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Violent Embrace

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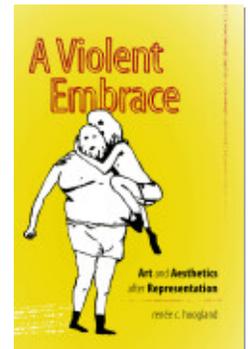
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We live with a particular image of thought, that is to say, before we begin to think, we have a vague idea of what it means to think, its means and ends. And then someone comes along and proposes another idea, a whole other image. . . . From then on, thought is no longer carried on by a voluntary self, but by involuntary forces, the “effects” of machines. . . .

Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands*

INTRODUCTION

visuality, cultural literacy, and the affective turn

And so it goes. With individual thinkers, as much as with movements, or indeed with moods in thinking itself. While often dismissed as mere fads or trends that one may or may not resist, shifts or “turns” in critical thinking happen with a certain irregularity, marking emergent moods that allow for (or that enforce) a “whole other image” of thought. This book finds its beginnings in the operations of such involuntary forces, in emergent configurations of critical moods marking the first decades of the twenty-first century. As such, it inscribes itself at various intersections of current modes of thought that follow in the wake of the “linguistic turn,” with its focus on the representational and signifiatory functions of art and literature, as well as of the “cultural turn” in its near-exclusive attention to the constitutive role of cultural processes and systems of signification in the production of the meanings of social realities, in the construction of identities, and in the definition of values and beliefs. My focus, therefore, is on cultural practices as forms of making and doing, as involuntary forces themselves, with their own immediacy, materiality, and vitality.

As the book’s title, *A Violent Embrace*, suggests, being carried along by involuntary forces is not necessarily a pleasant or a reassuring experience. It is, however, an interesting one. Interest, from the Latin verb *inter-esse*, meaning literally “to be in-between,” is a kind of love. Love, in relation to works of art—and between

other entities, animate and inanimate—is about being in-between. It has to do with a willingness—even if, paradoxically, an involuntary form of willingness—to be taken out of what one considers to be one’s self, to encounter that which is other. To invest one’s interest in a work of art is to open oneself up to its potentially deregulating power. Embracing a work of art is being embraced by it. It is an engagement of both action and passion, at once active and passive, and does not so much dissolve the distinction between self and other, between subject and object, as it marks the moment of an affective encounter: the observing subject being affected by the perceived object as much as the object is affected, informed by the subjective perception. My passionate investment, my interest, in this book is the aesthetic encounter in itself as a form of making and doing, qua activity. Perhaps incongruously, its main concern is therefore with what is ostensibly untouchable, yet embodied: the embodying embrace of various forms of primarily visual art. Since such “embraces” are dynamic, contingent, and mostly unpredictable affairs that are, moreover, ambivalent in their effects, the project of the book is by necessity largely theoretical and/or philosophical in nature.

Central in the chapters that follow is the operation (functioning, working, performance, action) of visual art beyond the traditional terms of semiotics and hermeneutics. Instead of asking questions about the symbolic meaning or the underlying “truth” of a work of art, I am primarily concerned with the actual “work” that a work of art, intentionally or not, voluntarily or not, does in the world in which I encounter it. Why and how does an abstract painting move me to tears? Or, on a less personal level, why do some randomly reproduced cartoons of the prophet Muhammad generate worldwide political outrage? What, in other words, is the compelling force of visual images, even—or especially—if they are nonfigurative, repulsive, or downright “ugly”?

Rather than describing, analyzing, and interpreting individual artworks, my approach to art in this book is to (re)turn to the question of aesthetics as, first, a question of feeling. We see images rather than read them. Aesthesis, in the original sense of feeling, sensation, or perception, therefore marks an affective experience. It follows that the aesthetic encounter constitutes an event that only obtains on the level of actualization. Such moments of affective actualization, it will be clear, do not occur twice, cannot be repeated, and are hard if not impossible to capture in language. In order nonetheless to try and find a way to think and write about art in a nonrepresentational, postformalist, and postdeconstructive manner, I have worked into some of the chapters that follow a kind of “retelling” of a specific artistic event. These “retellings” do not serve to explain what a certain work of art means or how and why it is significant. The main purpose is to place such events in the context of recent interventions in post-Deleuzian aesthetic theory

and to offer a glimpse at the aesthetic encounter as a potentially disruptive, if not violent, force field with material, political, and practical consequences.

