is human but in the purity, the absoluteness, of its rendition, so far past the range of our ordinary natures, a commission so much beyond the limits of ordinary action, it seems nearly alien to us—a thing so purely us that it is nothing like us. Of our natures and yet nothing of our natures—the difference between the representative and the exemplary. There is something shocking in it. We are, in our potential, more than we know, and drawing is our potential realized on its own terms. Drawing is what we are—amplified to the increment of astonishment. Which is to say, merely, that a drawing is an act of love.

There is something of astonishment, and the evidence of the gesturings of love, in the exhibition of the drawings of Georges Seurat at the Museum of Modern Art. Covering the entirety of Seurat's career, the exhibition includes 138 works, the vast majority of them drawings (119 out of the more than 500 he created, according to press materials distributed by the museum), ranging from examples of his academic training, dating from 1875, to drawings done in the few years before his death in 1891. Included along with the drawings are a handful of paintings, several sketch books, and a letter.

Many of Seurat's drawings were done as studies for his large-scale paintings, several oil studies for which are interspersed among the drawings, helping to orient those that are pertinent. But the far larger number of the drawings were done as independent works, executed apart from plans for the paintings. Or, more accurately, they for the most part were done to the purpose of developing a distinctive technique, a drawing technique, that has everything to do with Seurat's primary achievement: the painting style for which and by which he is known—pointillism.

Of course, the majority of the drawings are those one knows to come for—the works in Conté crayon. Developed in the late eighteenth century, Conté crayons are a relatively waxy drawing implement made of, initially, graphite or charcoal mixed into a wax or clay binder. Seurat's use of the implement is distinctive and masterful to a degree not seen before or since among the principal populating figures of art history. Seurat did not so much sketch with the tool as use it to hone darkness and light. His technique was to stroke

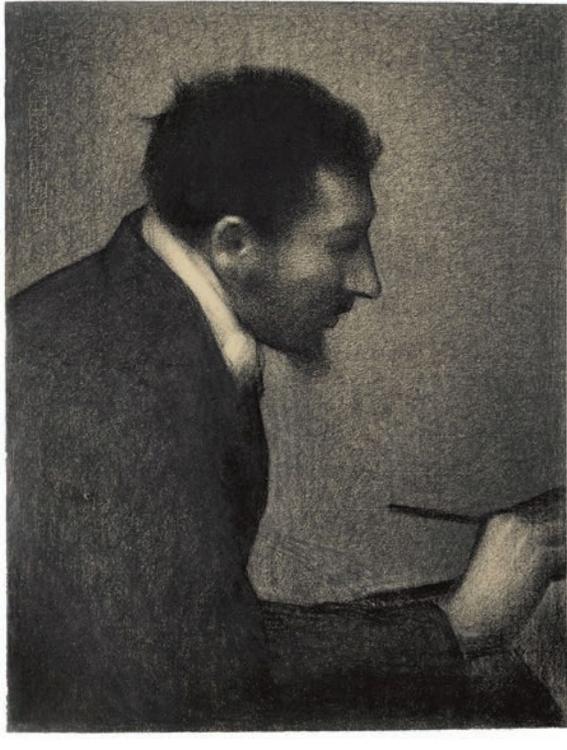
the surface of the support with varying, intricately modulated degrees of pressure, rendering an unbroken field of grey that densified continuously across the surface, moving restlessly from light to dark to light. Working on Michallet paper—a paper with a “heavy” tooth,



a rough surface—the crayon picked up and emphasized the texture of the paper, precisely what it is its virtue to do. The tonalities of the drawings shift constantly from a black so heavy as to eliminate any visual sign of the tooth (at the greatest pressure), through varying shades of grey that are ridged and intricate with the paper’s terrain, to a nearly pure white (at the lightest pressure). The elements of foreground and background are configured by the modulations of tone. They are not outlined, not defined by evident, denoted edges. Rather, they form before the eye through modulations of shade that have been cast among a continuous field of modulating shade. The figures are not in a literal sense “drawn”—instead, they emerge out of the darkness. They virtually coalesce out of the rendered black, congeal out of a continuity of densifying and rarefying extension—they arise, apparently, out of what they are implicitly and necessarily a portion of.

What is impressive and masterful here is not so much the idea of this technique—the thought of doing it at all—as the execution. The idea of “painting” with a drawing implement—of working continuously across a surface, of “painting” the surface with an unbroken laying on of medium—is, itself, not unknown or less than obvious. What is visually stunning here is the combination of elements in the technique, the application of the idea of “painting” on *this* drawing paper with *this* drawing tool. The visual complexity of the continuous tooth of the paper in varying densities is entirely different in effect from the “painting” (with any medium) of a smooth surface of varying hue or tone. If one looks carefully, if one looks properly, what one sees first is not urban scenes or entertainers in a café or picnickers by a lake. What one sees is the intricately textured modulating field—with a keen eye, what one sees is the tooth, in a dance of structure. What Seurat has rendered is not so

Close-up of Seurat's drawing textures
from Georges Seurat, *The Echo (study for Bathing Place, Asnières)*, 1883
Conté crayon on paper, 12 5/16 x 9 7/16 inches (31.2 x 24 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Edith Malvina K. Wetmore
(Shown in full on last page.)



Georges Seurat, *Aman-Jean*, c. 1882–83
Conté crayon on paper, 24 1/2 x 18 3/4 inches (62.2 x 47.6 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Stephen C. Clark,
1960 (61.101.16)

much figures and settings as the paper itself, as an apparent physical reality, as an evidently thick fact, and, from that vision of continuity, figures and objects and settings seem to form.

At their best, these drawings have an apparent reality of their own, an apparent reality in that third sense: not as physically and evidently (evident immediately to the eye) real instances of worked paper (their literal factuality), and not as evident simulations of images one might have seen in reality, as reproductions of something that could have been observed on its own (their representational factuality), but as objects themselves of an imagination, as dreams made objectively real, as visions congealed, as something subjective become something objective, something conjured by the spell of art. Three distinct things superimposed—the referential simulation, the composing elements of paper and pigment, and the envisioning of the mind emerged from the mind.

At their best, these drawings have a near photographic conviction and power of simulation, so effective, at least with regard to the texturing of visuality, is Seurat's technique at fulfilling the second function of the rendition, that of representation. In photographs, as in the reality that greets the eye, nothing is outlined, with such an intricate degree of absence of outline that normative visual reality is virtually defined by the lack of the bounding line. It is this fact as much as anything else that gives photography its assumed and apparent extent of "realism." In works such as *Aman-Jean*, c.1882-83, as much as one knows the work and knows that it is a drawing, as often as one has seen it or reproductions and knows (one thinks) better than to be taken in, upon seeing the thing in the "flesh," one believes one is viewing a photographic image, one believes one is viewing a "shot" taken of reality, which one is, as much as if one literally were witnessing that other artificiality of photography. With *Embroidery (The Artist's Mother)*, c.1882-83, the texturing is precisely right, but the figure of the women sewing is too abstracted, too boxy and simplified and unlikelike (as is often the case with Seurat) to carry the conviction of the unprepared gaze, the conviction that one is seeing or as good as seeing the real thing. But this is as unlike a drawing, or a nominal work of handmade art, as it is unmediated reality, and what one is convinced of, despite what one knows (which is what conviction means), is that this is some third thing, some thing brought straight from the mind and dropped like a pollinating germ into the precincts of our otherwise common and, for some,

uncommonly tedious, natural habitat—something of the imagination made tangible fact. This drawing is like nothing else, except its kin.

And so, this and its kin, most of the works that occupy this exhibition, are as unlike drawing as they are unlike all else. And so, we are compelled to ask: just what do we have here and just what is it worth? How are we to judge it? How are we to comprehend or recognize its indispensability, to determine if it has indispensability? It is a question that confronts all avant garde art, and a question that remains with us now particularly, after a century and more of artistic adventure, and as we continue to wrestle over the worth and inheritance, over the implications of the advent, of abstract art, the mode which these drawings and the paintings to which they contributed did much to bring about.

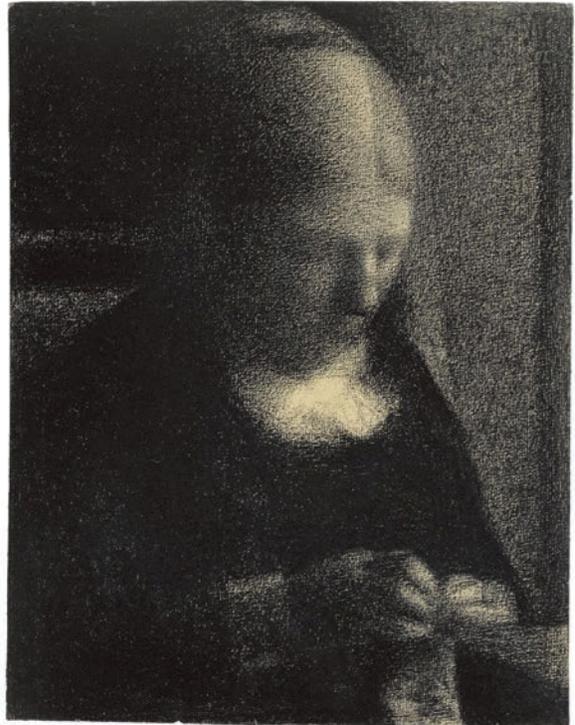
For the fact is, must be, that if one changes the rules of the game, then it is difficult, it is meaningless, for others to subsequently assert the fact of one's doing well at the game, of one's "winning" at the game in some way, and it forces those who later witness one's achievement to seek to devise some standards by which one can be evaluated, according to which one can be lauded to some degree comparable to the dazzle of the accomplishment of what was evidently difficult to do. In short, just what kind of art is this, and is this art at all? For it is irrevocably the case that the mere fact one can do something well does not imply that the thing is worth doing in the first place. That determination still has to be made. What have we got here?



Not everything that is more difficult is more meritorious.
—St. Thomas Aquinas

What we unquestionably have here are drawings, for that is what these literally are—it is what they are in the first sense because it is how they are made, it is the principle upon which they are built. And we must begin with the defining standards of drawing, and for that, we can do little better than resort to the requirements of one of the inescapable masters of the medium, William Blake, who made his principal requirement vocably and ferociously clear.

For Blake, it is the line that is the heart, the very essence, of art, and of beauty.



Georges Seurat, *Embroidery (The Artist's Mother)*, c. 1882-83
Conté crayon on paper, 12 5/16 x 9 7/16 inches (32 x 24 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1951; acquired from The Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Collection (55.21.1)

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Every Line is the Line of Beauty it is only fumble & Bungle which cannot draw a Line this only is Ugliness[.] That is not a Line which Doubts & Hesitates in the Midst of its Course

The line is the mark and sign of sureness—of thought, of imagination, of the hand in action, directed by the imagination. Hesitation shows, for the smoothness of the line is the result of the unbroken dance of inspired thought. The hesitant line, the broken line, comes of doubt, of falter, of a lack of conviction. It is the mark of the absence of something more significant than mere craft, for craft will not produce it. The beautiful line is the dance of the mind, for all else in art can be manufactured deliberately but the line is more than deliberate—it is certain.

Blake sees the choice in art as falling between two approaches to rendition: the line and the tint.

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They say there is no Strait Line in Nature this Is a Lie like all that they say, For there is Every Line in Nature But I will tell them what is Not in Nature. An Even Tint is not in Nature it produces Heaviness.

It cannot dance. And it should be noted that the monumental artists of all eras in our tradition can be seen to resort to the line, to the sure smoothness of a defining lineament, at the core of their conception. To take the matter at its height, Michelangelo conceived along an S-curve—it can be seen in every one of his major compositions. The David, particularly—the spine of the figure demonstrates an impeccable S-curve from every angle of observation—a seemingly, until you see it, impossible conception.

But it is, for Blake, the character of the “Moderns” among artists to do otherwise, to prefer otherwise, and it tells us that the movement to the flushing field of tone preceded Seurat and our “Moderns” by the century that separates Blake from them, that the roots of abstraction have longer tentacles and are deeper in the soil of the imagination than we often believe.

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Moderns wish to draw figures without lines, and with great and heavy shadows; are not shadows more unmeaning than lines, and more heavy?

There is more at stake here than beauty, for beauty has import—beauty has meaning. What is at stake in this is what Blake calls “character,” and character is indispensable to expression, as expression is in the soul of art.

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But I know that where there are no lineaments there can be no character. And what connoisseurs call touch, I know by experience, must be the destruction of all character and expression, as it is of every lineament.

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Such art of losing the outlines is the art of Venice and Flanders; it loses all character, and leaves what some people call, expression: but this is a false notion of expression; expression cannot exist without character as its stamina; and neither character nor expression can exist without firm and determinate outline.

What is at stake is more than art and beauty, what is at stake is that which is foundational to character—it is stamina, and clarity, and it is dependent on the “firm and determinate outline.” For it is the product of the dreaming mind, the insightful mind, and it is centered by what the mind does:

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The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind, and the pretence of the plagiary in all its branches. How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements?

The idea. To see in art, through art, is to see with the mind’s eye, with the visionary eye—it is to see an idea. And for there to be art, for there to be a vision, there must be an idea. Art is beauty plus the idea, the idea that is beautiful—it is the idea and the beauty that form, that depend on, each other.

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The Beauty proper for sublime art, is lineaments, or forms and features that are capable of being the receptacles of intellect; accordingly the Painter has given in his beautiful man, his own idea of intellectual Beauty.

Intellectual Beauty, the beauty witnessed and known by the seeing and incisive mind, is the objective at its height—art at its zenith. And, in the end for Blake, there is something more:

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Leave out this l[i]ne and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again, and the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist.

It is the line, or “chaos is come again.” For not just insight, and imagination, and art are dependent on the bounding line, the sure cut of the clarified mind, but life. Without the bounding line, all that is, is lost. Without the bounding line, the mind itself is lost. Without the bounding line, we are deluded, and we are mad.

Those who have taken proper drawing classes will know that the objective of the exercise of drawing is not to produce the replication, not to accrue the facility for simulating appearances. Plato was right in this, and, without an increment of true irony possible, Nietzsche agreed. The reproduction of appearances is nothing of value in itself and not the point of art—it is mere scaffolding, a means to an end. The objective is to hone the facility for line—to learn to produce a living line, a line that is not just capable of configuring a seemingly living presence, but a line that itself seems sinuously alive, that can configure a seemingly living presence because it is itself seemingly alive. Of course, there is no learning this. Some just can, and most cannot. Most merely scratch away at the paper, evidently hoping that a compounding of many tiny lines, aligned, will produce the smooth cut of something like living tissue—what Blake means by hesitance. It is a talent, if you will. But there is the honing of the talent, the mastery of it, like learning to ride a horse: one does not dominate the line, or succumb to it. One goes the third way: one becomes the line.

Seurat was not adept at the line. There is no smooth sinuosity to his stroke; there is none of that intangible tangibility, none of that living presence in the way he strikes the paper. He has no velocity to his hit. He is frankly ham-handed and hesitant. He scours the sheet. He does not dance the image he makes; he manufactures it. Even his most intricate, photographically

convictional executions of light and dark do not swim on the paper, do not swirl and pulse; they are not fluid. They are staid and serene; they are structures rather than fleeting observations captured. They are architectonic. They are designed, which is not quite the same thing as being drawn.

The quality is oft noted, and it is attributed to his geometricizing his figures. This is of course the case—it would have to be, for the quality is too easy to miss, and thus too hard to claim in its absence. (Perhaps the only major artist who could simultaneously emphasize and bury his geometry was the still master of the mode: Piero. Perhaps the only one who could do geometry subtly.) It is the majority of his renditions: stiff, angular, ultimately boxy figures, unconvincingly set in scenarios similarly simplified and awkwardly rendered. Consider *Nurse*, c. 1882: the wall plaque in the exhibition states “Seurat simplified the figure, rendering it as a series of geometric forms,” and characterizes the nurse’s cloak as “trapezoidal.” *Woman with a Dog*, c. 1882-82, is almost perfectly symmetrical. *Square House*, c. 1882-84, is entirely so, with the overall composition being geometrically regularized, meaning simplified down to uncomplicated forms of plane and volumetric geometry. The road sweeps up to the house as a fanning set of regular curves. Except for the sloping roof, the lines of the house are all parallels and perpendiculars. It is thoroughly unlikelike, not because the lines of life are not geometrically regular, but they, and the line Blake wanted, are more complex, subtler, more writhing. For all the smooth regularity of this work, the smooth lines are scratched together out of small clumsy ones, and there is no rapidity here. This composition just sits—the sure sign of a wanting of draughtsmanship. And it is not quite an irony that Seurat’s smooth lines composed of a multitude of far smaller lines are geometrically less complex than the single python stroke of a Blake or, better, a Michelangelo. As in all the important things, the sureness is all.

Seurat is complimented for his geometric regularity, his geometric simplicity, as a move toward the abstracting of the figure, a move toward the invention of, ultimately, non-representational abstraction. But, taking conviction from the complete lack of evidence to the contrary, one is drawn to say that Seurat did not cut his figures, or anything else, with a living, snake-like sinuosity because he could not. His drawing prowess was simply insufficient. And so it would seem, making a virtue of necessity, he found his way through innovation, through invention of means. Much the same could be true, much the same would seem to be true, of a number of the progenitors of abstraction, because, in the sense of drawing being propounded here, they could not very well. The matter becomes clearer if one takes the rendering of the human figure, insignificant as that is aesthetically, as a measure of the ability to cast the line. Cézanne was clumsy with the figure. Monet was far worse, and after a certain point relatively early in his career, he never attempted it again—though in his case, his poor draughtsmanship is compensated by the fact that he

had possibly the largest arsenal of distinct brush strokes in the history of Western painting. Van Gogh had a quiver full of means for rendering in ink, but his handling of the figure was little better than that of Cézanne. There are similar weaknesses with Gauguin, Dove, Malevich, Pollock, and others. With the possible exception of Picasso, it is difficult to think of a major artist who was masterful in the way he could draw and chose, at least on occasions, not to—like a pianist forsaking virtuosity.

There is a self-evident problem with this. While it is certainly possible to transform a necessity into a virtue (to the redemption of us all), it is not quite the same thing to attempt to transform a weakness into a strength. To move away from one's weaknesses is not necessarily to move toward one's strengths. The motion directly away from weakness follows the vector of fear, and capability is accrued by embracing fear, not fleeing it. Emerson: "Always do what you are afraid to do," or, as Nietzsche never quite put it but came close to and would have endowed us all had he: Inability is not an argument.

Heralding one's inability to draw is an excuse, and finding another way is not necessarily to obtain to a better option. Picasso puts it to us: if you can draw, would you, and could you profitably, decompose figuration?

So what have we got with Seurat's drawings? What do they achieve beyond the eschewing of the embarrassment? What more is here beyond the apology they inevitably are?

What we clearly have is an idea, although it may not be the caliber of idea that Blake required, which is to say the drawings may not be art in the sense Blake understood—which is much to say. But the idea here is nothing insignificant, nothing pallid or banal, and that, too, is much to say. It may well make the matter of aesthetics a mere aside, or itself insignificant, or open to redefinition in a meaningful manner, because the intelligence of the idea is a foundational standard. In any field, if the thought is intelligent enough, no other consideration is of significance. If Seurat has changed the rules of the game and thereby said something it is imperative to hear, said something that could be said in no other way, or has not been, then he has implicitly established the standards of judgment by which he can be evaluated, for in the life of the mind, the worth of intelligence cannot be doubted—it is simply the thing done, and done to a higher degree. And all that aside, if he has been intelligent enough, then clearly, on the kind of common sense grounds it is merely ignorant to question, like asking why two plus two makes four, he has done enough. Sooner or later, something must go without question, and in that matter, intelligence trumps aesthetics.

And the thought in these works, the meaning of the vision they invoke, is a substantial one, for it is a vision of an alternate conception of existence, a different conditionality of the extant, of what it means to be, and makes it

possible to be, present. In this, as in all matters of essential conception, of the determining of founding conditions for the thought of anything beyond the essential conception—that which must be thought in terms of essential conceptions, which thereby serve as background conditions out of which all further thought arises as a chemical product of the first conditions or as an emergent property conditioned by them—there is a choice of two. There is always a fundamental decision between clean alternatives, a decision that determines all else for all else will follow from it, and the choice in the question of the nature of the extant is between particle and field. Either all that exists is a collection of particles, of whatever nature in themselves, distributed over an extension, a field—space—or all that exists is a set of configurations of the extension, of the field, composed of the field in some manner of distortion of its extensiveness and composed of nothing else. Either what exists is a rock in water, or it is a whirlpool—of the water, with there being, therefore, nothing but water.

It should be noted immediately—because this is where thought on this matter tends to run off the rails—that such coupled pairs, paired alternatives between which one must choose, can never be uncoupled, not merely as alternatives for the skeletal construction of theory but as components of any theory then constructed. Every theory of the real must contain both particle and field, or else neither, if that is conceivable, because, conceptually, there can be no particles without a field in which they are distributed—otherwise, they would all be in the same place and it would be meaningless to talk of more than one particle, and if that particle has density, extension, then we have just re-created the field and there are no particles—and there can be no field without particles, or at least localizations, points in space (whether occupied or not, but identifiable)—a difference between “here” and “there”—otherwise, everything would collapse down to a point and we would have just re-created the particle in the only meaningful sense in which it is not a field: dimensionless, a mathematical point.

What is at question in all foundational conception is never which of the coupled pair of alternatives to accept and which to reject, but which to make foundational to the other—what is to be explained in terms of what. In the theory of the real, the question is whether particles, or identifiable localizations, exist because the field must be marked in its extension, in order to be a field at all, or whether the field exists because there are, and in order for there to be, particles in distribution, separated by “here” and “there”? The choice regarding the theory of the real, and the determining of the essential nature of the real in theory, is between particle theory and field theory, and we have been battling over it all along—whether we are objects aswim in the universe, or configurations of water, ambient in water. In fact, the alternative can be said to mark one of the “basic” differences between Plato and Aristotle.