Assuming the primacy of affect in the experience and in the “event” of art (while taking into account that whatever is defined as “art” is subject to both historical and cross-cultural variation), the guiding question in each of the chapters is the way art affects us, not only emotionally and/or cognitively, but also, if not primarily, in our material, embodied being. Before I say more about the chosen approach to art in this book, let me dwell for a moment on the “turn to affect” more generally and on the “machines” that have carried me toward this “image of thought” in trying to think about the aesthetic, one of which is firmly located in my teaching practice in cultural studies.

In these so-called posttheoretical times, the turn away from “high theory” often implies a return to notions of experiment and experience, as well as a renewed emphasis on motion and becoming, on actualization and expression, and a concurrent focus on process, sensation, and indeed on affect. Welcomed by some as a “surge of interest in affect, feeling, wonder, and enchantment,”¹ and dismissed by others as a premature abandonment of the attempt to develop “generally applicable” models of thought in favor of the “unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky,”² it seems clear that the “fast-changing conditions” of our times, the “transformations, metamorphoses, mutations and processes of change” that Rosi Braidotti presciently—or perhaps not so presciently—identified in 2002 as the “one constant” at the “dawn of the third millennium,”³ have not left the fields of art criticism and theory, nor that of cultural studies more generally, unaffected.

The invocation of affect, or the “affective turn,” has occasionally been hailed, as Clare Hemmings skeptically remarks, as the “privileged ‘way out’ of the perceived impasse in cultural studies.”⁴ As such it has, quite puzzlingly, not only led to a certain revaluation of, if not at times a retrenchment into, disciplinary domains, but also to an all-too-eager rejection of the transdisciplinary projects of poststructuralism and deconstruction, as well as of attendant minority studies, such as feminist, critical race, and queer theory. But the new millennium has also called into being the relatively new, fundamentally interdisciplinary, and as yet emergent field of visual studies, alternately called image studies, or simply visual culture. If visual culture can be described as a “postdisciplinary” field of study organized around the problem of visibility in its many manifestations, guises, and social effects,⁵ the simultaneous coming into prominence of the problem of affect—post deconstruction—may not be so much a coincidence as an overdetermined inescapability: the effect of “machines” generating a “whole other image of thought.” My purpose in this introduction is therefore not only to explore the significance of currently circulating notions of affect for the study of

visual culture, but also the joint emergence of these two buzzwords in the wider realm of critical theorizing across the humanities and social sciences.

But let me be clear about my investment in this debate. If the affective turn can be maintained also to permeate the field of visual culture, the question remains whether a postideological perspective, an approach of visibility beyond representation—which is to say an affirmative rather than a merely negative mode of critique—may prove helpful in a liberatory critical practice of visual *culture*, especially if such a posttheoretical critique is undertaken from a politically engaged “minority” position. While I am weary of relatively uninformed embraces of the affective turn, particularly if, as Hemmings makes poignantly clear, such a redirection of critical focus is accompanied by a knee-jerk rejection of what some players in the field consider traditional or even old-fashioned poststructuralist critical analyses,⁶ my observations will nonetheless serve to suggest why the turn to affect may not only prove helpful, but might be key to effective postideological critiques of visual cultural production, especially in its increasingly multimedia or cross-media manifestations.

The reason I became interested in exploring these issues is in effect twofold. First, a few years ago, I found my research concerns expand from the function of fantasy and, in its cultural expression, of artistic production, in the ways we learn to do and be our bodies, that is to say, in processes of corporeality to include the interrelations between aesthetics and ethics. This forced me to realize that I was no longer exactly thinking within the theoretical frameworks that for several years had constituted the basis of my teaching practice.⁷ If my formerly thoroughly poststructuralist and deconstructive framework for cultural analysis no longer satisfied my scholarly needs, how could I justify my reliance upon such frameworks in trying to help my students to become the critical readers of their cultural contexts I hoped they would? Clearly, I had to reconsider the use and recommendation of theoretical tools that did not fulfill their purpose, both inside and outside the classroom. Second, an experience that even more directly relates to my life as a professor at a large, urban, public university, was a growing dissatisfaction on my own and on my students’ part with the critical explanations and analytical tools offered by available textbooks on the newly emerging visual culture market. Both the increasing discrepancy between my changing scholarly perspective and the equally shifting intellectual demands of undergraduate students urged me to reflect upon the affective turn and to take in both its critical and pedagogical implications. To clarify the latter, let me single out a recent textbook often used in undergraduate cultural, media, and visual studies classes, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, jointly authored by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, first published by Oxford University Press in 2001 and currently in its second edition.⁸

According to the publishers' blurb, *Practices of Looking* comprises a "comprehensive and engaging introduction to visual culture," providing an "overview of a range of theories about how we understand visual media and how we use images to express ourselves, to communicate, to experience pleasure, and to learn." Up to date in their selection of visual culture, including paintings, prints, photographs, film, television, video, advertisements, news images, the Internet, digital images, and science images, Sturken and Cartwright do an admirable job exploring how images gain meaning in different cultural arenas, how they travel cross-nationally and cross-culturally, and in assessing how visual culture forms an integral and important aspect of our lives, and they analyze specific images in relation to such issues as desire, power, the gaze, bodies, sexuality, ethnicity. They furthermore discuss visual culture in the context of different methodologies, including semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and postcolonial theory. In all fairness, the book is an excellent introduction for students coming to the study of visual culture for the first time, offering concise and accessible explanations of the fundamentals of the selected theories while presenting ample visual examples of how they function. It is a text I have gratefully adopted for cultural studies, gender and sexuality, and visual culture courses, and will continue to do so. Whence, then, the earlier noted dissatisfaction on both my own and my students' part?

Although my own problems with this book are of a slightly different nature than the problems my students have, both are rooted in the same soil, which is the exclusively poststructuralist framework in which the authors place their critical discussions and the ambivalence arising from their nonetheless strenuous attempts to take into account the incisive critiques to which theories of sociocultural and discursive construction have in recent years been subjected. Within the realm of critical theorizing per se, such critiques are neither particularly new nor controversial, as is adequately illustrated by, for example, the more than thirty years of discussion of Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."⁹ Almost immediately after its publication in 1975, feminist and other minority critics began taking Mulvey to task for presenting the ideological operations of mainstream Hollywood cinema as inescapable, nonnegotiable, and determinative, rendering the female film spectator utterly powerless to resist the medium's oppressive operations. In addition to the perceived disempowering implications of some "hard-core" poststructuralist theorizing, more recent critiques—for instance those deriving from so-called new materialist approaches—have focused on such models' discursivization of everything to the neglect of the materiality of social structures, of human bodies or "the flesh," and of other less easily deconstructible aspects of/in the world.

Sturken and Cartwright are clearly cognizant of such critiques. In the introduc-

tion to the second edition of *Practices of Looking*, they write: “By the beginning of the 1990s, scholars working on the theory of visual culture had become aware that critical theory was in crisis . . . because the writing associated with it was not providing the kind of explanatory power or impetus to social change desired by many of its authors.”¹⁰ Hence the need for a “plurality of theories,” for an eclectic and wide-ranging critical toolbox to make sense of the ways “we make and use things in the realm of the visual in our everyday lives.”¹¹ Still, perhaps because in some of even the most intellectually enlightened parts of the world the basics of poststructuralist theory have hardly entered the undergraduate classroom, and because the main purpose of their book is to move beyond still largely prevailing commonsense—read liberal humanist—notions of meaning and being, the authors’ perceptible ambivalence about the confining and politically disempowering implications of, for example, Lacanian and Althusserian thought, is neither outspoken nor explicitly addressed. What is more, in order to counter the determinist implications of some of the theories that frame their arguments, the authors take recourse to precisely the conceptual framework their book aims to question and supersede, by reintroducing a notion of individual and collective agency firmly based in the liberal humanist concept of the rational and volitional subject. Because of its theoretical inadequacy, it is this “solution” to the problem of the power and effects of images (over and beyond their ideological operations) that forms the main source of my ultimate dissatisfaction with *Practices of Looking* and with similarly oriented critical approaches to visual culture. Although most of my students are probably unable to grasp its theoretical implications, they nonetheless tend to perceive clearly—if not exactly why—that the suggested possibility of agency fails to explain two key issues, issues that may well have contributed to the crisis in critical theory in the first place. First, “agency,” in whatever way defined, does not adequately account for their own, often highly divergent engagement with and responses to the bombardment of images that constitutes the context of our everyday lives. Second, the notion of individual and collective agency cannot explicate our inability to effectively resist our subjection to the compelling force of everyday visual culture, despite our awareness of its potentially oppressive and pernicious operations.