What Seurat renders through his absence of the bounding line, and through the density of the figures and settings he is able to evoke in and yet out of the continuum of his modulating shadow, is the visual realization of field theory. Everything that is apparent in his drawings, everything that seems to arise as distinct object, is of a piece, and the piece is the continuing reiteration of the tooth of the paper. It is everywhere, and it is the substance of everything, and every “thing” appears by way of a densification or rarefaction of the inescapable inking of the texture. All is texture to varying degrees of collection. All is as much the continuum as it is a foreground set against the continuum. And every edge of every apparent object is only, and all the less, apparent—the closer one stands to the surface, the less easily one can determine exactly where any edge is supposed to be, for “in fact,” the edges aren’t there.

And if one looks hard enough, if one looks closely enough, one can see the tragic import in all this. If all is the configuration of the field, and the field is all that is, then nothing exists “in itself”—the square house is not there, not in itself, nor is the woman walking with a parasol, nor Pierrot and Colombine, nor the woman with her embroidery, nor any of the figures, nor any of us. If the field is all that is, then we are not, for we are merely chemical combinations of it or its aspects, or emergent properties dependent on chemical combinations of it (for that is why emergent properties emerge under some conditions and not others), we are molecular agencies rather than atoms, and when the molecular components disperse, as they once began to cohere, and rearrange themselves into other molecular dispensations, everything continues just as it was—except us. And if the aesthetic status of Seurat’s drawings is to be under question, it should be noted that this vision is precisely what Nietzsche informed us in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

And this is precisely the vision that Blake cannot enclose because of his insistence on the bounding line, whereby everything rendered is rendered distinct from everything else—whereby everything rendered is, in fact, rendered. This is precisely the vision Blake wished to rule out through the insistence on the bounding line: “the line of the almighty must be drawn out upon it before man or beast can exist.” And so, evidently, man and beast must exist, and so there must be a bounding line to distinguish them, or else “all is chaos again.” That chaos is what Seurat embraced—that chaos is what he saw. That chaos is what he makes us see.

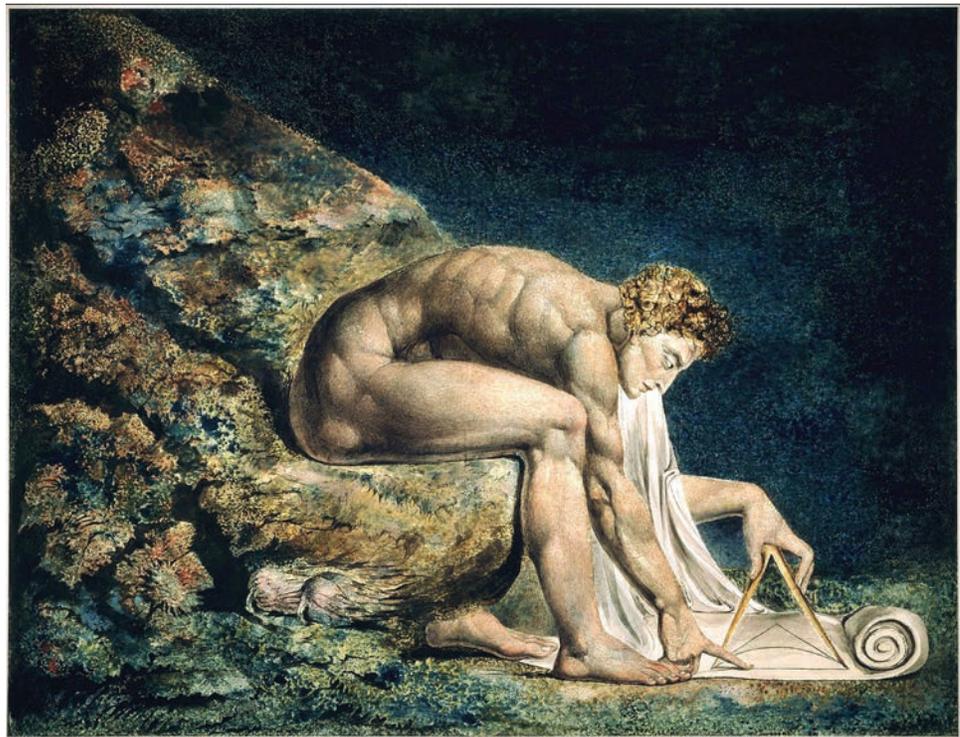
What Blake found absent, the absence that Blake found brings on “chaos again,” is what “man or beast” is: “life itself.” It is life that is his concern; it is the conception that brings about the implicit absence of life, for life is found only in living forms, that is his concern. And thus Blake’s concern is similar to Goethe’s when Goethe opposed Newton’s conception of the world for rendering a vision of the real that omitted life, and unwisely attempted to devise scientific principles that would root the truth of the world in the fact of

life, or at least the facts of human observation—a set of principles meant to generate an alternative to the Newtonian conception. Blake, as well, takes his issue with the Newtonian vision.

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I know too well that a great majority of Englishmen are fond of The Indefinite which they Measure by Newtons Doctrine of the Fluxions of an Atom. A Thing that does not Exist. These are Politicians & think that Republican Art is Inimical to their Atom. For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else.

But there is something of a mash here. Newton’s “fluxions” was his mathematical method, now called the calculus, which was the name Leibniz gave to it when he devised it at roughly the same time, and the calculus, or fluxions, is the math for calculating “the minutest subdivisions” of any extension—for Newton, the path of an orbiting sphere, broken down by the math to a vector analysis of its precise acceleration at any one, precise moment. In short, the calculus is the math that gives a “slice” of that which is continuous, of a continuum—of a field. The calculus is pertinent to, and thus is about, the mathematical point, and so about infinite divisibility, and it has nothing to do with the indivisible atom—with the particle. And so, Blake and Newton are on the same page on this, a fact that Blake may have better acknowledged with his engraving of Newton. Or, better—Newton and Seurat are on the same page with their unbroken continua, and Blake, with his continuous, infinitely divisible



Georges Seurat, *Woman Reading in the Studio*, c. 1887-88
Conté crayon on paper, 12 x 9 3/16 inches (30.5 x 23.3 cm)
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums. Bequest from the Collection
of Maurice Wertheim, Class of 1906



line for separating out the indivisibles of life (man or beast), differently distributed indivisibility and infinite divisibility—another coupled pair.

Which is to say that there is something of a mash whenever we attempt to confront or combine the issues of life—of experience and perception and thought—with the issues of what Seurat can better be said to have been after: truth, what is, regardless of what we perceive. For there is a category confusion here: life and truth are incommensurables. When the microscope of contemplation is focused for the examination of life, the focal length is wrong for truth and truth swims out of definition, out of all evidence—it is nowhere to be seen. And when the focal length of thought is set for truth, the opposite results. The two are never in the same field of mental vision.

Truth and life preclude each other.

And so it may well be that Blake is right—when there is only the tint, only the loosely

distinguishable configurations of the continuous field,

there is no life, for life depends on the distinguishment, on the line between this and that. And Seurat may be right—that the truth of the matter is that there is only the continuum, that we, seen by eyes other than ours, are not to be seen, that water ambient through water leaves merely water. And thus life, and all of us with it, can be said not to exist, and not to be in evidence, however illusory the evidence, except when perceived by that which lives, which is a perfect Möbius strip of a thought, or perhaps just a mystery. Life is then the beautiful illusion, the intellectual beauty, and it is nothing more. And there too is a tragedy, or perhaps it is the same tragedy—perhaps there is only and always one tragedy, and it is life.

And that leaves us with the question of art, and of Seurat as an artist, and whether Seurat defined himself out of the game. Take a look at Seurat's *Woman Reading in the Studio*, c. 1887-88. She is at study in the studio, the studio that seems something of a laboratory, a situation of investigation and inquiry, where secrets are delved and revealed through the instrumentation of the means of art. Perhaps Blake was right—art is where and how we conjure the illusion of life, and intellectual beauty is a fantasy, and the line indispensable to pure art, the line that is art drawn down to its essential, is the means of art's alchemy. And then Seurat was no artist—to his benefit, to ours, for he was a teller of truth. And the woman is a seeker of knowledge. But then, she is in an art studio, and she is *reading*.

“

THE AWFUL shadow of some unseen Power
Floats though unseen among us,—visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower,—
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
It visits with inconstant glance
Each human heart and countenance;
Like hues and harmonies of evening,—
Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—
Like memory of music fled,—
Like aught that for its grace may be
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”

Georges Seurat, *The Echo (study for Bathing Place, Asnières)*, 1883
Conté crayon on paper, 12 5/16 x 9 7/16 inches (31.2 x 24 cm)
Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Edith Malvina K. Wetmore



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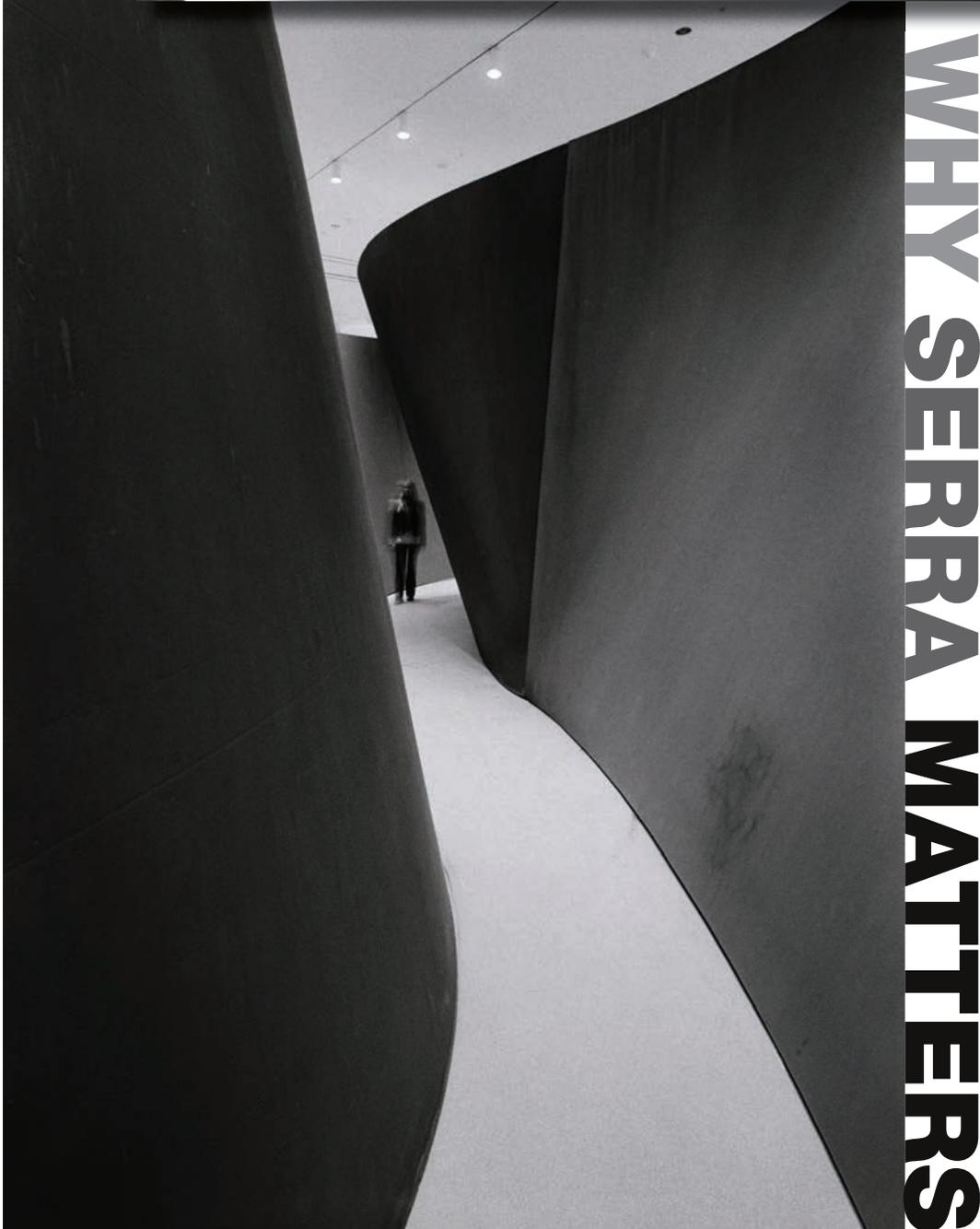
Why Serra Matters

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years

Hyperion, Volume II, issue 4, December 2007

**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



**Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
June 3 – September 10, 2007**

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Some works of art matter too little because they matter merely as works of art. Some works of art matter only within the corridors and interior landscapes of the story of art, of the ongoing history of art's development, only along the walkways of puttering rumination and the storied vistas of art on its way to becoming art, of past art making its traipse to future art. Some art matters only because it leads to the vision of what art will become.

Anyone who has spent sufficient time in the art world, time sufficient to follow these tendencies toward self-defining excitations, knows the mode of enthusiasm. It is a corporate fascination that roams in crowds the streets of New York, Berlin, London, and elsewhere, and studies the makeshift hallways and byways of international art festivals, sniffing for the early scents of what will be next, and it displaces any concentration on external standards of significance, any focus on questions of why what will be next will matter: what will be next will matter merely because it will be next.

There is to the thinking mind, of course, a roster of logical difficulties here. They begin with the logical absurdity of, the internal contradiction in, the idea of contemporary history—a contradiction in terms. To see history, or to see eventuality as history, is to see a story—it is to see what has occurred as a story, or the told tale of what has occurred, accurate to a degree beyond determination for its having been fashioned into a story. To do that is to require a finite selection, and the present tending to the future is by definition indefinite—it is open-ended. To look to see how the story ends, or even how “this” chapter of the story will turn out, is to angle the experiment—it is to “beg the question.” To know what to look for is already to have shaped the story, and so to have defined at least the sort of thing one is prepared to recognize as fitting the category of expectation. Somewhere, deep within, one already knows the result, and all other outcomes already have been overruled. It is to observe “history” as a participant who forces the conclusion. And Schopenhauer has made the argument, in his remarkable essay “Transcendent Speculation on the Apparent Deliberateness in the Fate of the Individual”—that the future will inevitably, always contribute to a story, in that every detail will lead to a coherent conclusion, but that “storied” nature of eventuality can be observed only in retrospect; one cannot see the future coming by projecting the form of the story, by continuing its recognizable pattern. In short, history remains history—it is of the past.

And to seek ongoing history is to enter voluntarily into the herded mob, to bow to the power that markets to the crowd, or uses the crowd to market its wares

to those who use the crowd to drive up the prices of what they have bought—it is to willingly participate according to the “herd instinct.” The mob, driven by expectation of the news about to come, and not knowing to recognize that news but by the assent of the crowd—for popularity has no sign other than popularity, everyone looking to everyone else—is a supersaturated solution of fanatical interest. All that is required is the seed crystal, the convincing suggestion to be enthusiastic about something, dropped into the waters of the undirected popular will, the bath that cleanses nothing, and the herd runs toward wherever it has been pointed. And then, fingers “fumble in a greasy till,” for the mob is made to be herded and popularity is the tool of those who know to profit from it.

But the greatest difficulty is in the displacement of critical judgment for fanatical interest. Art that is of interest for the sake of art and for the sake of nothing else is a closed circuit, and of beckoning only to those whose interest has no need of justification, no need of reason beyond itself—and that is a fair definition of fanaticism. Works of art that are taken to be of interest because they take up and brandish new forms of execution, new materials of employment and modes of engagement for the viewer, or the reader, or the listener, and that want no reasons why the new forms and materials and subjects are more compelling than those that preceded them, works of art that are compelling purely for the novelty of their means, are matters of fascination, of mesmerization, of hypnotic appeal. They have no reasons for no reasons are requested; they are sufficient unto themselves for there is nothing they are required to lead to. They are adequate as means—for no end is wanted. And they are of interest only to those who need art to have no interest, no end, no purpose, beyond the fact that it is art, or is taken to be. And we cannot then know what is art by what it does, for it does nothing, or by what it is, for the new, the previously unrecognized, is what is desired. Art, then, is a machine plugged into itself, like a tape machine recording only its own output, with no output but what it obtained from itself. And the interest it carries is fanatical, for it needs no reasons—it is sufficient because it is. It is because it is. And that leaves art as an entertainment—fascinating for the fact that it is fascinating; popular because others find it popular, a stick for whipping public taste, taste that is nothing more than the irresistible penchant for the following of followers. And then art is no longer an enterprise of inquiry, a search for whatever the artist deems worthy of seeking: it is an industry of commerce, a herding of sheep.

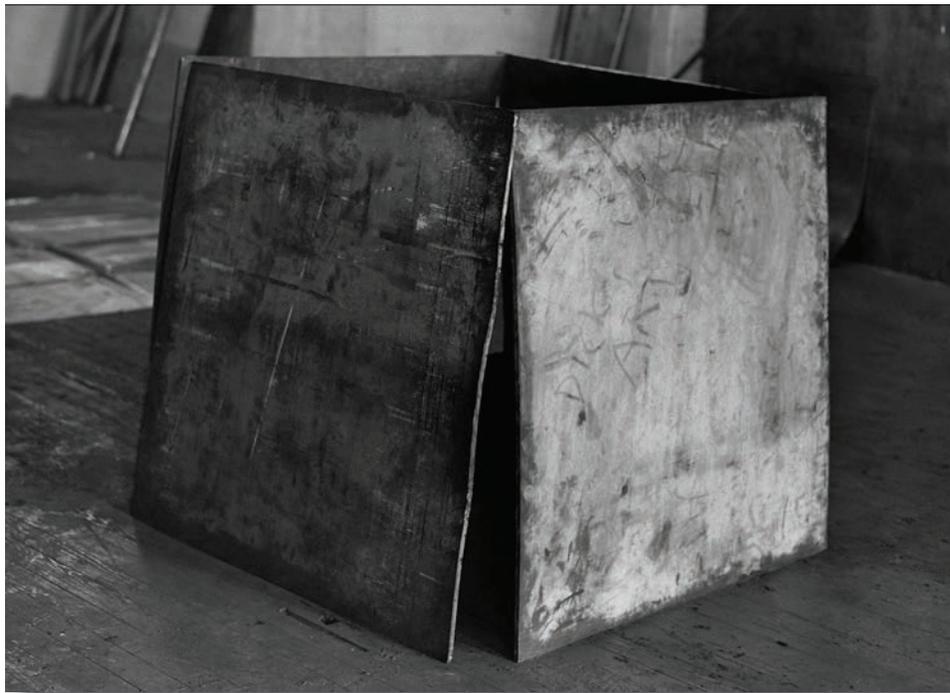
To distinguish out interest of reason and reasonableness (not the same thing) from unreasoning and unreasonable interest (not the same thing), one may refer to what can be called the machine principle, which is to say that art is, in the making and in the requirements for its results, no different from anything else—it is like all else we do but worthy of greater concern, it is different from all else in degree rather than in kind. It is like all else we do, only in some way,

more so. The machine principle is such: for a machine to be functional, it must have output—it must make something—and its output must be of a kind other than itself. The failure to be so is the failure to be functional. A factory that produces nothing more than more factories whose functions are to produce more such factories clearly constitutes a system that is going nowhere. Sooner or later, something must be produced that justifies the entire enterprise, some purpose to it all must appear, otherwise, the entire enterprise produces nothing. Sooner or later, something must escape the defining confines of the system, or the system is purposeless. Sooner or later, there must be a vertical move out of the lateral distribution of the system's parts, or we have nothing. So, too, with art—sooner or later, the sequence of works of art leading to other works of art must produce something that is not art—an insight, a realization, knowledge, or anything else that we might determine justifies all that antecedent effort—or the effort has been for naught. The purpose of art is not art.

Much of Richard Serra's reputation has been such—as an innovator with relatively little argument for or recognition of the purpose or purposes his innovations serve. He has been known for creating new means, for employing new materials or employing materials in new ways, for expanding the formalisms of sculpture, without much to be said about what he has accomplished or made possible beyond the means, beyond the making possible of some future sculptor's work. He has been known for most of his time for doing what no one else at the time was doing, which is what most other artists deemed of note at the time were doing. The thinking in this is more than (or less than) circular.

Which is to say that a great deal of the recent exhibition of Serra's work at The Museum of Modern Art in New York was of interest in that it showed us where he was, which is to show us where we were, because in part where we were was busy ogling what he was producing. The exhibition contained more than two dozen works covering the entirety of Serra's career as a public and highly influential artist up to this point, beginning with his most overtly and reputedly experimental works of the mid-1960s and ending with his most truly experimental and, far more important, aesthetically remunerative works of the present day. This is to say that a great deal of the exhibition was nostalgic. Much of it was comparable to an exhibition of paraphernalia from the Sixties, which in fact was the subject of an almost simultaneous exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Extending over three spaces, two within the museum and then out to the sculpture garden, the works were not displayed entirely in chronological order. However, the start of the exhibition on the sixth floor—one moved on to the second, and then outdoors—offered the works from Serra's first decade, as well as the trip down memory's lane. One room, in particular, found many



Richard Serra, *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969
 Lead Four plates, each: 48 x 48 x 1 inches (121.9 x 121.9 x 2.5 cm)
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
 Gift of the Grinstein Family
 © 2007 Richard Serra
 Photo: Peter Moore

of the Serra sculptures whose images tend to make it into the art history books. Seeing sculptures such as *Belts*, 1966-67, *To Lift*, 1967, *Prop*, 1968, *1-1-1-1*, 1969, and *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, 1969, those of us who are old enough could not help but recall the heady days of ferment.

And one could not help but recall the

theorizations written about these sculptures, then and often now, explanations so opaque for their blandness that they served and serve only to extend the mysterious opacity of the works by extending the befuddlement, as if the explanations of the unilluminating titles were themselves further unilluminating titles.