In order to salvage the important—and indisputably empowering—lessons of poststructuralism, and to familiarize students new to the field of visual culture with its analytical tools and their critical and political potential while at the same time maintaining the possibility of resistance without reverting to defunct notions of subjective agency, I suggest that certain forms of postideological thought, especially those generating from within the affective turn, may not only prove pedagogically helpful, but also politically indispensable.

For one, although the cinematic model underlying many poststructuralist/

deconstructive models of visual analysis may not have become altogether obsolete, it nonetheless no longer seems adequate to the task of accounting for the functioning and operation of visual culture in the digital age.¹² I am not referring only to the radical difference between “old,” noninteractive media, such as cinema and television, and the interactive information and communication technologies that form an intrinsic and pervasive part of our daily lives in a postmechanical society. In a way, the change from visual consumption to media interaction had already been effected by the introduction of the VCR, which gained mass popularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This new technology, with its possibilities for freeze-framing, fast-forwarding, slow motion, and endless repetition, allowed for the manipulation of visual/representational time and the material basis of temporal experience. The VCR—largely ignored by the most influential critical theorists/philosophers at the time—dramatically transformed the organization of perception, forging a new relation between the spectator/participant and the cinematic apparatus that had been the center of attention for film scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. The digitization of the image, both in popular cultural domains and in new media art, constitutes yet another radical transformation of structures of perception or, rather, opens up perception in its processual, material dimension. Inaugurated by the manipulative aspects of the VCR, which enabled us to see in the linear, cinematic unfolding of the flow of images things not available to human perception, in the interstices, or what Mark Hansen calls the “between-two of images” of film, it is the uncompromisingly antimimetic nature of digital images, the fact that there is no longer necessarily any referential layer underlying them, that paradoxically calls for a retheorization of perception as a technically enabled rematerialization of the body, an embodied framing of affect.¹³

In his thorough investigation of the interrelations between technology, digitization, and the body—the complexity of which I can by no means do justice to here—Hansen discusses Bill Viola’s slow-motion digital video installations, *Anima* (2000), *Dolorosa* (2000), and *Observance* (2002), to argue that the technological possibilities of contemporary digital media do not so much enable us to perceive the “between-two of images” the way VCR options for freeze-framing and slow-motion allow us to do, but rather urge us to “experience the imperceptible in-between of emotional states.”¹⁴ (See figures I.1 and I.2.) Hansen submits that by exploiting the technical capacity of shooting film at high speed and, after its conversion to digital video, “project[ing] it seamlessly at normal speed,” Viola is “able to supersaturate the image, registering an overabundance of affective information normally unavailable to perception.” The image as such thus becomes the support for the “registration of affective microperceptions,” entailing an intensification of perception as embodied activity, thereby laying bare the “embodied materiality of subjectivation” itself.¹⁵ What Hansen’s analysis makes clear is that



FIG. 1.1 Bill Viola, *Observance*, 2002. Color High-Definition video on plasma display mounted on wall, 120.7 × 72.4 × 10.2 cm. Performers: Alan Abelew, Sheryl Arenson, Frank Bruynbroek, Carol Cetrone, Cathy Chang, Ernie Charles, Alan Clark, JD Cullum, Michael Irby, Tanya Little, Susan Matus, Kate Noonan, Paul O'Connor, Valerie Spencer, Louis Stark, Richard Stobie, Michael Eric Strickland, Ellis Williams. Photo: Kira Perov. © Bill Viola Studio LLC



FIG. 1.2 Bill Viola, *Anima*, 2000. Color video triptych on three LCD flat panels mounted on wall, 41.3 × 190.5 × 5.1 cm (overall dimensions). Performers: Page Leong, John Fleck, Henriette Brouwers. Photo: Fred Scruton, courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York. © Bill Viola Studio LLC

the digital image, having lost any necessary connection with an independent reality—its “infrastructure” being, in Patricia T. Clough’s words, no more than “layers of algorithmic processing of a matrix of numbers”—has become a process, an activity that does not merely invite “the user’s interaction,” but that rather “requires the human body to frame the ongoing flow of information, shaping its indeterminacy into meaning.”¹⁶

In giving the name affectivity to the intensification of bodily experience, its expansion to the experience of the “imperceptible in-between of emotional states,” Hansen follows the lead of one of the most influential theorists of affect, the Canadian philosopher, writer, and political theorist Brian Massumi, whose *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, and Sensation* (2002) offers an insightful and straightforward account of the need for and possible development of a theory of affect without undoing the deconstructive work effectively carried out by poststructuralism.¹⁷ Since my thought about affect has been strongly influenced by Massumi’s Deleuzian approach, I will take a moment to map out some of its central assumptions.