Belts is a series of rubber pieces, apparently rubber belts, tacked to the wall, in 11 groupings, one after the next, with one having twisted neon bulbs wound into it, like masses of large insect feelers caught writhing around themselves, intricating themselves into coagulated intestinal conglomerations, like butterflies pinned to a board. It has been said to be a form of drawing, emphasizing “non-compositional all-overallness” (Serra’s words), whatever that is supposed to mean. *To Lift* is a large swath of vulcanized rubber placed on the floor, one edge lifted somewhat like a teepee, or half a teepee, and standing of its own accord, without an armature to hold it up—soft sculpture that remains erect despite the pliable material out of which it is composed, evidently defying gravity. *Prop* is a plate of lead antimony placed at eye level on a wall, apparently held in position by noting but a lead rod that leans against it—evidently defying gravity. *1-1-1-1* is an assembly of four large plates of lead antimony each standing on edge, unconnected to each other, with only a lead rod touching them all by lying across the tops of them—the plates evidently defying gravity. *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*—probably the best-known work of this group—is another assembly of four lead plates standing on edge and leaning apparently precariously against each other, held up only,

it appears, because they are leaning against each other. Together, we are told, they weigh one ton, and they are standing something like a rather simple house of cards. The point, we are also told, is the contradiction between the weight of the material and light, casual way the work slants into its standing position—evidently defying gravity.

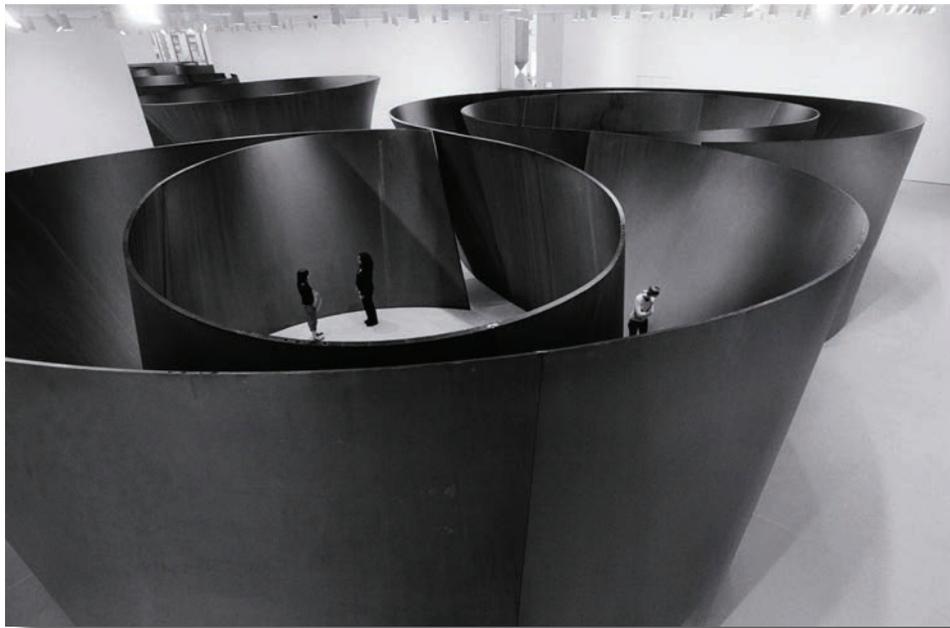
These works speak of their time, a time in which, as we thought, the language of art was being expanded, new forms and formalisms, new formulae for making new artistic statements, were being developed everywhere it seemed, with little thought for or expectation of their being used to say anything new. To “speak” in a new way was to be “saying” something new—at least, it was all that was being said. Much of the purpose was also an expansion of art, both in its means and in its exposure—art forms were devised so that more people could make what would be accepted as art, and art was to be a common currency of social exchange. After Abstract Expressionism, which was taken not unreasonably to be an elite exercise, capable of “speaking” only to the initiated, to those who knew how to look at it, and with the inauguration of the Sixties, elitism was the antithesis of hip, or in, or something or other. The common was the good, and art was to be common. It was as if we had given everyone a library card and then put nothing but blank pages inside the books.

But following this time, Serra turned to something else, something his own, and something entirely elite, capable of speaking only to those who have prepared themselves to receive the more refined forms of imagination, of thought and wonder—and that is the remainder of the exhibition. Serra turned to geometry.

In works such as *Band*, 2006, *Sequence*, 2006, *Torqued Ellipse IV*, 1998, and *Torqued Torus Inversion*, 2006, one can see not only forms that are far more complex and more engaging than those of the earlier work, one can see the working of an idea—of something being said, of something being realized and



Richard Serra, *Band*, 2006
Weatherproof steel
Overall: 12 feet 9 inches x 36 feet 5 inches x 71 feet 9 1/2 inches (3.9 x 11.1 x 21.9 m),
plate: 2 inches (5.1 cm) thick
Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
Gift of Eli and Edythe Broad
© 2007 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Lorenz Kienzle



Richard Serra, *Sequence*, 2006
 Weatherproof steel
 Overall: 12 feet 9 inches x 40 feet 8 3/8 inches x 65 feet 2 3/16 inches (3.9 x 12.4 x 19.9 m)
 Collection the artist
 © 2007 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
 Photo: Lorenz Kienzle

revealed through the sculpture. Serra is after something here, something more than internal tales of the hermetics of sculptural making, something that reaches beyond the precincts and perimeters of the practicing of the art form, something in the way of output that is not art: a recognition, an understanding

of the nature of space, and of ourselves in space, and of ourselves and the space we occupy as a conception, and an experiential reality. There is observation here; there is an insight.

In each of these works—and of the later works in the exhibition, I have omitted only *Intersection II*, 1992-93, which seems a bit simple relative to these other works—the form, the footprint on the ground, and in the air, is easy to comprehend. Each work is composed of a long, curving steel sheet, or several curving steel sheets, bent such that one can not only walk around the work but into its inner space or spaces. Each work stands between 12 and 13 feet high, so that when walking inside, one is completely encompassed by it, enclosed in the interior space. *Band* is composed of apparently a single sheet (actually a number of sheets welded together) that curves back and forth into four close to circular loops. *Sequence* is composed of two such apparent sheets curving around each other, in near parallel, to form two circular inner spaces and the curving “hallways” between the sheets. *Torqued Torus Inversion* is made of two identical forms, sheets in almost circular pattern that curve—that is, elongate—in two directions: along the ground and as they rise. One of the two toruses is an inversion of the other—turned upside down—and both are slit vertically so one can walk into them. *Torqued Ellipse IV* (the first versions of the *Torqued Ellipse* series were a sensation when they opened in New York almost 10 years ago) is a sheet curved into an ellipse, an oval, only the sheet is torqued, is twisted as it rises, so that, at the top, the wider axis lies at 90 degrees to the longer axis at the bottom, at the floor. *Torqued Ellipse IV* is also slit, permitting one to walk inside. (Please refer to the images to get a sense of the simplicity of the forms.)

For all the ground-plan simplicity of the forms of these sculptures, the experience of walking inside their interior spaces is nothing simple, and that experience is the opening of the import of these works, it is the experience they are built for, or rather, the experience of them is why they needed to be built and not just planned out, as on paper. They are made to be entered, and upon entering them, one is disoriented to a remarkable degree. Even with works as relatively simple as the two (or three) torqued sculptures, nothing about the interior walls makes normal sense, and you discover within them how dependent we are on walls, or any vertical rises, being exactly perpendicular to the ground. Once the walls go in some other way than straight up, you lose your sense of balance, your physiological orientation. The feeling of gravitational pull, the inner sense of where “down” is, does not help—one is off kilter. We are evidently helpless without the normal visual cues. We are conditioned, apparently to a thorough extent, by the structural definitions of the spaces we construct for ourselves.

What becomes evident in walking into and through these works is that, for all the simplicity of their forms, these structures are, experientially, mazes. In each case, even once one has grasped intellectually the geometric pattern, the work remains labyrinthine to walk through. Nothing in it is simple to take in—everything is disorienting and new every time you encounter it again. None of the pathways has perfectly vertical walls; you feel like Alice undergoing geometric realignment. Corridors that you know proceed in nearly straight lines disappear around remarkably subtle curves as you walk along them. None of the interior spaces, the nearly “circular” spaces, retains its precise shape as you look up—your sense of the distance between you and any portion of the surrounding wall changes as your gaze moves, and eventually gets lost entirely. Perspective changes everything you know about the overall form; the sheer scale of it, its relative enormity—relative to you—alters its nature. Everywhere inside and outside these works, you know where you are, and you never know where you are.

There is a severe discrepancy between the conceptual simplicity of the ideas of these sculptures and the experiential complexity of their reality—there is a rupture, or rather, there is a failure to bridge, an impossibility to bridge. What Serra reveals with them is that there is a transformation that occurs when

Richard Serra, Torqued Ellipse IV, 1998
Weatherproof steel
12 feet 3 inches x 26 feet 6 inches x 32 feet 6 inches
(373.4 x 807.7 x 990.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Fractional and promised gift of Leon and Debra Black, 1999.
© 2007 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo: Lorenz Kienzle





Richard Serra, *Torqued Torus Inversion*, 2006
 Weatherproof steel
 Two torqued toruses, each overall: 12 feet 9 inches x 36 feet 1 inch x 58 feet 9 inches (3.9 x 11 x 17.9 m), plate: 2 inches (5.1 cm) thick
 Collection the artist
 © 2007 Richard Serra / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
 Photo: Lorenz Kienzle
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simple principles are distilled from complex experiences. We seed the mind with the images of what we encounter in life. We detach the world from the world, dislocate its elements, condense them down, and inventory the awareness with miniatures of the objects and situations we live among in full scale. We map the world and chapter it for comprehension.

But the simulacra, the models, the images, are not equivalences. Something of the basic nature of the object changes when we enter it into awareness, when we make it a denizen of the precincts of thought.

The reduction in scale, from the surrounding world to the encompassing mind, is also a reduction in complexity. The simple principles, the underlying tenets and foundational conceptions, are an explanation of what is, or a plan for what we will make, and they are also a distortion, for they are a reducing down to a clarity of logic that is the result of the process of reduction, that is of the nature of the mind that conceives and not the thing being conceived. Or put differently, the logical clarity of simple principles is an alteration, an over-simplification, of a reality that is unremittingly irrational, uncanny—a phantasmagoria. A simple geometry can constitute, when brought to a physical reality, a vertiginous labyrinth. And in the reverse direction, a scientific theory is not of the complexity of the world to which it applies, nor is it meant to be. Scientific theories are derived from experimental situations, and experimental situations are deliberate simplifications of the districts of reality from which they are taken, to which they refer. They are reality corralled, distilled, taken under control, and they are what the theory derived from them explains. Once we put the theory into orbit, so to speak, there is no telling what might just happen. The vertiginous may inject itself.

With Serra's later, geometric works, the knowledge of the form is simple and

the experience of the form is not. The knowledge of the form must be simple because the experience of the form is not—it is dense, complex, and constantly changing. That discrepancy is precisely to the point of these sculptures. What we know and what we live through constitute two different worlds,



and each world is dependent on the other. What we know comes from what we experience, and what we experience is dependent on what we know. Yet, these two forms of awareness are, in and of themselves, nothing alike.

The difference between these two forms of awareness is something along the lines of the difference between the objective and the subjective. More, it is the difference between the conception and the perception, and in that formulation, it is comparable to the difference between the way things are unto themselves, if we assume that what we conceive, were it complex enough, would be capable of being the way things are in themselves, that thought is a vision of things with us detached, as themselves, without the range of consuming perception, as if beneath some mind's eye, and the way things hit us, confronted by and in the embodied eye—the difference between truth and life, between things as they are, or envisioned as they are, pure of us, and what we encounter, the way things come to us.

The world of living experience and the world of things in themselves—at least as we can conceive it in ideas, ideas operating by their own laws in our own interior spaces—do not touch at any point. There is no intersection between them. And the discrepancy is not due to any distortion in perception. Nothing has been distorted in our experience of Serra's forms. They are there before our eyes. One can stand inside, say, the torqued ellipse and, through observation, mentally map and recognize the shape. One can visually measure the 90-degree turn by observing, from the inside of the work, the top edge of the sculpture and comparing it to the edge touching the floor. The math of it is right there. The discrepancy is not due to any evident distortion but to what has been called the subjective component of experience, an

overlay of something impossible to describe, of something dream-like—a blanket of experientiality, like a tangible substance, a draping sheet, a veil of mortality, a gauze before the eye—that transmogrifies everything without altering a single fact of it all.

Serra has said, with regard to the *Torqued Ellipse* series, that he is interested in what he calls “the substance of space” and that the works in the series are predicated not on the eye but rather on the movement of the body. This thinking is comparable to the intent of Minimalism, at least among some of its practitioners, to discover a means of, as Donald Judd put it, “finding out what the world’s like.” But it is also comparable, with its orientation on the movement of the body, to the interest of Abstract Expressionism, the opposite in many ways of Minimalism and the artistic paradigm against which the Minimalists reacted, in the nature of the subjective, of the quality of experientiality purified, of the subjective component of experience experienced on its own terms. This thinking is comparable to the theoretical concern with the intrinsic nature of space, as Serra says, as it was before we arose as a species, as it is all around us, as it will be after we have managed to make ourselves as a species extinct (through over-running our environment, our space, as natural an eventuality as what happens to any species that over-runs its environment, and, sooner or later, all species become extinct—a natural eventuality). But it is also comparable to the interest of Helmholtz, Mach, and Poincaré in constructed space, in physiological space, in what Poincaré called “motor space,” an experiential reality resulting from the sensations of bodily movements, the experience of a space that, according to Poincaré, “has as many dimensions as we have muscles.”

But these pure alternatives are not where Serra resides. His later work strides the chasm between the two artistic vocations of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, between the theories of the geometric nature of space and the idea that the experience of space is a physiological result, a body reaction to what is beyond conception, to something whose nature we do not even suspect. Ultimately, the space that Serra’s works are most deeply concerned with is the space between knowledge and experience, between what the truth might be and what life in fact is.

A simple geometry can constitute, when brought to a physical reality, a vertiginous labyrinth. What we experience might be utterly accurate, and at the same time, will be nothing like what it is we are accurately experiencing, for the veil of the subjective has fallen over the reality, the gauze is ever over the eye, and our face always looks back at us in the mirror, obscuring the view of what lies behind us, forever hidden.

The geometry of it all is both lucid and strange, familiar and completely alien. This is Serra’s realization, and as new as it is in his hands, it is also an old

one. The Pythagoreans, roughly 3,000 years ago, knew that arithmetic was the heart of a vast mystical philosophy, it was the essence of the mystery of the universe. And musicians know to this day that the emotive power of their creations are dependent upon a cold logic of simple and rigorous numbers. In these times of the superfluity of the intellect, times in which all art is subjected to the bleaching glare of theoretical formulation, in which we continue too often to spend more time making clear how art can be made in new forms than we do using art to make anything else clear, it is a profound lesson that Serra does well to teach us once again—logic can explain everything, and it can explain nothing. The mystery constantly returns. And in everything we know, and everything we can live through, we are in the gap.

Title page image:
Richard Serra, *Sequence*, 2006

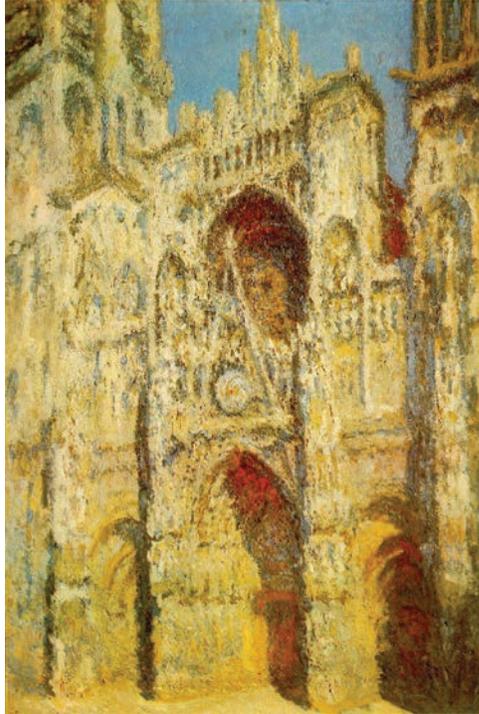
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Nietzsche and the Future of Art

by Friedrich Ulfers and Mark Daniel Cohen

Hyperion, Volume II, issue 4, December 2007

**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



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FUTURE of **ART**



by Friedrich Ulfers and Mark Daniel Cohen

Among the fields of philosophical concern, aesthetics is distinguished by its having a reality test. The majority of areas of interest for the philosopher lie outside the reach of external evaluations. Ontological speculations stand as logically determined and demonstrable propositions and as presuppositions for the designing of scientific inquiries; they stipulate what must be taken for granted in order that science may be practiced without falling into an infinite regression of required proof. Ethical considerations are purposed to guide effort—they establish the standards by which actions may be judged, and so elude judgment by the actions they direct. But aesthetics engages the analysis of that which is done without the direction of philosophical texts. Artists create out of an internal motivation, and their creations are driven by impulses that resist instruction. Aesthetic theories assess what exists outside their tutelage, what is as fully given to the philosophical mind as is the reality of the world and the fact of human life. Even when an aesthetic theory is formulated in the prescriptive, even when the philosophy it delivers is devised as a recommendation to artists, it remains the case that the theory is evaluated by the degree to which artists, in fact, choose to follow its dictates. And, given the perennial difficulty in determining dependably artists' motivations, such an aesthetics can never be unambiguously claimed as the cause of a change in artistic practice and may well be more a prediction than a prescription. And so, aesthetic theories must prove themselves valid more in the sense that scientific theories must than in the sense that ontological postulations can. Aesthetics is the science of art, for art precedes aesthetics, and aesthetic philosophies must demonstrate their worth—they must survive the test of matching what they specify to what artists actually provide.

The role of aesthetics in the body of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical work is well recognized. As is familiar to virtually all Nietzsche scholars, Nietzsche founded his ontology, his sense of the philosopher's vocation, and his formulations for the future evolution of values on an aesthetic philosophy, first laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy* and rooted in his analysis of Greek tragedy, which gave him his conception of the difference between the Apollinian and Dionysian forms of artistic imagination and, with them, the Apollinian and Dionysian world views—two differing interpretations of the world. With these two forms of specifically *artistic* conception come, for Nietzsche, two essential forms of perception, which relate directly to interrelated aspects of his ontological philosophy—of his conception of the real. For Nietzsche, the Apollinian and Dionysian are capabilities of the truth, and it is art that possesses a unique capacity for insight into that truth.

¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist Antichrist*, fourth ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 10.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968) 46.

It did not take long for the appreciation of the importance of aesthetics in Nietzsche's work to be established. From the earliest reception of his thought, Nietzsche's name has consistently been connected with a valorization of art that was taken to be central to his text and so to his overall concerns. Whether this is due to such early conceptions as that of Stefan George, who saw in Nietzsche the exemplary philosopher as poetic visionary whose idea of power was understood by George in the context of his own artistic motto "*j'aime l'art comme pouvoir*,"¹ or to the recognition of Nietzsche's own artistic efforts—his musical compositions, occasional poetry, and his novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—there can be little doubt that Nietzsche has in general long been understood to be the quintessential philosopher of art.

What is not so generally recognized is that Nietzsche's views on art were reflected to a significant degree in the work of artists in the years following his death, a period of development in the arts that saw changes in artistic method and purpose that rival any that preceded it—the period of Modernism. It is the thesis of this paper that Nietzsche's conception of art, and specifically his views as laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy*, directly foresaw and established a philosophical foundation for the primary developments in the art of the twentieth century in the Western tradition, laying out a role and vision for art that characterize the developments which define Modernism. It is an alignment of imagination, and a potential range of influence, that has been ratified by numerous artists who cite Nietzsche in their writings, and it can perhaps be most clearly observed in the principal achievement in visual art of the century—the development of pure, or nonrepresentational, abstraction.

Art, in Nietzsche's conception and as reflected in the work of artists who have come since, carries the capability and responsibility of conveying the full weight of the philosopher's ontological vision. It is an art of truth-telling, and the truth it tells is of a "Dionysian" comprehension of the world: a tragic insight into a world of Becoming, a processual conception of reality in which the world is an incessant interplay of forces. There are no enduring objects, no "things." There are strictly events ceaselessly coming into being and simultaneously passing away and that are the function of oppositions of forces that never achieve equilibrium, that never come to resolution. It is a world of endless flux, of constantly incomplete, constantly open-ended experimentation, and which can be understood only through the rejection of oppositional thinking, the dismissal of all conceptions that are defined as the opposite of what they are not. Everything that can be said to exist—existing as a continual state of Becoming, of being created and being uncreated as its inherent condition—is both what it is and what it is not. It is what may be called a "chiasmic" unity—an integration of opposites, an interlacing of what the normative mind would think could not go together. This chiasmic condition is what Nietzsche called "excess"—that which is beyond definition, or limitation—and it was his claim that "*Excess revealed itself as truth.*"² What we are left with is a world of the

goalless play of forces, a ceaseless Heraclitean strife, a world in which nothing can achieve a final state, in which nothing can complete itself and accomplish a perfected stability.

Nietzschean art is that whose purpose is to reveal the nature of such a worldview, not through the art's assertions or renditions—it cannot state what inherently cannot be defined—but through simulation, through enacting this vision of the real and conveying as an aesthetic experience a sensory grasp of the truth, a truth that cannot be explained but can be achieved only through insight—a tragic, Dionysian insight—tragic in that it envisions the incessant making and unmaking of everything, including ourselves. This is the lesson Nietzsche acquired from ancient Greek tragic drama, from the beginning of our artistic tradition—a lesson lost, he felt, during the nearly 2,500 years of the dominance of logical thinking—and with no true irony, he saw it as marking the art of the future. Nietzsche saw his philosophy as a whole as a “Philosophy of the Future,”³ and the characterization of an art charged with conveying that philosophical vision as an art of the future is more than just a direct implication. The philosopher stated it openly: “The future of art (when mankind grasps its point). I could think of an art that is forward-looking, that seeks its images in the future. Why isn't there such an art? Art moves forward away from piety.”⁴

In observing Nietzsche's assertions regarding an aesthetic of the future, one should appreciate what futurity meant for the philosopher. The future, like all that occurs in the world, is intrinsically and irrevocably open-ended. Nothing can be resolved, nothing can reach a completion—history cannot end in a fulfillment, nor can any aspect or portion of the play of forces that constitute history. The future is not a promise but an endless process of goalless experimentation in all that is possible. It is directionless, and in itself, it is featureless. Nietzsche remarks on the pure and dizzying, disorienting open expanse of time, referring to the “oceans of the future”⁵ and “the abysses of the future.”⁶ Nietzsche's conception of an art of the future, an art appropriate to such a sense of the future, is distinctive in its implicit opposition to the aesthetic arguments of our time claiming we have reached the end of art. For Nietzsche, there can no more be an end for art than there can be a resolution and completion for anything else, and thus there is within his aesthetics a necessarily continuing possibility of art, and an unceasing, irrevocable, distinctive, and defining purpose to which art may be put—the continuing possibility of an art that makes an ontological claim.