Taking various empirical studies of the emotional effects of media as his starting point, Massumi first establishes that the strength and the duration of an image’s effect are “not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way.”

Indeed, the measured physiological and subsequent verbal responses of research subjects to selected visual material suggest that the “primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect*.”¹⁸ In other words, there is a certain indeterminacy in the embodied response to the image that distinguishes affect, the level of automatic physiological response, from both conscious perception, language, and emotion. An almost too obvious instance of such indeterminacy is the moment when we find ourselves being pleasurable affected by an image of sadness. While language and social context largely determine the qualities (or content) of a perceived image, the strength or duration of the image, Massumi proposes, with reference to Deleuze, to designate “intensity.”¹⁹ While both intensity and qualification are equally immediately embodied, he continues, there is a critical difference in that “intensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin,” whereas embodied functions such as heartbeat and breathing are “depth reactions” that belong more to the “form/content (qualification) level” of response, marking a “reflux of consciousness into the autonomic depths, coterminous with a rise of the autonomic into consciousness.” On this perspective, intensity, being a “non-conscious, never to be conscious autonomic remainder” of primary affect, remains “beside this loop.” Language does not necessarily operate in opposition to intensity: if matter-of-fact or commonsensical, it may have a dampening effect, interfering with the image’s effect; if, in contrast, language punctuates narrative with qualifications of emotional content, it may enhance intensity, resonating rather than interfering with it.²⁰

As a critical element among what Deleuze’s counterpart Félix Guattari calls the “heterogeneity of the components leading to the production of subjectivity,”²¹ the reorganization of the visual in the age of digitization entails a reorganization of subjectivity itself. Since we do not so much *read* but *see* images, approaches to the image in its relation to language fall short if they merely operate on the semiotic and/or semantic level. The integration of intensity into cultural theory and art criticism would help to (re)gain what such approaches inevitably lose: the “expression *event*—in favor of structure.” Massumi explains the “expression event” as the “system of the inexplicable: emergence, into and against regeneration (the reproduction of a structure),” the unassimilable. Actualized in the expressive event, affect or intensity is that which remains outside and eludes theories of signification that “are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences.”²² Conscious perception and emotion put limits on the opening up of embodied affective events, rendering determinate—e.g., in the form of narration—what is and must remain indeterminate, emergent, in the expression event qua event. Affect is thus not the description of a concept, but rather a term that attempts to think, in Braidotti’s terms, “through flows and interconnections,” to expand a theoretical reason that is “concept-bound and fastened upon essential

notions,” in favor of representations for “processes, fluid in-between flows of data, experience and information.”²³

By equating intensity with affect, Massumi is capable of establishing a clear distinction between affect, as embodied indeterminacy, as potential and emergent, on one hand, and emotion on the other. Emotion is a “subjective content,” qualified intensity captured and fixed in language, appropriated and recognized in signifying terms, and henceforth defined as personal. Intensity, in contrast, may be qualifiable as an emotional state, but it is not to be associated with linear processes. Affect or intensity is a state of suspense, “potentially of disruption,” running parallel, but not reducible to sociolinguistic capture, nor to personal psychology. Affects are not presocial. As Braidotti reminds us, “affects are the body’s capacity to enter relations—to be affected,” and such relations—“the virtual links that a body can form with other bodies”²⁴—are not restricted to intersubjective forms of empathy, sympathy, love, or indeed hatred or disgust, but rather cut across the boundaries between species, allowing for multiple, nonunitary, heterogeneous flows of affect in an ongoing process of becoming (other). Emotion and affect, Massumi hence maintains, “follow different logics and pertain to different orders,” and what is both theoretically and politically at stake in this distinction is “the new.”²⁵

There appears to be increasing consensus among media, literary, and art theorists that the cultural condition of postsecular, postideological high capitalism is marked by a “surfeit” of affect. If we are going to make sense of our thoroughly image-saturated and digitally mediated culture, and if the challenge is not only to make sense of a world in which the so-called master narratives are no longer viable but also to enable possibilities for change, then we need a new vocabulary to theorize affect. Not emotion, for theories of emotion tend to return to traditional psychological categories that eventually both personalize and depoliticize the operations of our current information- and image-based culture.²⁶ Sturken and Cartwright may be perfectly right in problematizing the confining and deterministic implications of certain poststructuralist theories; their attempt to escape from the reproduction of structure and to explain the potentially disruptive, enabling, and innovative effects of images alongside their reactive, reterritorializing operations by reverting to traditional notions of individual and collective agency, however, is not only a theoretical error, but also politically inadequate.

In her critical evaluation of the affective turn cited earlier, Hemmings points to the “myriad ways that affect manifests . . . not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social reproduction in the most glaring ways.” She mentions the “delights of consumerism, feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism” as just a few of the contexts in which affective responses reinforce rather than challenge or dislodge a dominant social order.²⁷ Whereas Hemmings may

justifiably take the advocates of affect theory to task for not spending enough attention to the fact that affect operates in unpredictable ways and that “good” and “bad” affect inevitably function simultaneously, sometimes reciprocally, and interdependently, I would yet suggest that it is precisely on account of its complexity, indeterminacy, and ultimate unassimilability, while yet pertaining to sociality on its multiply entwined levels, that we need to find ways of thinking about its processual operations outside the linearity of conceptual reason.²⁸ Indeed, the very coexistence of, on one hand, hyper-individualism, personal and corporate greed, diverse forms of religious fundamentalism, a mass media system that continues to produce mind-numbing and degrading reality shows and that provides us with disinformation and feeds us sensationalist junk, the spectacularization of politics, and so on—all playing on and to the “bad” affect that is indisputably rife in an increasingly global informational and communicational culture—in *tandem* with, on the other hand, various grassroots protest movements that make effective use of the Internet and other contemporary technologies, growing ecological concerns, the expansion of social media, and other responsibility- and community-building phenomena engaging “good” affect, in its irreducible complexity and resistance to structural analysis, requires us to think through and account for the operational potential of affect, in both its “good” and its “bad” effects.

Massumi’s examples of affective responses do not only suggest what bodies can do, but as Clough astutely points out, they also “show what bodies can be made to do.”²⁹ Responsible and irresponsible behaviors coexist and are partly, if not largely, instigated by new media whose productive and/or destructive potential can neither be predicted nor explained within the terms of structural frameworks that clearly separate emancipatory aspirations from conservative or even reactionary drives, whether of a nationalist, ethnic, or religious nature. As Braidotti forcefully argues, the “point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical mode.”³⁰ If we are not to slip back into sociological or psychological categories and reify existing structures of signification and modes of being, but instead seek to understand and mobilize individual and collective levels of undecidability, of newly emerging systems of becoming—“good” or “bad”—what is called for instead is, in Massumi’s terms, an “asignifying philosophy of affect”³¹ that will enable a more complex and more sophisticated critical apparatus to develop and teach a sociocultural literacy. What is needed is a conceptual framework that is adequate to the challenges and possibilities of a sociocultural realm of information and communication that is an increasingly visual, if not multisensual, and shifting hybrid of fluctuation, change, and transformation.

The critical potential of the media today, in the context of global power relations, does not merely lie in the individual subject's volition and cognitive ability to negotiate (whether in agreement or in opposition) the qualitative and/or signifying effects of the image/expression of events in which she is deeply immersed. Obviously, ideology is not a thing of the past, and critical analyses of ideological operations remain crucial. It is just as important, however, to try to understand the ways in which the effects of visual culture obtain on the immediately embodied level of affect: affect or intensity cuts across different structures differently in every actual case, resonating in its specificity with other layers and other orders of the system, enabling moments of emergence, of productive disruption as much as of reactive regression or ideological retrenchment. The political potential of affect lies in its openness, its directness, its operation in an unbounded field of possible actualization. The undecidability of political processes—poignantly manifested in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections—equals the unpredictability of economic developments in high capitalism, as reflected in the recent “credit crunch,” the *démasquée* of mortgage bankers, and/or the fall of the Detroit automobile industry. In both realms, it is affect that seems to produce the most powerful effects, over and above the power of politics and economics themselves. Image reception is deeply enfolded in the domain of affect that is virtually everywhere: the ways blocs of affect shift into potential actualization are increasingly utilized by both the reactive and liberatory apparatuses through which they are relayed. If we do not develop a cultural-theoretical vocabulary with which to think about affect, cultural studies will lose the critical momentum generated by the affective turn in its current re-emergence, in both theory and practice, both inside and outside the classroom. It is against this overall political and theoretical background that I turn my attention in this book to visual art as a site—for lack of a better term—where the “new” is most likely to arise and where emergent formations of becoming are primarily (although not exclusively) expressed in their affective operations. In light of the above, one may well ask why I have decided to focus on art in the narrow sense, and not on visual media in their wider implications, to address these issues.