Nietzsche's devising of his aesthetic philosophy occurred at a particularly propitious moment in the history of the arts, and not just of the arts. He wrote and had his first influence in the heart of a time of profound ferment, a time of notable innovators and innovations, a time of foundational change in not only philosophy but also in the sciences and in the arts. Much of the most

³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, Basic Writings of Nietzsche* 179.

⁴ Nietzsche, ksa 8.187. (translation by the authors)

⁵ Nietzsche, ksa 6.393. (“Das Feuerzeichen” Dionysos-Dithyramben, translation by the authors)

⁶ Nietzsche, ksa 11.24. (translation by the authors)



Above:
Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral, the West Portal and Saint-Romain Tower, Full Sunlight, Harmony in Blue and Gold*, 1893

At right, from top:
Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889

Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892

Otto Dix, *Machine Gunners Advancing*, 1924



innovative work developing then in the arts was involved in what can be termed a break with fidelity to appearances. Symbolist poetry as devised by Stéphane Mallarmé was already turning away from the depiction of a material world occupied with substantial objects. He instructed poets to render, “for example, the horror of the forest, or the silent thunder afloat in the leaves; not the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees.”⁷ In the avant-garde painting of Nietzsche’s lifetime, the first forays were being made into the deliberate break with mimesis, the break with the faithful representation of observable reality, through the projects of the Impressionism of Claude Monet and the Post-Impressionism of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Such developments align with Nietzsche’s own rejection of material, enduring objects that appear to populate the world and seek a more mysterious, Dionysian realization.

⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Arthur Symons, “On Stéphane Mallarmé,” *The Symbolist Poem*, ed. Edward Engelberg (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967) 326.

With such developments, a trajectory of experimentation in art was being inaugurated that would lead through increasing divergences from the authentic reproduction of appearances and would culminate, 20 years after the philosopher’s death and most evidently, in the achievement of pure abstraction in the visual arts. As visual artists pushed further into the departure from apparent reality in the first decades of the twentieth century, the number of references to Nietzsche in their writings and in the writings of the commentators on the new art makes it clear that Nietzsche served a role as an inspiration, if not a guide, to the new artistic experimentation, and he did so to a degree that no other philosopher, no other thinker from any field, could match.

Many artists remarked on the importance of Nietzsche’s writings to them—the Expressionist artist Otto Dix, for example, noted that he carried a copy of Nietzsche into battle during World War I. Numerous artists did portraits of the philosopher, including two busts of Nietzsche by Dix, done in 1904 and 1914, a bust by Max Klinger in 1902, and a painted portrait by Edvard Munch, done in 1906. What is of the greatest significance, however, is the testimony of Nietzsche’s relation to the most important developments leading toward pure abstraction, toward the complete dismissal of the artistic recognition of the world of material objects: the creation of Analytic Cubism by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque and of the first experiments in abstraction by the generally acknowledged creator of the mode: Wassily Kandinsky.

In the case of Analytic Cubism—the first and best-known form of Cubist painting, which was devised simultaneously by Picasso and Braque—the principal statements of artistic intent come from Guillaume Apollinaire, a French avant-garde poet and friend of many of the Cubist painters who served as something of a theoretician for the movement. In his book “The Cubist Painters,” published in 1913—in which he attempts to lay out in fairly systematic fashion the methods, history, and objectives of the movement in painting that had begun six years earlier—Apollinaire mentions Nietzsche by

⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters," *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1968) 224. Compare with Nietzsche, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 19, *Twilight of the Idols, The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) 526.

⁹ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 224.

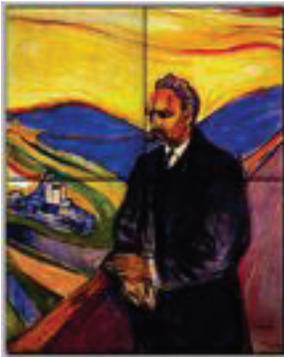
¹⁰ Nietzsche, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 19, *Twilight of the Idols* 525.

¹¹ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 222.

¹² Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 227.

¹³ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 222.

¹⁴ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 222.



name, assigning to the philosopher not the origination of the impulse to the new art but the ability to have "divined" the opportunity for its arrival—to have foreseen the possibility and necessity of Cubist Art. According to Apollinaire:

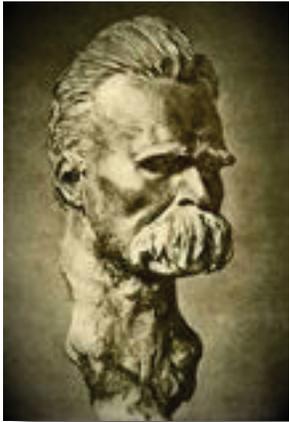
“

Nietzsche divined the possibility of such an art:

“O divine Dionysus, why pull my ears?” Ariadne asks her philosophical lover during one of the celebrated dialogues on the *Isle of Naxos*. “I find something pleasant and delightful in your ears, Ariadne; why are they not even longer?”⁸

The quotation indicates that Apollinaire was conversant with Nietzsche’s criticism of beauty as an Apollinian attribute, as an attribute and thus an invocation of the world of distinct objects rather than of a Dionysian flux of forces. Within the context of Apollinaire’s essay, Nietzsche’s brief anecdote of Ariadne and her lover serves to demonstrate his prescience regarding the Cubists’ rejection of the ideal of beauty, an ideal that Apollinaire identifies specifically as “Greek,” and as “a purely human conception,” an ideal that he condemns in that it “took man as the measure of perfection”⁹ and thus served human vanity rather than the purpose of truth. In this, Apollinaire agrees thoroughly with Nietzsche’s assessment of the psychological function of beauty. As Nietzsche put the same thought: “In the beautiful, man posits himself as the measure of perfection; in special cases he worships himself in it. . . . At bottom, man mirrors himself in things; he considers everything beautiful that reflects his own image: the judgment ‘beautiful’ is the *vanity of his species*.”¹⁰

The rejection of beauty and its underlying human vanity serves to justify and illuminate the value of the compounded perspectives and the distortions in Cubist paintings. According to the French poet, for Cubist painters, “real resemblance no longer has any importance.”¹¹ Instead of duplicating appearances, and with them the supposition of human “perfection” implicit in beauty, these then-young painters sought to create an art “not from the reality of sight, but from the reality of insight.”¹² Apollinaire makes clear the aspect and objective of this art of “insight” rather than “sight”—it possesses the artistic nature of music (“Thus we are moving towards an entirely new art which will stand, with respect to painting as envisioned heretofore, as music stands to literature. It will be pure painting, just as music is pure literature.”¹³), and it is committed to the service of “truth,”¹⁴ the end to which all efforts to paint resemblances are to be sacrificed. In this, it is clear that the purpose of the distortions in Cubist painting is precisely what Nietzsche saw as the purpose of the Dionysian quality of Greek tragedy: to mitigate



Above:
Pablo Picasso, *Accordionist*, 1911

At left, from top:
Georges Braque, *Man with Guitar*, 1911

Max Klinger, *Nietzsche*, 1902

Otto Dix, *Bust of Nietzsche*, 1914

Opposite page:
Edvard Munch, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1906

¹⁵ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," *The Birth of Tragedy* 17.

¹⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. with an introduction by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977) 14.

¹⁷ Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?" *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994) 103.

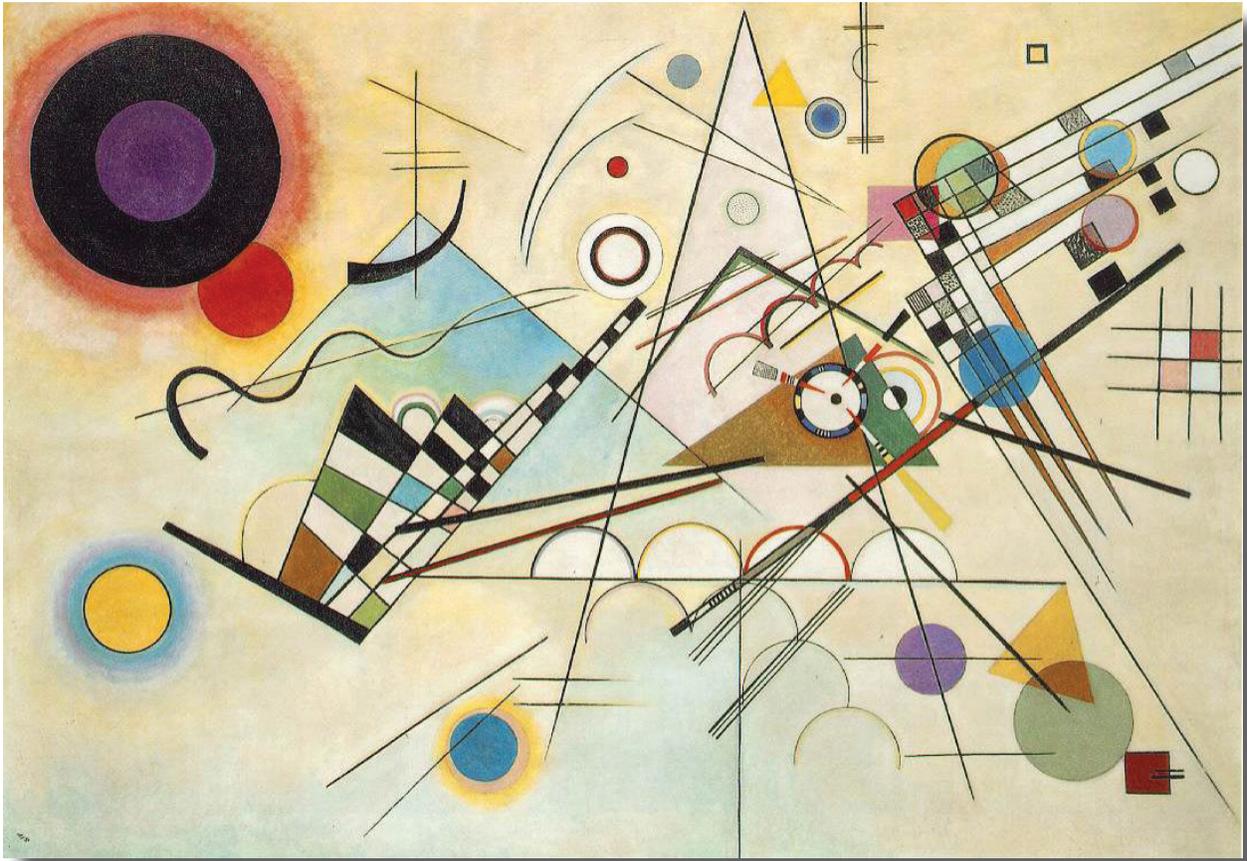
¹⁸ Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?" 98.

the beauty and idealism of the Apollinian image and instill an insight into the mysterious depths of truth through the ecstatic, intoxicated Dionysian quality of music—"the music of tragedy"¹⁵—the music out of which, Nietzsche had argued in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian, tragic insight initially arose.

Cubism was the first artistic gesture in the substantial movement away from the reproduction of appearances, rather than merely the emotionally expressive alteration of still-recognizable appearances that characterized such earlier artists as Gustave Courbet, Monet, van Gogh, Gauguin, Egon Schiele, and many others. The complete step away from any fidelity to appearance was taken only a few years after the devising of Cubism—in 1911, by Kandinsky. Kandinsky's reliance on Nietzsche's thought can be more deliberately estimated than can Nietzsche's effect on the ideas behind Cubism, for Kandinsky had a carefully contrived program behind his artistic revolution, a body of ideas worked out more systematically than Apollinaire had managed to do in his apologies for Cubism.

Kandinsky's references to Nietzsche are made more for the sake of emphasizing the radical nature of the change he wished to bring to art and to civilization than for the purpose of helping to define the objectives of the new art of total abstraction. In his principal book and, in essence, manifesto, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, written in 1911, Kandinsky cites Nietzsche to mark the fundamental change in civilization already underway in his time. "When religion, science and morality are shaken, the two last by the strong hand of Nietzsche, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself. Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt."¹⁶ In the same year, the artist wrote a paper, "Whither the 'New' Art?" in which he again compliments Nietzsche for being a causal agent in a groundbreaking change in cultural values and ideas: "Consciously or unconsciously, the genius of Nietzsche began the 'transvaluation of values.' What had stood firm was displaced—as if a great earthquake had erupted in the soul."¹⁷

Despite this vagueness of stated affiliation, there are substantive similarities between Nietzsche's thought and Kandinsky's artistic program, as laid out in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. In Kandinsky's estimation, civilization, at least Western Civilization, had over the last several centuries passed through a period of what he called "materialism," a time which was then only beginning to pass. The period was marked by a faith in material reality, a belief in only the things of physical presence, as a result of which, the sense of "the inner meaning of life"¹⁸ had been lost. However, due to the shaking of "religion, science and morality," the realization of inner meaning had just begun to return. "Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe



Above: Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*, 1923



Left above: Luigi Russolo, *Nietzsche and the Madness*, 1907-08

Left bottom: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Red Stone Dancer*, 1913

Below: Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913



¹⁹ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 1-2.

²⁰ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 4.

²¹ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 4.

²² Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?" 99.

²³ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 11.

into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness."¹⁹ To respond to the renewed need and to spur the return to a sense of inner meaning, an art must be developed that would dispense with the reproduction of the appearances of the material world and that would evoke subtler, more refined emotions than had been elicited by the realistic painting of the past. As painting developed the means for initiating increasingly finer, subtler emotional responses, it would eventually gain the strength to convey the experience of "the spiritual life,"²⁰ the life "to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements."²¹ The majority of Kandinsky's book makes clear that his new art, the art of pure abstraction, was devised to be just such an art, an art to evoke his "spiritual life," and Nietzsche is one of the few extra-artistic thinkers, and the only philosopher, to whom Kandinsky is able to append commendation for contributing to his cause of broad cultural, spiritual evolution.

Kandinsky's assault on materialism, carried out in his work through the complete break with fidelity to the representation of a world of objects, bears distinct similarities to Nietzsche's criticism of the conception of the world as constituted of material, enduring, substantial objects, as well as to Nietzsche's rejection of classical causality, which is rooted in a naïve materialism. Furthermore, there is a Nietzschean quality to Kandinsky's assessment of the cultural, psychological inheritance of the time of materialism—his sense of the inner meaning of life as having been lost, leaving us "with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal," leaving us in a spiritual vacuum, in which we ask, "Where is the meaning of life? Where lies the aim of life? And the surrounding silence answered: There is no aim in life."²² This sounds much like Nietzsche's own critique of fatalism. Even more specifically, Kandinsky attributes the beliefs and the psychological implications of materialism to the positivistic worldview—in speaking of those who are "blind atheists" and who acknowledge the existence of nothing more than they can physically observe, Kandinsky wrote, "In science these men are positivists, only recognizing those things that can be weighed and measured."²³ The roots of this assessment can be found in Nietzsche's evaluation of the psychological weakness that positivism, and its secret motivation to establish a metaphysics, represents and evokes. In *The Gay Science*, he observed:

“

Metaphysics is still needed by some; but so is that impetuous *demand for certainty* that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form. . . . Actually, what is steaming around all of these positivistic systems is the vapor of a certain pessimistic gloom, something that smells of weariness, fatalism, disappointment, and fear of new

disappointments—or else ostentatious wrath, a bad mood, the anarchism of indignation, and whatever other symptoms and masquerades of the feeling of weakness there may be.²⁴

For Kandinsky, of course, the antidote to this state of affairs, to the cultural legacy of materialism, is to be found in art—in the dark times of such fatalistic, positivistic despair, “nobody needs art.”²⁵ Or so it seems, for in the final analysis, the entire universe acts to refine and sensitize the human soul, touching it with subtle implications and sensitivities that are like unorganized musical sounds. “A force is required to put these fortuitous sounds of the universe into systematic combinations for systematic effect on the soul. This force is art. . . . Art is spiritual bread.”²⁶ Despite the artist’s references to a spirituality that Nietzsche would never have acknowledged (and it is worth noting that nowhere does Kandinsky define what he means by “spirituality”), there is a clear alignment between his belief in art as the antidote to an age of materialistic illusions and Nietzsche’s thought, as there is between Kandinsky’s sense of the universe as necessarily tuning the human senses and Nietzsche’s conception of an art necessarily and perennially of the future. For neither of them can art become obsolete.

It is specifically Nietzsche’s idea of the world as a confluence of opposing, interdependent forces that influences and is reflected in the work of many of the subsequent innovators of abstraction in the visual arts. In the space available here, only a few can be mentioned. Various commentators have observed the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy on, most notably, the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the Futurist painters such as Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo, and the initiator of Constructivist sculpture, Naum Gabo.²⁷

Gaudier-Brzeska, a young sculptor who died on the battlefield in World War I, was the principal figure in the Vorticist movement, which was defined by the poet Ezra Pound as heralding an art that depended on an image more determined by an intrinsic dynamism than by a stabilized and static meaning, an image that “is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”²⁸ The Futurists, among whom Boccioni and Russolo are exemplary instances, sought to create between the two world wars an art that celebrated the rush and sheer force of the new machine age, an art of the future in their sense of what was to come, and they found their inspiration as much in Mussolini’s dubious and tendentious misreading of Nietzsche as in Nietzsche’s own texts. In the new Constructivist art movement, based on the Suprematist movement of Kasimir Malevich, Gabo sought to explore and reveal the new conceptions of space and time that “are reborn to

²⁴ Nietzsche, section 347, *The Gay Science*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 288.

²⁵ Kandinsky, “Whither the ‘New’ Art?” 99.

²⁶ Kandinsky, “Whither the ‘New’ Art?” 102-3.

²⁷ On Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, see *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1992) 160. On the Futurist painters, see Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977) 18, 32, 55, 89.

²⁸ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions Books, 1970) 92,



Above: Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956

Above:
Adolph Gottlieb, *Brink*, 1959

Barnett Newman, *Stations of the Cross 1*, 1958

At right:
Naum Gabo, *Linear Construction #4*, 1962



us today,” as he explained in his statement of artistic purpose, *The Realistic Manifesto*, written in 1920. To do so, Gabo observed that the artist must recognize that all things are “entire worlds with their own rhythms, their own orbits,” and to reveal them in their true nature, the artist must work so as to leave “only the reality of the constant rhythm of the forces in them.”²⁹

It can be argued readily that the last significant period of development and achievement in abstract painting was that of Abstract Expressionism, which flourished in New York from the 1940s to, at the latest, the early 1960s. All the most recognizable names in the movement wrote sufficiently to make their artistic intentions verbally clear, and the commitment to an art of truth-telling, an art of an ontological claim, was general and unmistakable. The most overt assertions came in an article written by three of the Abstract Expressionist artists—Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman—published in 1943, in which they argued that this new art, for them, “is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take risks,”³⁰ and that they painted “flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”³¹ The issue of formalism—of the exploration of painted form for its own sake—was addressed, and they claimed a presence and importance of subject matter in their work: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.”³² In another essay, “The Sublime is Now,” published in 1948, Newman goes so far as to raise the issue of “the desire for sublimity” in the new art, opposes it to beauty, and claims that the objectives of the sublime are being reasserted: “Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.”³³ Despite the fact that no confessions are made regarding an influence of Nietzsche or an alignment with his thought, the Nietzschean cast of these ideas is clear.

That Nietzschean cast in Modernism was not ghettoized to the visual arts. In music, Arnold Schönberg, who devised the mode of atonal music, claimed that the unique qualities of music eluded verbal expression or explanation. Like Nietzsche’s art of the future, which makes its ontological claim in forms that are, ultimately, inexplicable, conveying a sense of the mystery of the Dionysian insight, for Schönberg music is “the language of the world, which perhaps has to remain unintelligible, only perceptible.”³⁴ In any attempt to translate the details of musical language “into concepts, into the language of man, which is abstraction, reduction to the visible, the essence is lost.”³⁵

In Modernist literature, the most salient example of an evident practice of the Nietzschean aesthetic is in the work of Robert Musil, for Musil does acknowledge Nietzsche’s influence via the philosopher’s criticism of material

²⁹ Naum Gabo, “The Realistic Manifesto,” *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* 328.

³⁰ Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, “Statement,” *Art in Theory: 1900 - 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* 562.

³¹ Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman 562.

³² Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman 563.

³³ Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman 574.

³⁴ Arnold Schönberg, “The Relationship to the Text,” *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, ed. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1974) 92.

³⁵ Schönberg 92.

³⁶ Robert Musil. *Gesammelte Werke in zwei Bänden*, Hrsg. v. A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, Bd. 1, 1882. (Zitiert als Musil-2 Bde.) *Collected works in two volumes*, ed. by A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, vol. 1, 1882. (quoted as Musil-2 vol.) (translation by the authors)

³⁷ Musil. *Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*, Hrsg. v. A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, Bd. 1, 250. (Zitiert als Musil-9 Bde.) *Collected works in nine volumes*, ed. by A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, vol. 1, 250. (Quoted as Musil-9 vol.) (translation by the authors)

³⁸ Musil-9 Bde, 1978, Bd. 8, 1334. Musil-9 vol., 1978, vol. 8, 1334. (translation by the authors)

³⁹ Musil-9 Bde, 1978, Bd. 1, 16. Musil-9 vol., 1978, vol. 1, 16. (translation by the authors)

⁴⁰ Musil-9 Bde, 1978, Bd. 8, 1029. Musil-9 vol., 1978, vol. 8, 1029. (translation by the authors)

⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," "Four Quartets," *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems: 1909 - 1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 175.

⁴² Eliot 199.

substance and discrete enduring objects and his valorization of the world as Becoming. Musil makes the influence on his work evident in the figure of Ulrich, the protagonist of his novel *Man Without Qualities*, who, following the insight, inspired by Nietzsche, into the "ungroundedness of the world and the self,"³⁶ into the absence of any eternal, unchanging foundation underlying the world of incessant change, develops a radical skepticism towards an understanding of time in which the present is a punctual "now." Such a skepticism has its foundation in Nietzsche's conception of the eternal recurrence of the same, which under a rigorous logical analysis renders the Moment of ontological temporality as not a point in flowing time but as the source of the phenomenon of linear time. Musil's skepticism of the conventional conception of time leads to the rejection of the punctual present as "nothing but a hypothesis, which one hasn't gotten beyond yet."³⁷

Musil puts his rejection of present and substantive presence into literary practice, in what he calls "essayism," meaning thereby the literary essay as "momentary snapshot" that "grasps" the contingent, non-teleological moments that constitute the world. The art of "essayism" is performative in that it is like a sheer event in "not striving towards a goal if one understands by the term 'goal' a judgment with a claim of truth. For in this domain there is no truth."³⁸ In short, there is no possible final answer regarding the meaning or nature of the world—there are only changing, experimental postulations, reflecting the endlessly changing nature of the real. It is a truth of a different order.

Musil practices "essayism" via the form of *Man Without Qualities* by breaking radically with the principle of teleologically oriented development. In the novel, he abandons the continuum of classical narrative in favor of discontinuous, nomadic fragments that serve as parts of a non-totalizable "whole," one which allows no determinate meaning or closure but only infinite allusion. In this way, the referential function of language is suspended, a suspension that gives way to what Musil calls the "sense for potentiality" (*Möglichkeitssinn*),³⁹ which enables the author to render the non-teleological structure of the real by allowing the discovery of "ever new solutions, connections, constellations, variables."⁴⁰

The moment that exists apart from the flow of linear time is an often-ignored trope of literary Modernism. It is a central motif in T. S. Eliot's final poetic work "Four Quartets," which opens with as close to a direct presentation of its nature as one would think is possible: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past. / If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable."⁴¹ What Eliot elsewhere in the work calls "the moment in and out of time"⁴² can be taken to be unredeemable in the very sense Nietzsche would recognize—that it is not a mere illusion behind which stands a different, metaphysical, changeless reality. Such a moment that is the fountain of time but is not subjected to the flow of

time can be recognized also in the epiphanies that occur in James Joyce's stories in *Dubliners* and in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as well as in Virginia Woolf's moments of being, Marcel Proust's memory, and William Faulkner's moments of heightened perception, particularly in *The Sound and the Fury*.

The Nietzschean profile of thought can be found throughout key works of Modernism in the arts, and Modernist Art can be and has been characterized as art that makes the ontological claim. Yet, it is generally accepted that the Modernist Period in the arts extended only through the early 1960s, and that we now inhabit a time in art history that follows a different protocol. Evident most clearly in the field of the visual arts, we are presumed now to be in a time in which the Modernist formalities, and in particular abstract art, have been exhausted or have been transformed into mere formalisms; the "art" of the artwork is located in the idea behind the work and not in the accomplished execution; and Conceptual Art, Installation Art, and New Media Art all orient on issues less ambitious (or, it is argued, pretentious) than ontological insight. What constitutes art is taken to be defined by contextualization, by the cultural conventions that determine what is seen as art and what is not, rather than by an intrinsic and indispensable function that can be fulfilled in no other way, and artistic experimentation is concerned with pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a work of art. Art's issue is not with the truth of the world but with the "truth" of art—under a Duchampian protocol of thought, artists seek ever new possibilities of what can be viewed as acceptable within a gallery space.

Within such an intellectual environment, it is possible to argue the case for the end of art. That case is made nowhere so powerfully or influentially as in the writings of Arthur C. Danto, the principal proponent of the idea. Danto makes clear his source for the thought: Hegel, the philosopher of the end of history, the philosopher of the culmination of the world in an ultimate synthesis and of a cessation of Becoming that Nietzsche could not countenance. There is a key sense in which no two philosophers could be as opposed as Nietzsche and Hegel.

Danto defines the precise meaning of the end of art by quoting Hegel directly:

“

. . . he claimed, it must have seemed prematurely, that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.'

Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place . . . The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our days than it

⁴³ Arthur C. Danto, "Narratives of the End of Art," in *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 341-342.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" 20.

⁴⁵ Danto 343.

⁴⁶ John Cage, *For the Birds* (Boston and London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1995), 201.

⁴⁷ Cage 80.

⁴⁸ Cage 80-81.

⁴⁹ Cage 80.

⁵⁰ Cage 186.

⁵¹ Cage 95.

⁵² Cage 79.

⁵³ Cage 94.

⁵⁴ Cage 46.

⁵⁵ Cage 147-149.

⁵⁶ Cage 73.

⁵⁷ Cage 119.

was when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again but for knowing philosophically what art is.

It is with regard to this sort of consideration that I had meant to say not that art had stopped, nor that it was dead, but that it had come to an end by turning into something else—namely, philosophy.⁴³

This position effectively turns Nietzsche's aesthetics on its head, for Nietzsche can be said to have desired a philosophy that functioned like art (in his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," which served as the preface for the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the "tongue" that voiced the book "should have sung, this 'new soul'—and not spoken"⁴⁴). Danto describes an art that functions like philosophy, and it is a philosophy oriented on art rather than the world. Danto exemplifies its key moment with the instance of Andy Warhol:

“

. . . when he exhibited, in 1964, those marvelous Brillo boxes, relevantly so precisely like the cartons of Brillo in the supermarket, raising the question acutely as to why something should be a work of art while something altogether like it should not. And that, I thought, was as far as art could go, the answers to the question having to come from philosophy.⁴⁵

Nietzsche's propositions concerning an art of the future, an art of the ontological claim that is incapable of passing out of pertinence, are immediately at risk here. But it is not philosophers who make art, or who determine what art is, it is artists who do—that is a point not at issue in either camp. So, it becomes an imperative matter to determine whether the Nietzschean aesthetic continues to be practiced, or whether it has gone entirely out of circulation, no longer being ratified by any contemporary artists.

There are, however, significant artists of the period after Modernism who practice a decisively and recognizably Nietzschean aesthetic, regardless of whether they acknowledge Nietzsche as a direct influence on their practice. There are artists who continue Nietzsche's art of the future, demonstrating that his aesthetic possesses what it claims: a future beyond the Modernist period. Only a few can be mentioned here, but even those few are sufficient to dispute the claim of the obsolescence of art's function of revealing the truth of the world—a truth that is distinctly what Nietzsche proposed in his ontological philosophy.

Such a purpose is precisely what the composer John Cage claimed for his music. He characterized his music as a “music of reality,”⁴⁶ capable of revealing the world as it is. Cage argued, “Before we wished for logical experiences; nothing was more important to us than stability. What we hope for is the experience of that which is. But ‘what is’ is not necessarily the stable, the immutable. We do know quite clearly, in any case, that it is we who bring logic into the picture. It is not laid out before us waiting for us to discover it. ‘What is’ does not depend on us, we depend on it. [...] And unfortunately for logic, everything we understand under that rubric ‘logic’ represents such a simplification with regard to the event and what really happens, that we must learn to keep away from it.”⁴⁷ This is precisely matched to Nietzsche’s thought of the inexpressibility of the truth of the world, to its Dionysian mystery that defies encapsulation in conceptual thought. And for Cage, as for Nietzsche, art can convey what concepts cannot grasp: “The function of art at the present time is to preserve us from all the logical minimalizations that we are at each instant tempted to apply to the flux of events. To draw us nearer to the process which is the world we live in.”⁴⁸

As with Nietzsche, the world is “not an object. It is a process.”⁴⁹ There is for Cage a “fluidity of all things,”⁵⁰ a simultaneity of their presence and absence: “Appearing, changing, and then disappearing . . . coming and going, this presence and absence, together.”⁵¹ Cage put this sense of the world as it is into his music through the use of a “network of chance operations.”⁵² The oxymoronic aspect of the term “chance operations” alludes simultaneously to all that exceeds or escapes our designs (“chance”) and to the reasoned process by which a design is put into effect (“operations”). What this means in terms of Cage’s practice is the escape from “precise cause-effect relationships” and “exclusions, radical alternatives between opposites.”⁵³ Chance operations, because they free the artwork from the straightjacket of cause and effect, will also bring about “interpenetration and non-obstruction.”⁵⁴ In other words, Cage views his chance operations as a kind of emancipation, dissolving structures that immobilize, restoring them to what he calls “openness”: “the opening up of everything that is possible and to everything that is possible.”⁵⁵ An example of this openness is Cage’s practice of allowing music “a structure based on rhythm or time ... [to] be hospitable to noises as to so-called musical sounds.”⁵⁶ From this perspective, Cage characterized art as the “ultimate ‘experimental’ situation,”⁵⁷ “ultimate” in the sense of being paradoxically without “ultimacy”: a futurity without end. Cage’s “music of reality” is the art that Nietzsche looked towards, an art intrinsically oriented to an open-ended, horizonless future.

Whereas Cage’s alignment with Nietzsche’s thought is overt but lacks any evidence of direct influence, Milan Kundera’s connection with the philosopher is openly admitted. His literature is clearly and confessedly Nietzschean. His best-known novel in English, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, opens with



Performance of John Cage's 4 minutes 33 seconds

⁵⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984) 8.

⁵⁹ Kundera 5.

⁶⁰ Kundera 5.

⁶¹ Kundera 28.

⁶² Kundera 88.

a rumination on Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence. For Kundera, the eternal recurrence implies a quality of weight to existence, of significance that cannot be possessed by that which would occur once and once only. Tomas, the main character of the novel, realizes that "*Einmal ist keinmal* . . . What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all."⁵⁸ The absolute end to life gives it the unbearable lightness, whereas the weight of the recurrence is the significance due to an open-ended future, a futurity without end. The text refers to Nietzsche's claim that the eternal recurrence is "the heaviest of burdens"⁵⁹ and then asks "is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?"⁶⁰

This reversal of values is the mark of the most Nietzschean aspect of Kundera's art. Kundera deals with sets of polar opposites that are continually shifting in their symbolisms and their attributions. The lightness / weight opposition of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* indicates the model for Kundera's oppositions: opposing values are subjected to a process of perspectivalism that leaves the situations or figures to which they are applied ambiguous and open-ended in their artistic implications. The opposition of weight and lightness in the life of Tomas is represented, respectively, by the characters Tereza and Sabina: "Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing."⁶¹ But Kundera ultimately unsettles the simplicity of the initial assumption that Sabina represents lightness and Tereza represents weight, as well as the notion that lightness and weight are "separate and irreconcilable," as Tomas believes. Below the opposition-laden surface, Kundera exposes and moves beyond the limitations of Tomas's original thinking, detailing through the lives of the women themselves an unsettling or deconstruction of the opposition Tomas has such trouble seeing through. Indications of symbolic value are matched to indications of the opposing symbolic value for the same character—Sabina, for example, initially the image of lightness, is aligned with the imagery of recurrence, in her bowler hat that returns "again and again, each time with a different meaning,"⁶² and with the implication of the weight carried by the recurrence.

Kundera's art is an art of the Nietzschean, chiasmic unity of oppositions, an art of plural perspectives that continually recast the aligning of opposing values, showing them to be interdependent, not hierarchical, never to settle into a synthesis but ceaselessly in a Heraclitean eternal strife: an endless play of opposing forces. His work stresses the need to abandon mutually exclusive (either/or) positions in favor of a (both/and) balance in which neither pole is dominant but in which a whole spectrum of possibilities is allowed within only a provisional field of equilibrium. Kundera may propose no revolutionary alternative to the binary structure he critiques, but in the exposure of oppositional thinking and its consequences, it is clear that Kundera aims

beyond a clarity of established, unchanging oppositions, in an attempt to expose oppositional extremes and deprive them of their power and appeal.

The similarity of the work of Cage and Kundera to Nietzsche's idea is obvious—they adopt positions and tenets stated openly by the philosopher. However, the sculpture of Kenneth Snelson relates to Nietzsche's philosophy in a manner that is not immediately self-evident but, once recognized, is undeniable. Nietzsche's rejection of a worldview of enduring material objects constitutes a fundamental shift of paradigm in the conception of reality: a shift from particle theory to field theory. In essence, particle and field theories are necessary alternatives as models for conceiving the world—either the world is conceived as discrete objects interacting when they come into contact, or it must be seen as an arrangement of flowing forces related by some quality of distance or, more fundamentally, intensity. Put simply, either the world is envisioned essentially as broken into pieces or it is not. It can be argued readily that Nietzsche is the first philosopher to re-conceive the world along the lines of field theory, departing from the particle model that had dominated physical theory for millennia.

In this, Nietzsche foresaw a similar shift in conception conducted by Einstein's 1905 Special Theory of Relativity. He also, in this regard and in a more precise way than has been suggested here so far, foresaw the development of pure abstraction in art, for it can be argued that the move to abstraction is nothing more than the reduction of the figure / ground relation in representational painting—the relation of foreground to background—down to pure ground. Abstraction is merely the flattening of the picture image through the elimination of the figure, leaving a background only, which is nothing more than field—the elimination of the discrete object and the retention of the extensive space, across which colors play in much the way forces would.

In Snelson's sculpture, there are literally forces at play. His works are borderline scientific experiments that test the intricacies of actual and intrinsic spatial structuring. Each sculpture is an assembly of aluminum rods that do not touch and that are held in place by a network of steel cables. The form of the sculpture is stabilized by the internal forces of tension and compression, meaning that everything must be in precisely the correct place, or the entire assembly will simply fall down. It is as if, and more than "as if," each work were testing the organizing principles of spatialization—the laws by which forces interact and apparent things—which are nothing more than the arrangements of those forces—hang together in the void. The aluminum rods illuminate a portion of the invisible netting of available systems of balance, systems built into sheer extensiveness. In short, were the void truly chaotic and opposing forces incapable of interacting harmonically, nothing would hold together—and something does.



Above:
Kenneth Snelson, *New Dimensions*, 1977

Below left:
John Powers, *Roe 1 #2*

Below right:
Stephen Talasnik, *Cenotaph*, 2005



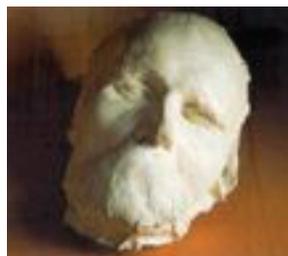
Like Kundera, Snelson is a currently functioning artist, one of the premier sculptors of our time, and he has extensive influence among many younger sculptors, among many of the more accomplished of them, such as John Powers and Stephen Talasnik, who conduct their own experiments in the interaction of forces within the geometric organizational principles of the field. These are but a very small number of the many examples that could be cited of a recognizably Nietzschean aesthetic currently being practiced, but they are sufficient to argue the point, because they are sufficient to engage certain logical necessities. If Nietzsche's proposition of the function of art being the telling of the truth of the world, a truth that can be approached by no other means, were ever capable of being put to practice, then such art could not come to its end, either through obsolescence or through a goal achieved and a project completed, which is more precisely Danto's evident point. The open-endedness of futurity, the impossibility of the completion and stabilization of any process, is a logical implication of Nietzsche's philosophy. Thus, according to the *Modus Tollens*, for Nietzsche's conception of the quality of futurity to prove false, his entire philosophy, and with it his aesthetics, would have to be false—if the conclusion is proved inaccurate, the premise must be inaccurate. Put simply, if there cannot now be an art of the ontological claim as Nietzsche conceived it, then there never could have been, for the Nietzschean aesthetic implies a ceaseless capability. More bluntly still—History, even the history of art, cannot terminate. If it could reach an end, then there never was History.

Of course, there is no one arguing such a case with regard to art. And so, the only possibility of our having reached an end of art is the chance that its purpose has been fully achieved, that the ontological claim which art practiced under a Nietzschean aesthetic seeks to convey has been fully conveyed. However, such a completion is not possible, and not merely because of Nietzsche's stipulations of the open-endedness of futurity and of the ceaselessness of all processes, but because of a logical inevitability of his aesthetic. The ontological claim, the Dionysian tragic insight, is not a piece of conceptual thinking. It is not an element of knowledge that can be learned and retained, and finally no longer needs to be repeated. In a proper sense, the Dionysian insight is not knowledge at all, and there is nothing to learn. It is a quality of experience, a state of illumination that one must undergo—as Schönberg put it, the insight is, of necessity, perceptible and otherwise unintelligible. It can be known only by being known directly. And thus, it is in principle inexhaustible. The experience of the Dionysian insight must be continually re-invoked for it to be known at all. And so, the pertinence of the Nietzsche aesthetic cannot be fully accomplished, and the need of it cannot be extinguished. It remains a continual possibility, and a continual requirement of the only possible "knowledge" of the truth of the world.

Thus, Nietzsche's aesthetic conceives an art of the future that continues to today. It is a contemporary possibility of an art of the sublime—the term that

Newman employed, as did Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. His aesthetic idea departs from both the Platonic conception of art as portraying the world of illusory objects and from the Aristotelian aesthetics of reinforcing ego structures through dispensing the balm of catharsis, the purpose of which is to psychologically medicate and recuperate individuality. Rather, it aligns more closely with and significantly augments the Kantian aesthetic. The capacity of art to deliver a Dionysian insight is categorically akin to the “supersensible faculty” of Kant’s mathematical Sublime in *The Critique of Judgement*, in that it appeals to and exploits for an aesthetic, non-rational form of receptivity and awareness, so as to remit an apprehension of a truth otherwise unavailable, unavailable as a form of human expression outside the precincts of art—only the awesome and awful quality of sheer magnitude in Kant has become the Nietzschean excess of the chiasmic unity of opposing forces, and the thing-in-itself is no longer a thing but an apprehension of the continual making and unmaking of the entire world. Such art offers a different “mimesis” of the real, not through its images but through its manner as art, not through its representations but through its simulations of the processes of the real. And it stretches before us, in both senses of the word, into an indefinite future.

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a review of

‘Verwandt-Verwandelt’ .

Nietzsche’s Presence in Rilke

by Angela C. Holzer, Princeton

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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



'Verwandt-Verwandelt'. Nietzsche's Presence in Rilke
Katja Brunkhorst
Iudicium Verlag GmbH, 2006

by Angela C. Holzer
Princeton

This study on *Nietzsche's Presence in Rilke* focuses on the relationship between the artist-philosopher and the poet that has not yet been fully explored—despite its importance for literary and philosophical history as well as for Nietzsche studies and Rilke scholarship. “Indeed, misconceptions abound about the actual amount of work on this topic” (22). Brunkhorst identifies merely 40 contributions on Nietzsche and Rilke in 70 years, some of which are obscure and unavailable or rely on each other and do not present new material. There is only one monograph on this topic (Detsch, 2003).

In addition, the theoretical complications that many such studies, beginning with Fritz Dehn's in 1936, have been confronted with consist not only in Rilke's own denial of a Nietzschean influence¹ or even knowledge of Nietzsche's works, reported by von Salis,² but also in inadequate theoretical frameworks that could be usefully brought to bear on such a complicated type of influence. In this special case, the relationship is ultimately composed of motivic, rhetorical, thematic, philosophical, personal, *zeitgeistliche* and psychological aspects. Thus, assumptions of a Nietzschean influence on Rilke have often run the risk of being merely speculative and have resorted to metaphors—such as intellectual “heir” (Margot Fleischer), in order to describe Rilke's position vis-à-vis the German philosopher.

The themes of spiritual *Verwandtschaft* (affinity) and *Verwandlung* (transformation), taken from a Nietzsche poem, also apply to the relationship between Nietzsche and Rilke. Katja Brunkhorst's study not only engages these two thinkers and artists, but the general problem of philosophical and poetic influence at the turn of the century, complicated by Nietzsche's own paradoxical advice in *Zarathustra*, namely that his disciples should turn away from him. “Hence, the question of influence is itself partly the object of this study, and its guiding spirit the ‘Antichrist's very own definition of philology, in his eponymous work, as ‚die Kunst, gut zu lesen [...], Thatsachen ablesen zu können, [...] ohne im Verlangen nach Verständnis die Vorsicht, die Geduld, die Feinheit zu verlieren‘ (KSA 6, 233).”³ The question of influence however, is also part of a methodological challenge this study faces, as I will discuss below.

Prior studies have been restricted to claiming either no Nietzschean influence or an influence for only parts of Rilke's corpus and life, variably for the early (notably Walter Seifert) or the later period (Hillebrand), more or less excluding the middle phase. Thus far, there is consensus that Rilke read the second *Untimely Meditation*, *The Birth of Tragedy* (on which he wrote *Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche. Die Geburt der Tragödie* in 1900),⁴ as well as the

¹ Brunkhorst considers this denial a “carefully manufactured myth” (p. 40) that Rilke maintained for a number of reasons and to which scholarship has adhered to blindly (11). Material indicating an influence of Nietzsche on Rilke was until now “virtually non-existent” (9).

² p. 37.

³ Brunkhorst, p.10.

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke: *Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche. ‚Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in: Rainer Maria Rilke: *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main 1966, p. 1163-1177.

⁵ Scholars such as Alberto Destro, Detsch, Engel, Fleischer, Frowen, Görner, Hawes, Kaufmann, Mason, May, Meyer, Szabó, and Heller have also argued for this position. However, the “arguments of those these thirteen scholars are mostly based on textual analysis, as evidence of Rilke’s reading of Nietzsche was largely unavailable until very recently,” (27). Qualifications such as mostly and largely, however, are problematic in this context, not clearly stating the situation. If there are other indications and arguments, they should be made clear, otherwise the originality of the present study might be, implicitly, jeopardized.

⁶ Brunkhorst notes in the text that also “Das trunkne Lied” (today: “Das Nachtwandler-Lied”) was marked in the table of contents (43), but she does not mention this fact in the appendix containing the marks of Z2.

correspondence between Friedrich Overbeck and Nietzsche, which he probably became familiar with in 1911 (73). He also knew a letter written by Nietzsche to Rohde containing his self-assessment as “Dichter bis zu jeder Grenze dieses Begriffs,” printed in the *Insel-Almanach auf das Jahr 1912* (19). It is unclear if Rilke knew parts of *Ecce homo* that appeared in French translation in 1909 (39). A copy of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1887) is existent in the Rilke archive, and Rilke read parts of it in 1902 (39).

Due to Brunkhorst’s research, it is an indubitable advance in scholarship that it can now be stated with a certain degree of likeliness that some passages of *Zarathustra* might have influenced Rilke’s works. Brunkhorst not only presents new evidence on which to ground accounts of Nietzsche’s presence in Rilke, namely the reading traces found in two copies of *Also sprach Zarathustra* in the Rilke estate in Gernsbach. She also suggests, based on the analysis of Nietzsche passages marked by Rilke, a constant influence of Nietzsche on Rilke, thereby corroborating various prior theses of continuous influence.⁵ Moreover, she also argues for a philosophical perspective on Rilke that would shed the remainders of a Heideggerian mystification. She additionally argues against the division of Rilke’s corpus into three different phases. By analyzing the reading traces, “Nietzschean themes which preoccupied the poet must emerge almost automatically, and his ‘Wahlverwandtschaft’ with the philosopher in its continuity throughout his literary career is brought to light. Thereby, this study hopes to make a contribution not only to the assumption of the continuity of the Rilkean oeuvre still debated within scholarship, but also to the re-discovery of Rilke’s philosophical radicality . . .” (11).

The marked passages from the two copies in the Rilke archive, one probably from the possession of Lou-Andreas Salomé, the other definitely read and marked by Rilke, are appended to and commented on in the book. Not only the circled and marked parts of *Zarathustra* are transcribed (according to the KSA), but the handwritten comments, by either Salomé or Rilke, are available to a wider audience for the first time here as well. These passages also form the material on which the third part of the study relies, containing the major bulk of interpretative work. This material is limited; seven pages in the book reproduce text from *Zarathustra* that was singled out in the Rilke copy (Z 2); these pages of *Zarathustra* bear hardly any reading traces but appear to have been mainly marked through the insertion of either a drawing, a photo, or dried cyclamen, although the latter could also have been pressed between the pages arbitrarily. All in all, there are few pencil marks of any decisive intention in this copy: either underlined chapters in the table of contents (*Von Kind und Ehe; Vor Sonnenaufgang; Vom Vorübergehen*),⁶ or a couple of underlined lines (in: *Vom Vorübergehen* (three underlined sentences), *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (one marked passage)). Strictly speaking, these are the only indubitable signs of Rilke’s reception of parts of *Zarathustra*, although Brunkhorst calls them “surprisingly many, very neatly executed pencil underlinings” (43).

The other copy of *Zarathustra* (Z 1) found in Rilke's estate was probably marked by Lou Andreas-Salomé during her work on *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen Werken*, which Rilke also owned (there is only the cover left today). It remains thus unclear, although possible, that Rilke had any contact, directly or through Salomé, with these passages. Salomé's copy, however, is fragmented, consisting only of parts one and two in the 1883 edition by Schmeitzner. The Rilke copy (Z 2) is complete, comprising all four books (1899 edition, Naumann). This copy was most likely given to Rilke by Clara Westhoff in 1901, according to a dedication in the book. Although Brunkhorst bases her analysis on the copy owned by Rilke, she also considers Salomé's copy when relevant. This is reasonable, given their personal contact. It is also risky, since ultimate evidence of the way he became familiar, if he did, with this copy remains unattainable. As Brunkhorst focuses increasingly on "textual analysis" when considering Rilke's work and the marked passages in *Zarathustra*, she has to admit the insecurity of such an undertaking and resort to metaphors of affinity or modes of reminiscence and similarity in order to qualify the type of relationship between ideas, phrases and passages occurring in both corpora. These metaphors increasingly abound,⁷ but at times tend to obfuscate rather than clarify the approach to the questions and modes of influence: "In following the marked Nietzsche passages with interpretations of Rilke's works pertinent to them, such textual analysis has automatically led to a thematic structure which makes visible Rilke's relation to, and transformation of, Nietzsche during the course of his development as a poet. Whether due to a direct influence or not, the most important point remains that Rilke's thought is often reminiscent of Nietzsche's sentiments..." (46). It might be important to remind of Nietzsche's "indifference to the question of influence" (46) in this context, but this does not necessarily solve the theoretical complications. Problematic here is not only the implicit assumption that Nietzschean sentiments are expressed in Nietzsche's works, most of all in the case of *Zarathustra*; it is also the difficulty in dealing with an influence that manifests itself both textually and through rhetorical transformation—due to the fact that Rilke "soon began to transform Nietzschean ideas rather than merely resounding them, as he had done in many of his earlier writings" (66). Thus, an emphasis on extra-textual factors especially influencing this case of artistic and personal influence is clearly in order.

Brunkhorst exhaustively discusses the scholarship on the connection between Rilke and Nietzsche, and devotes a complete chapter to establishing the literary and personal circumstances of Rilke's reception of Nietzsche and Nietzsche's psychological and personal situation during the composition of *Zarathustra*. Her attempt to grasp the importance of Nietzsche as a poet and philosopher of art for Rilke as well as their psychological affinity and the comparable circumstances in their social and erotic life during the production and reception of *Zarathustra*, however, at crucial points resorts again to

⁷ She speaks of the relationship in terms of 'kindred spirit' (13), 'Wahlverwandschaft' (11) Familienähnlichkeit (10), "intellectual and artistic proximity" (20), 'Wahlverwandschaft' that is often rather subconscious (20).

Nietzsche's own assessment, in this case his mentioning of *Zarathustra* as *dionysischem Unhold* in the 1886 edition of the *Birth of Tragedy*. *Zarathustra* might have served, according to Brunkhorst, "as a possible projection screen for the young Rilke, who may have had aspirations to being that chosen *Dichter* himself, and the most obvious reason for him, as a reader of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, to revisit the Persian prophet, whose prophecies, unlike those made in the earlier book, are never fulfilled, but keep on pointing into the future forever" (72). This suggests that Dionysos and *Zarathustra* were interesting to Rilke as figures of artistic hope. However, Rilke's contact with *Zarathustra* did not come about through his own impetus. Both copies of *Zarathustra* were given to him. It remains unclear why Salomé and Westhoff should have considered this book of Nietzsche's most suitable for Rilke: is it because it "comes closest to 'Dichtung'" (72)?

Brunkhorst suggests that Rilke was not only interested in the poetic and stylistic aspects of *Zarathustra* but also in what she calls Zarathustra's "main message" (72)—insinuating despite the authoritative and didactic tone that to follow him means not to follow him. This is the paradoxical crux around which Brunkhorst structures her argument about influence; it then necessarily has to consider the complexities, absences, and denials as part of this reception history.

Thus, psychological factors of the reception and its specific aspects are of crucial importance. Nietzsche might have been, not only in personal terms with regard to Salomé, but also in intellectual terms, an adversary to Rilke. This might explain, according to Brunkhorst, that the *Birth of Tragedy* was "in its flaws, comparatively less threatening to a budding artist than other, more stylistically accomplished Nietzsche works" (71). Even though Brunkhorst runs the risk of accepting Nietzsche's statements and self-assessments also in the psychological parts of the interpretation, these psychological aspects of the reception history are the most speculative of the whole study. "Yet, one can imagine the young Rilke, still constantly in search of an artistic identity and voice of his own, to be in awe of such firm authority and self-assuredness in advertising individualism at all costs" (73). "Thus, it may have been Nietzsche who helped to give Rilke the right to be true" as a poet, referring to Rilke's own poem from 1921. Nietzsche here takes on the function of a therapist, in addition to being a projection screen, mouthpiece, and motor for Rilke's own artistic coming of age as a poet. Nietzsche also served, Brunkhorst suggests, as social consolation: "Here was a fellow artist and thinker about human existence who did not fit into perceivedly 'normal' bourgeois Wilhelmine society, either" (73). Although these psychological speculations can be supported by textual evidence, they might run the risk of generalizing and banalizing the situation. Other problematic generalizations, like "An inherent poetics imbues his entire philosophy" (17) with regard to Nietzsche, or descriptions of Nietzsche at the time of writing *The Gay Science* as "most

balanced and psychologically ‘healthy’” (80) also do not necessarily lead to a better understanding of the topic at hand. Ultimately, they tend to lead away from a possible quest for direct textual evidence, as Brunkhorst intends it: “A feeling of affinity must have connected him to Nietzsche, a consciousness of belonging to the same ‘monumental’ lineage of those whom the latter, in his second *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtung*, pathetically refers to as the great ones, the lonely ones of history.” (75).

Brunkhorst however acknowledges these problems in proving direct textual influence, especially considering the nature and difficulty of *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and adapts her inquiry to this problem. She thus also considers similarities during the process of production and reception of the work, ultimately pivoting on the role of Salomé. Psychological and biographical speculation is moreover problematically, but then again necessarily, advanced in order to explain Nietzschean ideas like the “Übermensch (92f).”

The themes considered, in which Rilke was most interested in are: friendship, Fernsten-Liebe as opposed to Nächstenliebe, love, religion, and loneliness. Brunkhorst circumscribes their function and her methodological choice thus:



Most obviously, as I have argued above, those passages may have functioned as projection screens or sounding boards, merely triggering or mirroring what was already there within him, unfinished and dormant until then. The experience of some of those *Zarathustra* passages may also have added genuinely new impulses to the psychic material out of which Rilke went on to create his poetry. A neat separation of these themes and topics from one another however proves almost impossible...Therefore, rather than progressing by topic, I shall examine selected passages (as representative of the respective *Zarathustra* book they belong to) singled out by Rilke as natural vantage points from which to embark on analyses of Rilke and Nietzsche’s treatments of their respective topics; for Rilke was of course not merely an interpreter as much as a productive transformer of Nietzsche’s thought. (76).

This comparison of themes is undertaken in the third part of the study. These thematic discussions are apt and, as important, also engage the female points of view in biographical—but also in thematic—contexts (Rilke’s marriage; Clara Modersohn-Becker’s comments; Salomé’s role and position). The question of influence however, it seems to me, is not confronted theoretically throughout the study, according to the methodological “reader-response”

approach. Brunkhorst discusses similarities and differences of ideas and vocabulary. If one looks for explications of modes of *Verwandtschaft* and *Verwandlung*, one ends up with formulations like “directly inspire” (104) or “testify to the kindredness in spirit of the two writers” (104).

It must be stated that the possibility to claim a direct influence, as Brunkhorst is able to do due to the copies of *Zarathustra* in Rilke’s estate, is already a crucial step forward in the scholarship on the relation between Rilke and Nietzsche. There remains work to do with regard to the explications of how this specific and complicated type of influence could be theorized. Motivic “reminiscence” (105), “analogies” (108), “proximity” (110), and semantic “correspondence” (105) are here the ultimate instances of influence. Sometimes, Nietzsche is considered to “anticipate” or “preempt” Rilke. Rilkean ideas on the contrary “recall” Nietzsche or “resound” (78) in Rilke.

The major indecision, or theoretical tension resulting from the attempt to prove direct textual influence as well as the modes of its adaptation while also acknowledging the need to consider biographical, psychological, and other contextual factors, i.e., the well argued fact that absence of Nietzsche’s name in Rilke’s correspondence with Salomé “is potentially more telling than silent” (66) in the context of the current intellectual and personal climate, is present throughout the remainder of the study. While sharpening our understanding of the existential and philosophical themes Rilke confronted poetically, the study sometimes runs the risk of essentializing Nietzsche’s work as well as of following Nietzsche’s assessments very closely. Finally, it should be noted that the book, while it is written in English, contains large parts of German quotations and German appendices.

The book is certainly an indispensable contribution to scholarship. It presents valuable new material and carefully discusses the possible psychological, biographical, and artistic correlations—influences—between Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and Rilke’s *oeuvre*. With regard to a clear methodological choice in order to confront the various modes of influence and textual transformation as crucial moments in the relationship between Nietzsche and Rilke, this study opens a fertile field for subsequent theoretical discussions.

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7 *Hyperion—review of ‘Verwandt-Verwandelt’. Nietzsche’s Presence in Rilke*

HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



A Selection of Poems in Translation

Translated by Mark Daniel Cohen

Hyperion—Volume II, issue 4, December 2007 **1**

Sils-Maria

Hier sass ich, wartend, wartend,—doch auf nichts,
Jenseits von Gut und Böse, bald des Lichts

Geniessend, bald des Schattens, ganz nur Spiel,
Ganz See, ganz Mittag, ganz Zeit ohne Ziel.
Da, plötzlich, Freundin! wurde eins zu zwei—
—Und Zarathustra ging an mir vorbei . . .

von „Anhang: Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei“ *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

Sils Maria

I sat here, biding, biding—but for nought,
Beyond good and evil, now the light

To savor, now the shade, all merely mime,
All lake, all midday, all untending time.
Then, friend! one turned to two, so suddenly—
—And Zarathustra sauntered beyond me. . .

From “Appendix: Songs of Prince Vogelfrei” *The Gay Science*

Nach neuen Meeren

Dorthin—will ich; und ich traue
Mir fortan und meinem Griff.
Offen liegt das Meer, in's Blaue
Treibt mein Genueser Schiff.

Alles glänzt mir neu und neuer,
Mittag schläft auf Raum und Zeit—:
Nur dein Auge—ungeheuer
Blickt mich's an, Unendlichkeit!

von „Anhang: Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei“ *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

Toward New Seas

That way—I will: and my assure
In me henceforth and in my seize.
The sea lies open, in azure
There drifts my ship, my Genoese.

All, new on new, shakes flame to me,
On space and time the midday sleeps—:
And but your eye—in monstrously
Stares at me! Infinity!

From “Appendix: Songs of Prince Vogelfrei” *The Gay Science*

An Goethe

Das Unvergängliche
Ist nur dein Gleichniss!
Gott der Verfängliche
Ist Dichter-Erschleichniss . . .

Welt-Rad, das rollende,
Streift Ziel auf Ziel:
Noth—nennt's der Grollende,
Der Narr nennt's—Spiel . . .

Welt-Spiel, das herrische,
Mischt Sein und Schein:—
Das Ewig-Närrische
Mischt uns—hinein! . . .

von „Anhang: Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei“ *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

[Cf. the last lines of the Second Part of *Faust*:

Chorus Mysticus:

Alles Vergängliche
Ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Unzulängliche,
Hier wird's Ereignis;
Das Unbeschreibliche,
Hier ist's getan;
Das Ewig-Weibliche
Zieht uns hinan.

—Goethe]

To Goethe

The intransiency
is but your imagery!
God's intrangency
is lyric trickery . . .

World rim, rolling all,
skimming aim to aim:
The must—the spited call,
Insane calls it—the game . . .

The game of worlds, immane,
Stains into seen and seem:—
The ever more inane
Stains into ever—we! . . .

From “Appendix: Songs of Prince Vogelfrei” *The Gay Science*

[Cf. the last lines of the Second Part of *Faust*:

Chorus Mysticus:

All that's transient
Is but in imagery;
The insufficient,
Here's occurrency;
Ineffable divine,
Here, it is done;
The Eternal Feminine
Draws us high upon.

—Goethe]

Ecce homo

Ja! Ich weiss, woher ich stamme!
Ungesättigt gleich der Flamme
Glühe und verzehr' ich mich.
Licht wird Alles, was ich fasse,
Kohle Alles, was ich lasse:
Flamme bin ich sicherlich.

von „,Scherz, List und Rache' Vorspiel in deutschen Reimen“
Die fröhliche Wissenschaft

Ecce homo

I know whence I originate!
Like a flame insatiate
I anneal me and consume.
Light grows all that I conceive,
Embers everything I leave:
Certainty is I am flame!

From "Joke, Cunning, and Revenge: Prelude in German Rhyme"
The Gay Science

Heraklitismus

Alles Glück auf Erden,
Freunde, giebt der Kampf!
Ja, um Freund zu werden,
Braucht es Pulverdampf!
Eins in Drein sind Freunde:
Brüder vor der Noth,
Gleiche vor dem Feinde,
Freie—vor dem Tod!

von „,Scherz, List und Rache' Vorspiel in deutschen Reimen“
Die fröhliche Wissenschaft

Heraclitean

All of earthly bliss,
Friends, it's war bestows!
Yes, for friends' enlist
Requires the rifle-smoke!
Friends but one in three:
Brothers 'fore distress,
Peers 'fore enemies,
Freedom—before Death!

From "Joke, Cunning, and Revenge: Prelude in German Rhyme"
The Gay Science

Unverzagt

Wo du stehst grab tief hinein!
Drunten ist die Quelle!
Lass die dunklen Männer schrein:
„Stets ist drunten—Hölle!”

von „ ‚Scherz, List und Rache‘ Vorspiel in deutschen Reimen”
Die fröhliche Wissenschaft

Undeterred

Where you stand so deeply mine!
Down beneath is well!
Let the dim of scowling whine:
“Down beneath’s but—Hell!”

From “Joke, Cunning, and Revenge: Prelude in German Rhyme”
The Gay Science

Ohne Neid

Ja, neidlos blickt er: und ihr ehrt ihm drum?
Er blickt sich nicht nach euren Ehren um;
Er hat des Adlers Auge für die Ferne,
Er sieht euch nicht!—er sieht nur Sterne, Sterne!

von „,Scherz, List und Rache' Vorspiel in deutschen Reimen“
Die fröhliche Wissenschaft

Unspited

Unspited eyes he, thus you homage him?
He eyes you not, for all you honor him;
With eagle's eyes, he pierces to the far,
He sees you not!—celestial eyes for stars!

From "Joke, Cunning, and Revenge: Prelude in German Rhyme"
The Gay Science

An der Brücke stand

An der Brücke stand
jüngst ich in brauner Nacht.
Fernher kam Gesang:
goldener Tropfen quoll's
über die zitternde Fläche weg.
Gondeln, Lichter, Musik—
trunken schwamm's in die Dämmerung hinaus . . .

Meine Seele, ein Saitenspiel,
sang sich, unsichtbar berührt,
heimlich ein Gondellied dazu,
zitternd vor bunter Seligkeit.
—Hörte Jemand ihr zu? . . .

von *Ecce Homo*, „Warum ich so klug bin,” § 7

And at the bridge I stood

And at the bridge I stood
of late, and brown of night.
A song weft from afar:
a drop of gold and whelmed
along the shimmered plane.
Gondolas, lights, and strains—
drunk it swam into the gloaming haze . . .

My soul, a lyre's plaint,
itself sang, struck unseen,
a hushed gondola air,
shone iridescent bliss.
—Had anyone have heard? . . .

From *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am so clever," § 7

Renati the King

A Play

by Gian DiDonna

Hyperion, Volume II, issue 4, December 2007

RENATI THE KING

MEMORIAE

RENATI · DESCARTES

RECONDITORIS · DOCTRINAE

LAVDE

ET · INGENII · SVBTILITATE

PRAECELLENTISSIMI

QVI · PRIMVS

A · RENOVATIS · IN · EVROPA

BONARVM · LITTERARVM · STVDIIS

RATIONIS · HVMANAE

IVRA

ACTIANAE

**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



RENATI THE KING

A Play

by Gian DiDonna

RENATI THE KING: A PHANTASMAGORIC COMEDY

introduction by Rainer J. Hanshe

The degree to which any of us can fulfill the Delphic Oracle's command is limited, but the work we create and give to the world is perhaps a testament to our (un)knowability. We live, or so we believe, through other things and on stage, through the lives of others. In his plays, writer Gian DiDonna presents a body of characters that, perhaps, are masks of him, revelations of that which cannot otherwise be revealed. In meditation, as we surrender to silence, what eludes us flickers forth without reserve from the projector of the unconscious. What though is manifested remains enigmatic. Are the multitudinous masks of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche not signs that they are even more unknowable, signs of the high degree their wisdom reached in knowing that the self is ultimately inexplicable? The mask of Dionysus reveals and conceals each of us; as we delude ourselves in thinking that we reveal something as we annul the veils, we are even more obscured. The veils remain, an infinite fold, where layers and layers and layers reveal nothing more and more nothing. Welcome to the spectacle.

For some time, DiDonna has been writing plays and working with various independent theater companies, several of whom produced his work Off-Off Broadway. Of recent, he has been working with LAByrinth Theater Company in New York City. His play *A Sinister Man* was featured in their 2007 Barn Series, a host of staged readings at New York City's Public Theater. In 2004, his urban drama *The Night Trombone* was featured in the same series, which included Jose Rivera's play about Che Guevara, *School of the Americas*. DiDonna's first play, *Bento* is a complex epic drama that concerns the life of Baruch Spinoza. It was a finalist at the 1999 Last Frontier New Play Lab Competition, which was sponsored by Edward Albee. Of recent, *Bento* was reconfigured as *The New Jerusalem*. *Renati the King* is an exploration of the final hours of Rene Descartes, who, while situated in the bowels of a military frigate in the dead of winter, is awaiting an appointment with the Queen of Sweden. If he is able to produce on behalf of the Queen a cure for melancholy, he will be

named the court philosopher of Sweden. In the play, Descartes' philosophy has been made corporeal, yet that corporeality is abnegated by Descartes despite his grand aspirations. Flesh has been given, not taken away, but Renati the King, as Descartes crowns himself, will refute flesh in honor of mind and construct a temple of reason that the world is to worship.

For Descartes, the mind was the stage of stages, a stage out of which the entire world erupted. As God supposedly created the world, Renati creates a world around him out of his mind, though not necessarily knowing it. The stage to which he aspires in *Renati the King* though is the grandest of all and it is and is not an illusion. It is the stage of history itself. At one moment in the play, after suffering stark privations for some time, Renati asks the soon to be ambassador to the Queen to sequester clothes for him from the costume house of her theater. The philosopher is thus not only a character in the play, but is to don the raiments of the theater. Theater functions as a place within the play, and Renati, if there is to be a coronation, is, he learns, to be crowned in the theater. What is history but a representation? Enacted on stage, the degree to which it is an invention and a performance is exacerbated, and the reality of the play is as histrionic as history.

The closest antecedent to *Renati the King*, or a play which it hearkens back to, is perhaps Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, wherein Socrates, the first philosopher to be made into a theatrical personage, is transformed into a dangerous buffoon. In *The Clouds*, it is not the poet who is dangerous, but the philosopher; it is not the poet who is a dreamer, but the philosopher who floats on clouds, mystifying the world with abstract and abstruse theories. DiDonna doesn't necessarily supplant or undermine philosophy with theater as did Aristophanes, but stages philosophy, mutating Descartes into as much of a buffoon. *Renati the King* is a comedic spectacle, a theater of ritual and of science where *hybris* is more dangerous than cyanide. It is a movement into the darkness. The dog heads that crown the stage like muted savage hieroglyphs are symbolic of the horror that consumes Renati. But like Richard Foreman's *Bad Boy Nietzsche*, this dramatization of a philosopher's end is also satiric, a phantasmagoric comedy that veers into the dizzying mania of absurdity yet, while absurd, is still rife with pathos. It is this amalgam of comedy, absurdity, and pathos that is a mark of the play's merit and a testament of its artistic value. It does not collapse into the bathetic, but expresses with true power and feeling the heightened reality of the philosopher's exalted moments. In its expression of his baseness, it is honest and unyielding and refuses to idealize its subject. *Renati the King* is the work of a vaunted imagination. The play is both kaleidoscopic and hallucinatory and in its imaginative transformation of such difficult material, DiDonna reveals sensitivity, depth, and intelligence. This is brave theatrical work that stands against the fashions of its time.

Since Plato, philosophers have been interested in or concerned with theater and its effect on the members of the polis. Socrates, or as we know him as a dramatic personage in Plato, found the poet a dangerous figure who had to be subdued. It was less that theater was to be banished from the polis and more that it was to be co-opted and transfigured by the philosopher. In the nineteenth century, philosophy became, in large part, increasingly 'theatrical'; that is to say, philosophy employed not only the language of theater in its discourse but the theater's mode of presentation, as well. The distance between theater and philosophy thus significantly diminished, and it has continued to. Sophocles is now as much an exemplary philosophic figure as Empedocles and it is Mt. Etna more than Athens that, fittingly so, is more the birthplace of philosophy. Increasingly, philosophers became dramatists of sorts and dramatists, from Ibsen to Strindberg, Durrenmatt, Genet and Beckett, became philosophers of a kind or wrote work concerned with philosophical problems. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are undoubtedly the two most prominent 'dramatic' or poetic philosophers. The multitudinous styles and the use of monologues or theatrical situations that Nietzsche employs to express his ideas, most famously with the dramatization of the death of God, reveal how deeply theatrical Nietzsche's philosophy is. Peter Sloterdijk's *Thinker on Stage* aptly renders the predominant aspect of Nietzsche's thought. Kierkegaard's complex and artful employment of pseudonyms—there are over 10—reveals an even richer and more adroit stylistic conception than Nietzsche's. His use of theatrical modes is as galvanizing as it is profound. The virtual explosion of 'theatrical philosophy' that occurs in the twentieth century, with its appropriation and enactment of drama, event, mask, and performance is born of the wombs of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

Renati the King is thus part of a long tradition. It is a theater of ritual, science, and philosophy. God is erased, and in his place, the image of the philosopher is erected. The philosopher however dies not on a cross to save man from guilt, but ventures into the abyss, veering towards madness, a crescent breaking an edge, and presents humanity with truths difficult to refute. The philosopher is the antithesis of the savior. He is man's hardest task master. He refuses man all comforts and instead compels man to strive to overcome delusions, such as the belief in God. The philosopher doesn't blind with his light like God; his luminosity is not the scintillating luminosity of the saint, which mystifies and transfixes. It is the illuminating light of the seer. Yet, that light is so unbearable, in its clarity, it too can destroy. Descartes though, or Renati the King, does not seek merely to supplant religion with reason but to himself stand as the new truth. It is anthropos refusing and simultaneously reinscribing anthropos. It is the human subject gone mad. In such an instance, Nietzsche's invocation that man must perish could not be more vital. The human must be overcome; man, as he said, must think *cosmically*, not anthropomorphically. It is only when such a dawn comes that we may have at last surmounted our

madness, if we are mad anymore. In *Renati the King*, we have a philosopher at the apex of his madness; we have a philosopher obsessed with—*reason*.

What follows is the first act of a two-act play. Until *Renati the King* is produced, the writer prefers not to reveal its full contents. *Hyperion* is publishing this work because of its engagement with philosophy, which is rare in art today, and because its aesthetic objectives concur with *Hyperion's* vision of art. Also, as stated earlier, it is an untimely work that is particularly daring for exploring subject matter of little interest to the predominantly consumerist world that is theater today. It brooks no compromises, intellectual, or otherwise, and in that is especially honorable, for it almost courts silence. Integrity however is greater than fame.

For those who wish to contact DiDonna about the play, he can be reached at "gian **AT** att **DOT** net".

On to the coronation of the king. . .

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

RENATI

A burly philosopher of middle age. He is nothing less than a highly charged operatic diva. To conceal baldness, he wears a tattered and blondish Restoration-style wig. He carries a sword on his hip; his trousers are green silk. His shirt is a brilliant gold chiffon and over it he wears the coat of a Dutch military officer.

HELENE

Dutch and in her forties. The mother of RENATI'S deceased daughter. Since having been deserted by RENATI, she has become a prostitute, and adopted a French accent.

The "AMBASSADOR"

Not yet quite France's Ambassador to Sweden, he is really a liaison between Renati and The Queen.

QUEEN-CHILD

The ghost of Renati's deceased daughter.

PLACE: What appears to be the bowels of a military frigate anchored off Goeteberg, Sweden.

TIME: Deep winter, 1650.

SET: A dark room with thick wood walls and a heavy wood door. There is a thick heavy table and one chair. A cylindrical wood burning stove glows dimly in the upstage left area. Downstage right sits a large trunk. A board mounted on another table upstage left contains four straps with buckles to restrain the victims of vivisection. A small statue of the Catholic Virgin looks down on it from a pedestal. In the upstage corner we find a sack and a sheet made of burlap. On the rear wall of the room is painted a large crucifix upon which we find not the entire body of the "Savior," but only the hands and feet and the head. The face is in ecstatic agony and the forehead has a hole burrowed through the front and center. A series of decapitated dog heads hang from a line that runs across the ceiling. A cradle sits at the foot of a chair.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE:

At Rise: The sound of waves lapping against the hull of the ship. The occasional blast of a cannon cracks and in the distance. The room is dimly illuminated. Sobbing is heard. A bolt lock feebly hangs from the door frame. A chair is wedged under the door handle. Renati kneels before a cradle. He is shivering, and soaked from head to toe. A wig sits on a bust upstage. It is in tatters.

RENATI:

(Over the cradle)

Oh, my adored one, what slumber moved me to leave you unattended? I sought only a morsel of sleep so that I might be restored to some semblance of civility, and this is my reward?

(To the heavens)

She was just a child! She was more than child! She was perfection!

(Weeping)

How does one repair perfection? Oh, my Francine.

(He reaches into the cradle)

Speak to papa. Please, say something.

From above a voice shouts the command: Fire! A canon blast follows. Renati is thrown by the force. Laughter from the raucous mob above.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Ambassador!!!! Why have you abandoned me? Why has the Queen abandoned me?

More laughter.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Stop laughing, you scoundrels. This would have been her daughter and when the Queen learns of it, she'll have you executed whether you're Swedes or not!

(Then,)

Oh, my sweet, sweet, Fannie.

He contemptuously turns to the mural of the crucified Savior behind him.

RENATI: (cont'd)

(Accusatory)

You! I hold you accountable! Do you hear me? I've tried to re-invent the world in your likeness!

RENATI:(cont'd)

Forged a philosophy whose sole aim has been to purge the body so as to elevate the mind . . . and this is how you treat your servant? Oh, what use is there in railing? Isn't it evident? What future can there be in your image when all that's left of it are hands and feet!

Renati turns from the Savior, closes his eyes and raises his arms high above his head. After several moments of visceral concentration, he begins the incantation.

RENATI: (cont'd)

In the beginning! In the beginning! In the beginning and . . . somewhere along the middle . . . God gave His only son as a sacrifice because he was too much of a coward to sacrifice himself!

Laughter commences from above. Renati pauses.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Silence, you vile fiends! It isn't funny! I hate you all you Christian drunkards!

Renati resumes the posture of incantation.

RENATI: (cont'd)

In the beginning! In the beginning! God . . . divided the light from the darkness and I say this is tantamount to him *cutting off his own leg*. And this is *absurd*. *But we believe it!*

More laughter. Renati is furious. He seizes a scrub brush from within a bucket and vigorously continues to erase the remnants of the Savior's image.

RENATI: (cont'd)

We are finished you and I! Do you hear me? You've had your "Anno Domini." I hereby displace you from the center of the universe. In your seat I posit the greatest contrivance since the Greeks invented the soul. I call it "the Cogito." No mere wafer of your lambness, I assure you, but a sword of fierceness! No longer shall men hunger for the salvation you've offered them. Behold I say! I

offer the salvation of reason! And when I have finished undermining you, I will remain standing as the only existing verity! I will have become the new truth and people will paint murals of me! Behold, I say! I have become the rational bridegroom and my victory will be a triumph of one mind over many, as yours was, Monsieur Gesu Cristo.

RENATI:(cont'd)

All will abandon themselves and follow me, but unlike you, I will live to see it and I will live to relish it!

*A canon explodes off stage. Renati is again thrown.
The dust settles.*

RENATI: (cont'd)

Your majesty? Your majesty?

*An echo is heard of Renati's last words. It fades.
Silence.*

RENATI: (cont'd)

She's gone, my dear Fannie. Everything . . . is gone. Your father has failed you again.

Voices are heard from above.

*Suddenly a door is heard opening above. The
sound of raucous noise pours out. More shouts.*

VOICE: (O.S.):

Stand away from me, I say! I told you not to provoke him. You know he's ill. How can you call yourselves Christians when you take such pleasure in torturing him?

*Renati has climbed the rear wall to look out
through the hole burrowed in the Savior's head.
The upstairs noises have subsided. The deck
door clangs shut. The sound of slow and clumsy
footsteps begin to move down a ladder. Vague
canons can still be heard in the distance.*

RENATI:

Fannie! Do you hear? It's the ambassador! Perhaps there is still hope! Perhaps I can still win the Queen's favor and save you!

He suddenly turns to the cradle.

RENATI: (cont'd)

What's that? How could I forget? I can't let the Ambassador see you.

VOICE: (O.S.)

Monsieur Renati!

He quickly takes the cradle to the trunk and opens the lid and places the cradle inside.

RENATI:

You'll be safe here, my child. Rest soundly. I swear, I won't let anyone take you.

Renati closes the lid. He buckles the leather straps.

The footsteps continue.

VOICE: (O.S.)

Monsieur, are you there? You must grant me entry.

Renati barks.

VOICE: (O.S.) (cont'd)

Monsieur Renati, it is imperative that I speak with you at once!

Renati draws his sword.

RENATI:

(Shouting to the ambassador)

I have an announcement, Ambassador! Be advised that for the moment I no longer consider you my representative! You come at your own peril! And so does anyone who may be flanking you. Do you hear my words? Today marks the beginning of a new epoch! The first day in the Year Zero in the calendar of Reason. And I am the Messiah of Reason! Do you accept me as your Lord and Messiah, Ambassador?

VOICE: (O.S.)

Monsieur, there have been complaints of a foul scent of decomposing flesh; of screeches; of dogs baying in agony. I must know what is happening! Please offer me entry!

Renati blows out the upstage candle and the light on the "Savior" dims. He quickly draws the chair out from under the door knob, and hides. As the hinges give way, the Ambassador slowly enters.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur? Where are you? Why is it so silent? Where are the dogs I brought you? Where are you?

(Silence)

Monsieur Renati?

(Silence)

Why aren't you answering me?

Renati growls.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

I don't find that amusing. Please come out from where you're hiding. The odor is intolerable. What have you done?

The Ambassador stumbles over an object.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Oh! Goodness, what was that? Is there an infestation of rats down here?

He stumbles over another object.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Oh, dear heaven! Mons—

Looking more closely.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

These aren't rats; they're dismembered parts! What abominable act have you committed? Where are you?

He stumbles and falls. Renati barks. The Ambassador leaps to his feet.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Oh, look at this! God save us! This is dreadful!

RENATI:

Not as dreadful as it is about to get.

THE AMBASSADOR:

What? Please show yourself, Monsieur. You told me your purpose with them was empirical. It seems you've only succeeded in butchering them. I hope you at least had the decency to spare Bonne-Bonne. Did you spare Bonne-Bonne?

The door slams closed. A match is lit. Renati lights a candle over the table. The string of hanging dog-parts becomes visible. The Ambassador is horrified.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

(Seeing the heads)

Oh, dear God! Oh, dear God!

RENATI:

Did you imagine I'd be content with the observation of mere animal behavior? Shame on you, Ambassador. One must endeavor the inner workings of nature. I desire causes, not effects!

The Ambassador crosses himself.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Dear God in heaven, forgive him. Forgive me! I must depart.

The Ambassador begins to backtrack.

RENATI:

You are not to venture another step. I've killed men who were once my friends in the fury of battle, and I won't hesitate to do it again!

THE AMBASSADOR:

But this is no battle. We are not at war.

RENATI:

Of course we are! We are always at war, are we not, Ambassador? Otherwise why would I need a sword. And why would you need to stow me down here. Because the enemy rages, Ambassador. You've heard the canons.

THE AMBASSADOR:

What canons?

RENATI:

Don't play fool with me!

THE AMBASSADOR:

I swear to you, I—

RENATI:

Silence! This is the turning of the world, Ambassador. This day; this night. And after this day, the world will never be the same again.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur. Please I must inquire. I really don't know what war you're referring to.

RENATI:

Of course you don't. Because you have become disloyal.

THE AMBASSADOR:

I really haven't, Mons—

RENATI:

Of course you have. You said that you would always announce your arrival by sounding your horn. You failed to do that. Take out your horn!

THE AMBASSADOR:

I don't have it.

RENATI:

Because this is an ambush, isn't it, Ambassador?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Not at all. I came in haste and simply forgot it.

RENATI:

You forgot it.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Sincerely.

RENATI:

To the center of the room, viper.

Renati moves the Ambassador toward the dog parts with the point of his sword.

THE AMBASSADOR:

No, please! Not the center. I can't bear it.

RENATI:

Do it or I'll make a corpse of you as well!

THE AMBASSADOR:

No! I won't! Not under Bonne-Bonne. Little little Bonne-Bonne. You swore you'd care for him!

RENATI:

I did. But the bugger had me suspicious. He had something to hide! I would call to him and he would turn away. Avoid contact! And you know how I insist on eye contact, Ambassador!

Renati pokes the back of Ambassador's legs with the sword's tip. Ambassador falls to his knees.

THE AMBASSADOR:

You're going to kill me, aren't you?

RENATI:

Why shouldn't I? You damn near well killed me. It's been nearly a fortnight since you attended me!

THE AMBASSADOR:

I can explain my lack of attendance—

RENATI:

I won't tolerate any more of your school boy excuses!

THE AMBASSADOR:

But I was ill. Deathly ill. That's why I didn't blow the horn. Because I cannot produce enough wind to fill the instrument.

RENATI:

You and I both know there's enough wind in you to blow this frigate back to Rotterdam in one breath!

(Pause)

Stop chirping about the dog. What's a dog in the end anyway? A random bundle of reflexes coordinated by Chance into something that defecates. Cutting them while they're dead does me no good.

(Looking up at the dog heads)

You know, Ambassador, I've looked in every cavity of their bodies, excavated every fold of flesh and under-flesh and found no indication of a purpose anywhere. No sign of . . .

Suddenly Ambassador's eyes widen.

THE AMBASSADOR:

(To himself)

No.

RENATI:

What is it, Ambassador?

THE AMBASSADOR:

I don't think I can I even bring myself to ask such a question. What have you done with . . . you know . . .

(Pause)

The innards?

Pause

RENATI:

What do you think I did? I ate them.

THE AMBASSADOR:

(Crying out)

Nooooooooo!!!!!!

RENATI:

It's your own fault. Two weeks without nourishment! Without wine! I require warmth in my liquids! I require meat! Salted meat!

*The Ambassador cries. Renati moves to him.
Sword at his throat.*

RENATI: (cont'd)

Compose yourself, woman.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Let me live. That's all I ask of you. Please let me live.

RENATI:

Perhaps I will. What's this garment strewn about your neck?

THE AMBASSADOR:

This? Nothing.

RENATI:

It's not nothing. How could it be? I'm looking right at it. Is it mink?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Mink? I sincerely doubt it.

RENATI:

(Touching it)

Of course it is. It is genuine mink.

Renati slaps the Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

No! No hitting. Please, Monsieur, if you'd like to wear it—

Renati slaps him again.

RENATI:

Have you noticed how blue my lips are? How stiff my fingers have grown? Have you seen my wig there on that makeshift bust? Have you acknowledged its sad condition? Do you know who gave that to me? It was a gift from the Stadtholder of Amsterdam. Do you recall what stature I held then? How far above other men I stood?

THE AMBASSADOR:

I do, Monsieur Renati. And you will be restored to that form, if you'd only believe in me.

RENATI:

I was on the brink of absolute glamour, a scholar who nearly became the token prince of Orange. Then the sky caved in, and it no longer became safe for a man to think freely. So I renewed my vows as a Catholic and practiced Reason clandestinely. That's when you came calling. A citizen of France promising to bring me into the light of the free world as a peace offering between France and her majesty the strumpet of Sweden.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, you really mustn't refer to her ladyship with such profanity if you expect—

RENATI:

I left Amsterdam and all it promised and put my faith in her, in you, and in France's alliance with Sweden! But where is France now? Where am I? And where is the strumpet?

THE AMBASSADOR:

I am France, Monsieur. You have not erred by following me! I have been by your side for twenty years—

RENATI:

Time is the villain, here, not the comforter, you idiot! Look at that wig! I've had that for twenty years! What use is it to me now?

Renati seizes the wig.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Take that, you traitor!

*Renati forces the wig under Ambassador's nose.
Ambassador covers his mouth in nausea.*

THE AMBASSADOR:

Oh, Monsieur! Take it away! I can't breathe!

RENATI:

I've grown consumptive from having had to endure the bitterness of the North, and you have the audacity to parade before me in the full pageantry of mink!

THE AMBASSADOR:

I must relieve myself!

RENATI:

Give me the mink!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Take it. Take all the clothes on my back.

*The Ambassador throws the cloak at Renati's feet.
Renati puts it on.*

RENATI:

You can relieve yourself in the far corner.

The Ambassador makes his way to a bucket and heaves.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Where did you ever find an article of such luxury on a tundra as godforsaken as Sweden?

THE AMBASSADOR:

I stole it.

The Ambassador vomits in the bucket.

RENATI:

You?

THE AMBASSADOR:

They treat Catholics miserably in this country. I'm lucky to be alive.

The Ambassador looks up. In the darkness he is able to make out what remains of the image of the "Savior".

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

God save me from this horror. Please.

Renati studies his mink.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

How could you? How could you have put a hole in the savior's head?

RENATI:

(Lost in his reflection)

I could be a king with a mink like this.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur!

RENATI:

Ha!

THE AMBASSADOR:

What have you done to the image of God!

RENATI:

What does it look like I've done to it!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Have you become godless, Monsieur?

RENATI:

I didn't choose it. The greatness was thrust upon me.

THE AMBASSADOR:

You told me you loved God. That's why you were chosen for this assignment. You are the only man in Europe, in the entire world, as far as anyone knows the world, who has been able to reconcile God with science.

RENATI:

I no longer have faith in either!

THE AMBASSADOR:

But you must!

RENATI:

I refuse to obey anyone but myself!

(Suddenly)

I want to know what you've done to her.

THE AMBASSADOR:

To whom?

RENATI:

The Queen, you idiot! You promised me a return visit to her court. You told me she awarded it. That was weeks ago. Since then, its become apparent that have you have gained license to her court, but not I. Would you care to explain that?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Surely I would, Monsieur. It's because I am a diplomat.

RENATI:

A diplomat? You're nothing more than a liaison; a broker!

Long silence.

THE AMBASSADOR:

You're right. I am ashamed that you still call me your Ambassador. I have failed you, Monsieur. This is the cruelest winter I've ever known. And to have left you trapped down here all these months. Do you know they're saying it's been the coldest winter on record?

RENATI:

They always say that.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But this time it's true. Icebergs have been found floating as far south as Venice. I have tried, Monsieur. You must believe me. But one cannot ask a Swede to sympathize with the Mediterranean constitution. They have no cognizance of what it means. You know what I've learned above all else, Monsieur?

RENATI:

Tell me.

THE AMBASSADOR:

That to be born a Swede is to like the cold. Hence, to like the cold is to be born a Swede.

RENATI:

That's what you've learned.

THE AMBASSADOR:

It took some time, but I came to accept it.

RENATI:

And is this your attempt at a theory, Ambassador?

THE AMBASSADOR:

No, no theory at all, Monsieur. It is Nature.

RENATI:

Nature?

Renati slaps the Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Why are you slapping me, Monsieur.

RENATI:

Tell me do you imagine a dog barks because it's in his nature?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Naturally. Why else—

Suddenly Renati lets out a vicious bark.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

And why are you barking at me, Monsieur?

Renati seizes the head of a dog from the string above and places it on his hand like a puppet. He barks viciously and snaps at Ambassador with the dog's teeth.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Monsieur, what do you think you're doing!

He barks loudly and sharply.

RENATI:

Am I a dog, Ambassador? Do you think I bark because of my Nature? No, on the contrary. I bark because I have a motive to bark! I bark because you are an imbecile!

Renati flings the dog's head at Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Damn you, Monsieur!

RENATI:

What did you say?

THE AMBASSADOR:

I said, damn you! And damn you again! This is the line! The charade is over! The game has ended! It is time you came to your senses!

RENATI:

(Desperate)

Why must the burden of sensibility always be put on me when it is you who treat me so insensibly?

THE AMBASSADOR:

If you had only done the one thing you were summoned here to do, all would have been well by now. It was your duty to find a cure for Sweden's melancholia. Her majesty expects you to unveil your findings at the inauguration tomorrow. What have you to show for it?

RENATI:

Inauguration? What inauguration?

THE AMBASSADOR:

The inauguration of her new Royal Theatre. It is there, on a stage before her entire court, that she wants to name you the court philosopher of Sweden.

RENATI:

In a theatre?

THE AMBASSADOR:

A Royal Theatre.

RENATI:

This is unacceptable.

THE AMBASSADOR:

What is unacceptable is that she expects you to arrive with the cure in hand and you have not found a cure! France is counting on you. But in all this time, have you found the cure, Monsieur? No, of course not! You ask me to provide you with dogs so that you might observe the mechanics of their behavior, and what have you done with them? You asked me to furnish you with various clocks so that you might coordinate the mechanics of time with their animal behavior, and what has become of those clocks? Sweden's melancholia, Monsieur! It was the reason you were brought here. It was the cornerstone of my contract with the Queen.

RENATI:

Perhaps I should be cast as her court jester? Perhaps I am a jester to all humanity.

THE AMBASSADOR:

What on earth do you mean?

RENATI:

The world is plagued with disease and malnourishment and the bitch has fallen into the stupor of Art? Doesn't she know that there's only one theater of any real significance? If she wants to see Art, I'll show her Art! I'll show her the palpitating performance of the human body! I'll cut my own open if it brings her back to her senses!

(Pause)

You haven't had a conversion too, have you, Ambassador? Please don't tell me you're planning to return to France as an agent of theatrical talent?

THE AMBASSADOR:

France is the last place in the world I'd seek theatrical talent.

Suddenly Renati let's out a violent scream. Then, laughter explodes from above.

RENATI:

Do you hear them, Ambassador! Do you see how incessant they are in their mockery of me!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Who?

RENATI:

Them! They're merciless in their antagonism!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur?

RENATI:

What?

(Silence)

What!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Nothing.

RENATI:

Oh! I've had enough of this! I want her leg returned to me, Ambassador! Do you understand! I want it brought to me now!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Leg? Who's leg! What are you talking about?

RENATI:

My daughter's leg! My daughter's dismembered leg! They broke in here and tore it from her body! Do you see how they jarred the slide-bolt from the door frame!

THE AMBASSADOR:

What in heaven are you suggesting? Have you smuggled a child in this dungeon while I was away, Monsieur?

RENATI:

I am not a smuggler.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Then what?

RENATI:

She was birthed here.

THE AMBASSADOR:

You've done it, haven't you? You've been frequenting prostitutes! No wonder the Queen is skeptical.

RENATI:

Of what?

The Ambassador is silent. The Ambassador goes to the door.

RENATI: (cont'd)

What do you think you're doing, Ambassador? You're not leaving here alive. Not until you deliver me to her.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur Renati. You are in no condition to be brought before her.

RENATI:

Don't you think I know that. How could I when I haven't had a bath in six months? But I care nothing for that, Ambassador. I want to know what you're going to do about my daughter.

Silence.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Why aren't you answering me?

(Then,)

Ambassador?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, I'm afraid to say, that you have lost your mind. Now I think you should put away the sword and listen to me.

RENATI:

But—

THE AMBASSADOR:

But nothing. Put it down, Monsieur.

RENATI:

So you're not going to save her? You're going to let my daughter die?

THE AMBASSADOR:

I'm afraid to inform you, Monsieur, that you have no daughter.

RENATI:

That's not true. Not true at all, Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Then why haven't we heard a peep from her. I'd imagine a child missing a leg would be in horrible pain, no? That does seem reasonable, doesn't it?

RENATI:

She's sleeping.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Sleeping?

RENATI:

In that trunk over there.

The Ambassador suddenly seems concerned.

RENATI: (cont'd)

I hid her from you because I didn't know if I could trust you.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Why do I get the feeling you're not jesting?

RENATI:

Because I'm not. I wouldn't jest about the welfare of my own child.

The Ambassador fears the worse. He looks about the room and struggles for some semblance of sanity.

THE AMBASSADOR:

I see.

RENATI:

Would you like to meet her, Ambassador?

Silence.

THE AMBASSADOR:

I'm sorry to be so frank with you, Monsieur, but you are not of fit mind.

RENATI:

Nonsense. I am the only sane person alive. Now, if you want to meet her, and you are willing to care for her, then stand away from the door. Stand away from the door, or I will kill you.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But Monsieur, if this child is missing a leg, she must be taken ashore to receive proper treatment.

RENATI:

I will not entrust her life to those barbarians. And frankly, I don't see how you could either, when I've just finished telling you they were the ones who brutalized her.

Renati takes his sword from where it has been resting.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Withdraw from the door, Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But what good is living if a child dies in my service?

Renati puts the sword under Ambassador's chin.

RENATI:

Step away.

THE AMBASSADOR:

So, you say she's been in that trunk the entire time?

RENATI:

Safe and sound.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Very well. Away from the door I go.

The Ambassador moves away from the door. Renati blocks it with a chair, then seizes the Ambassador and forces him to the trunk.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Whatever it is I'm about to witness, I fear the end has come.

Renati opens the trunk. The Ambassador looks in, stunned.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Oh. Oh.

RENATI:

What do you have to say for yourself, Ambassador? Aren't you ashamed?

Silence. Ambassador looks at the trunk, then to Renati, then back to the trunk.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Do you believe me now? Her cries cut through the night like a rapier. Thank goodness she's resting peacefully now. To think the libidinous gnome is off frolicking in the theatre while her own daughter suffers at the hands of her loyal servants!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, did you say "her" own daughter?

RENATI:

That's correct, Ambassador. You want to know who's complied in this child's procreation? I therefore will name her. This child whom you see before you was born of my affections for the Queen.

Pause

THE AMBASSADOR:

And by that I take it you mean the Queen whom I serve, Monsieur?

RENATI:

None other than the illustrious vixen herself. Behold her daughter, Ambassador. Princess Francine.

Renati lifts "Francine" from within the trunk. We see for the first time that "she" is a robot composed of a clock face with pendulums for arms and legs. Of course, there is the exception of the one "missing" leg. She wears a bonnet and a pretty dress that is soaked.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Francine.

RENATI:

Fannie is also acceptable. As is Frankie. You'll have to forgive me for not telling you sooner, but I had no choice. I promised the Queen no one would know until the time was appropriate. But now, circumstances of life and death have forced my hand.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, do you want to suggest that the Queen knows about .

RENATI:

Francine. Don't let me have to remind you of her name again, Ambassador. The child cannot endure any further insults.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Very well. Francine. You're suggesting the Queen knows of her.

RENATI:

Of course. Haven't I made it clear that the trollop is her mother? The truth is, I've been in love with the bitch for quite some time now. And she with me. Why she's decided to take on this air of indifference is beyond my comprehension.

(Quickly)

From my very first correspondence with her ladyship, the voracious tart wanted nothing more than to be tutored in the language of my New Philosophy, which concerns itself not with the skepticism so many associate to my writings, but with that ephemeral mystery known as Love.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Love?

RENATI:

If you don't believe me, I encourage you to ask her majesty about the treatise I left in her care during my first and only meeting with her three months ago. A treatise that was written expressly for her own person in the spirit of the amorous love and dedication she has inspired in me. Let her show you how at the top of every page I painted the image of my favorite flower: a tulip called The Queen of Night because of its dark purple hue. Some might call this coincidence, since it seems obvious that as the Queen of a country steeped in perpetual night for six months of the year, no other flower could be named after her. But I prefer to call it destiny, Ambassador. And this child is the fruit of destiny. This child was conceived of our only meeting, and it was during that rendezvous that her majesty asked that I keep it secret, until it might be safe

to announce the arrival of our love-child to the world. You know how Christians feel about the concept of the love-child, don't you Ambassador?

(Quick Beat)

But now seeing that the salacious doxy has found it less than convenient to invite us to her court, I have no other choice but to make Fannie public knowledge.

Renati lifts the android's dress.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Do you see the gaping hole in her hip socket? That's where her leg used to be!

THE AMBASSADOR:

I assure you Monsieur, it will be returned to her. Yes, absolutely. In fact, I'll make my way to the deck right now and—

RENATI:

Stay right here, Ambassador. You're not going anywhere until you've apologized.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Apologized, Monsieur?

RENATI:

For insulting her. With that judgmental stare.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But I don't think I've been in any way—

RENATI:

I've been watching you and you've been despicable, Ambassador. Your eye boils with judgment.

THE AMBASSADOR:

I wasn't aware of it, but if you say so. Very well. I'll apologize and then I'll be on my way to make sure her leg is returned.

(Pause)

Dearest . . .

Ambassador has forgotten her name.

RENATI:

Francine. Her name is Francine.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Yes, it is. Francine, I apologize for staring at you with so much . . . judgment.

RENATI:

Good.

THE AMBASSADOR:

May I go inquire about her leg now, Monsieur? The child must really be in terrible pain.

RENATI:

No.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But—

RENATI:

I want the harlot to pay, Ambassador! I want her to sweat under the weight of my body. I want to—

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur! Please! You're talking about a lady who possesses a chastity of the highest order. This is a known fact across the continent.

RENATI:

For heaven's sake, do you really believe that the tramp is still the virgin so many believe her to be?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Well, obviously not, if she's given you a daughter.

RENATI:

Even so! Do you think it's possible, that some semblance of virginity could still be maintained in a woman who has delivered a child?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Well, I suppose all Queens are virgins in reputation—

RENATI:

I'm not referring to reputation, Ambassador. I'm referring to carnal virginity.

THE AMBASSADOR:

You do realize that many of history's alleged virgins often had hidden passage ways, making entrance to their "chambers" not entirely inconceivable.

RENATI:

I can assure you she has hidden entrance ways just about everywhere, Ambassador. Everywhere, except where it matters most.

THE AMBASSADOR:

And where are you suggesting that might be, Monsieur?

RENATI:

Dear Ambassador, despite what so many believe, the profligate has been penetrated. Ad nauseum. But unfortunately not in the orifice she so desires. The Queen has been cursed with a nondescript genitalia, a covering also known as a caul, that has rendered whatever opening there is, completely inaccessible. The strumpet has been sealed from birth, Ambassador. Sealed by the hand of God for a greater purpose.

THE AMBASSADOR:

And how do you know this, Monsieur?

RENATI:

Because I saw it.

THE AMBASSADOR:

You saw it?

RENATI:

With my own eyes.

(Beat)

I even touched it.

THE AMBASSADOR:

I am amazed.

RENATI:

You should be, Ambassador. Yes, in one sense, it is true that I have been summoned to Sweden to cure her melancholia. But beneath the artifice of that appearance, another kind of work has been undertaken and accomplished. My real work. My life's purpose. Ambassador, I have made it possible for her majesty to breed a child when the greatest physicians in Sweden had convinced her it would never happen. When I came to her, she was a broken woman. Broken and barren and in need of . . . fruition. And I gave her "fruition." Yes, over the course of one short meeting, our bodies came together and through that coming together not only did I transform her, but I also transformed the future of the entire world. My dear Ambassador, in that brief

exchange between myself and the Queen of Sweden, I made it possible for her to bear . . . an heir. And Francine is as much my daughter as she is hers.

(Pause)

The time has come for you to honor the princess of Sweden. Kiss her, Ambassador. Kiss Francine.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But I couldn't permit myself to . . . I am not worthy—

RENATI:

What you don't seem to realize is that by denying little Fannie you also deny someone else. Someone much more significant and unforgiving.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, the child is lovely, but I am sure the Queen will understand why I had to forego this blessed—

RENATI:

The Queen is nothing compared to the One of whom I speak.

THE AMBASSADOR:

The One? Which One?

RENATI:

Him.

Renati points to the image of the Savior on the back wall.

RENATI: (cont'd)

You have denied the Savior.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But how? She's . . .

RENATI:

She's what, Ambassador?

THE AMBASSADOR:

It's her artificiality. She's constructed so . . . mechanically.

RENATI:

And you find this quality morally troubling, Ambassador?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, is this act not blasphemy? Aren't you taking credit for creating what only the Lord can endeavor.

RENATI:

Isn't that what every Christian claims they're doing, Ambassador? "The Lord's charity? God's work?" Puh!

(Beat)

By suggesting that she's mechanical you have paid her the highest compliment. Nature is a machine that operates as a series of causes and effects. And the body too is a series of causes and effects. One thing connected to another, and moved by the catalyst that precedes it. I am only doing what my nature was designed to do, and that is to create more life. To be the cause, not only of an effect, but of a more excellent effect! To propagate with the purity of my masculine principle. To propagate with the intellect. I have merely imitated God's will. Is this blasphemous? I have imitated the Nature that He created. Isn't that what the church asks of us? To imitate the Lord? You wouldn't want people to think you're a heretic, do you Ambassador?

(Long Pause)

Well then . . . it seems you have no other choice . . .

Renati holds the android before Ambassador.

RENATI: (cont'd)

. . . for in kissing Fannie you acknowledge her not only as an act of divine grace, but as my own offspring. And what greater reward is there in life than for a man to become a father.

Quite reluctantly, the Ambassador kisses the android. He then turns before the image of the Savior, genuflects and crosses himself.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Isn't that better now? In fact, since you are the first to have seen her, Ambassador and the first to have in a sense, baptized her with a kiss, I wish to proclaim you her uncle. Do you accept the Christian responsibility?

Pause

THE AMBASSADOR:

Of course. How could I refuse?

Renati talks to the android.

RENATI:

(To Francine)

What, my dear? Oh, I know your clothes are still dreadfully wet, but Papa cannot stoke the embers for you until your godfather supplies us with more wood for the fire.

(Pause)

Oh, and what's that?

(Pause)

You say that in the meantime you wonder if the Ambassador will let us keep this plush garment so you can use it as a blanket to keep you warm? Well I'm sure your good Christian uncle wouldn't mind making such a small sacrifice. After all, he is fortunate enough to be blessed with two legs that enable him to move closer to a fire when he grows cold.

Ambassador nods in agreement. Renati removes the cape from around his waist and cloaks the android. He sings.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Fannie, Fannie, oh, my dear dear, Fannie, Were man more enlightened, At ease with the art of science, Then he might be less frightened, And I might have the license . . .

Renati moves to a corner where he lifts a small statue of the Catholic Virgin from a mantle and kisses it.

Then he has Francine kiss it too. He replaces the statue. Then brings Francine to her cradle and lays her to sleep.

RENATI: (cont'd)

(To Ambassador)

She's sleeping. The little darling child. And I'm certain once you have returned her leg, she will be even more content. You do promise to have her leg returned to us, don't you?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Oh, absolutely.

RENATI:

Good. Oh, yes, and the next time you find yourself in the vicinity of the costume store-house at the Royal Theatre, would you mind selecting a few articles of clothing on my behalf, so that I have something new to wear when I

meet her ladyship? Perhaps an orange blouse-shirt. And a purple pantaloons.

Ambassador nods again.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Very well. And now for the moment of deliverance, Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Is there more?

RENATI:

In fact there is.

Renati goes to a corner and brings an object wrapped in burlap to the table.

RENATI: (cont'd)

Ambassador, I present it to you!

THE AMBASSADOR:

And what is it that you are presenting me now, Monsieur?

RENATI:

The solution to Sweden's melancholia. And the vehicle to your official Ambassadorship.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Have you really discovered a cure?

RENATI:

Do you really imagine I would have let myself endure this much depravity in vain, Ambassador?

Renati unravels the burlap.

THE AMBASSADOR:

But this looks like a jar of capers?

RENATI:

Hardly. Though I must say a jar of capers would be delectable at this moment.

THE AMBASSADOR:

(The jar)
May I?

RENATI:

You're too hasty, Ambassador. Before I can place these hosts in your possession, I must first require that you go to the Queen and explain to her that what she has ordered me to do, I have accomplished. You will tell her, however, that unless she summons me to her court immediately, her reputation, her "virgin" reputation, that rests so dearly in my hands, is about to slip between my fingers into this puddle of urine wherein I presently stand.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, you're not thinking to . . .

RENATI:

I will out the strumpet if she doesn't bring me ashore!

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur, I cannot threaten the Queen of Sweden.

RENATI:

In this jar I possess the cure to Sweden's melancholia.

(Cordially)

Tell her I said she should forget the theater. Tell her I have devised a stage greater than any she could have imagined. Her stage shall be History itself, Ambassador, and she shall be deemed its second virgin. The Host of The New Immaculate Conception. And as the child's father it only seems fitting that I should be named King!

Renati opens the jar.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Oh, come now, Monsieur. How could you ever be named King when you know you weren't born of royal blood? The most you could ever hope for is to be named her majesty's Royal Consort.

RENATI:

Would that give me the same rights as a King?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Well, yes, but—

RENATI:

And would I be permitted to wear a crown?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Monsieur—

RENATI:

Would I be permitted to sit on the throne beside her?

THE AMBASSADOR:

Many of history's consorts have.

RENATI:

Then I accept the role of consort. Offer that as my compromise. I have kept my end of the bargain, Ambassador, now you must deliver yours.

Renati reaches into the jar and takes a "caper." He holds it up to the light as he speaks.

RENATI: (cont'd)

(Pure Pomp)

As Sovereign, no one will ever be able to accuse me of heresy again. I would stand as close to God as any Pope. He would have no advantage over me. My army would be as great as his. My title as great. My moral standing equally as great. Yes, the more I think back on my life, the more certain I feel that I am destined for a kind of secular sainthood. As Saint Renati of Sweden, Amsterdam, and Bohemia combined, I will relieve Saint Peter of his station as the guardian to the gates of heaven. From my position, I will raise a Pantheon of Saints in the name of Reason. And lastly, you will no longer be a mere liaison, for I will surely make you a full-fledged Ambassador, Ambassador.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Oh!

Renati holds the "caper" up to Ambassador.

RENATI:

Ambassador, behold the remedy to Sweden's melancholia. No, not a caper, but something of much greater alchemical potential.

THE AMBASSADOR:

What is it?

RENATI:

The pineal gland.

THE AMBASSADOR:

The pineal gland?

RENATI:

It's an organ located deep in the center of the brain. About the size of a green pea.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Brain! But who's brain?

Renati points at the many hanging dog heads.

THE AMBASSADOR: (cont'd)

Are each of these—

RENATI:

Every one of them.

Renati tosses a pineal gland into his mouth.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Good heavens! Are you sure you can do that, Monsieur?

RENATI:

Of course. How do you think I manage to keep my wits under such desperate conditions? Alchemy, my friend. Alchemy!

Renati produces another.

RENATI: (cont'd)

In this organ, my dear Ambassador, I have ventured upon the greatest miracle ever known to scientific inquiry. For this is the vessel Galen coined "the seat of the soul." Or, if I may venture to say so. . . the juncture where the two worlds meet.

THE AMBASSADOR:

The "two worlds," Monsieur? What two worlds are you speaking of?

RENATI:

The only worlds of any consequence, Ambassador.

Renati raises the jar in the air as if it were a communion host.

RENATI: (cont'd)

The divine world and the material world. The mind . . . and the body!

A footlight bathes Renati in red. He holds the jar up as high as he can, then brings it down to the level of his heart. Ambassador kneels.

RENATI: (cont'd)

(Chanting)

In the beginning . . . in the beginning . . . and somewhere near the middle . . . God sent his only son our Savior in carnal form . . . to save us from that form. And in his flesh was housed a soul. A soul that was purified of all things material, a soul that could not be blemished by anything sentient. In order for God to do that, a transmutation had to occur. A transmutation of the soul into the body. And so we say "Amen."

THE AMBASSADOR:

Amen.

RENATI:

We say "Amen" because in the blessed sacrament of Communion, the Savior's soul is transmuted into the wafer of bread and when we eat it, we eat from the Savior and we eat from the soul of the Savior which is God's eternal soul. And as the soul is materialized in the sacrament, so the soul becomes flesh in the body, embraced intimately within the organ I hold before me.

The sound of a clock bell begins to chime, marking time.

RENATI: (cont'd)

And through this organ, the soul is able to flood the body with fluids of rational purification. Through the body the fluids found in this little morsel cleanse us, purify us, and lift us, lift us, lift us into the joy of everlasting happiness. Lift us, lift us, lift us, in the name of the Father-mind, and of the Son-the body, and in the name of the Spirit-Soul.

Renati takes another pineal gland, tosses it in his mouth, chews it, swallows it, wipes his mouth and waits.

The Ambassador says nothing. Renati looks at him. The Ambassador acknowledges him.

THE AMBASSADOR:

Oh. Amen, Monsieur. Amen.

RENATI:

Aaaameeeen!

*SLOW FADE TO:
BLACK OUT.*

END OF ACT ONE

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RENATI

THE KING

MEMORIAE

RENATI DESCARTES

RECONDITORIS DOCTRINAE

LAVDE

ET INGENII SVBTLITATE

PRAECELLENTISSIMI

QVI PRIMVS

A RENOVATIS IN RVROPA

HONORVM LITTEARVM SVBDS

RATIONIS HVMANAE

IVRA

SALVA FIDEI CHRISTIANAE

AUTORITATE

VINDICAVIT ET ASSERVIT

NVNC

VERITATIS

SVAM VNICE COLVIT

CONSPECTV

PHVITVRA