Art and aesthetic experience move us “beyond” what appears to be familiar reality; rather than affirming what we already know, art creates a rupture, forcing us to see and think things differently. The conventional art historical model of description-analysis-interpretation does not satisfactorily account for such rupturing or deterritorializing effects, especially since these are singular, historically and socioculturally specific expressive events, and hence neither universal nor unchanging. Aesthetic force is neither immanent to the perceived object nor to the observing subject, but “happens” only in their encounter, so that Marcel Duchamp’s “anti-art” piece *pissoir* (*Urinal* or *Fountain*; see figure 1.3), for example,



FIG. 1.3 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, replica 1964. Porcelain, unconfirmed: 360 × 480 × 610 mm. Tate Gallery, London. Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1999. © ARS, NY. Photo: Tate, London / Art Resource, NY

was considered so outrageous that it was hidden from view at the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists while it is currently established as a classic work of high modernism, if not as a landmark of twentieth-century art.

To address the unpredictable, often disconcerting, yet always contingent power of art, I do not focus on artworks as mere objects of interpretation, whose meaning can be determined once and for all through careful formal and/or sociohistorical analysis. Instead, I approach the encounter with an artwork as an event that, in its *haecceity* or “thisness,” engages us on the level of affect as much as it invites us to analyze and interpret its formal and semiotic operations. To repeat, by affect I do not mean emotion or feeling, but the ability to affect and be affected.³² Affect is not presocial (it can only happen in the world), but it is nonconscious and abstract: the experience of embodied intensity that cannot be fully captured in language, nor fully determined by form nor by the chains of signification. Perhaps the most immediately “prehensible” and never fully *comprehensible* example of such aesthetic intensity would be the pleasure we derive from music, which has less to do with the communication of meaning than with the way a piece of music “moves” us. Visual cultural expression, whether of a popular or

more narrowly defined artistic nature, similarly does its actual “work” as a material, embodied (if not embodying) event by engaging us on the level of affect. Positing the operation of affective forces as primary to the artistic encounter, the examination of particular works of art in several of the chapters that follow enable me to develop a notion of aesthetic experience as at once experiential and material, an event with both potentially enabling and innovative effects, as well as reactive consequences.

In its *differentia specifica*, art—again, taking into account that what counts as “art” is subject to historical and cross-cultural definition—functions as a system of the inexplicable, as a site where the relationship between signifier and signified collapses. Art yet maintains its connections to the world in that it only “happens” in the actualization of the (aesthetic) event. Insisting on the dynamic presentness (as distinct from its representational dimension) of the artistic event, my project throughout this book is to trace the contours of a radical or neo-aesthetics that runs counter to art historical traditions that emphasize the autonomy of the artistic object, or the genius of the individual artist, or the merely pleasurable or edifying functions of art. On the assumption that there would be no art nor aesthetic inquiry without the possibility of aesthetic experience in its phenomenological sense, that is to say, as an expressive event in which both the subject and the object of perception enter into a force field that is constituted in and by their encounter, I critique both such an object-immanent perspective, as well as hermeneutic approaches to art—that is, the attempt to “read” meaning and being into artistic objects—to posit aesthetic experience as a process of alteration, or a force field, whose consequences are neither pre-given nor unambivalent.

Chapter 1 revisits Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetic” by way of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “aesthetic object” and Steven Shaviro’s reconfiguration of aesthetic theory through Alfred North Whitehead’s “critique of pure feeling” in order to examine different forms of art as singular modes of relating to the world. To address what different forms of art in their affective operations might share in common and, simultaneously, to explore the specific effects of any artistic event in the moment of its emergence and/or creation, the chapter briefly touches on music, as perhaps the most “disembodied” form of art, and additionally examines the body-related art of modern/art jewelry. While I argue for an understanding of the operations of all cultural expression as an embodied/embedded affective event, my aim in this chapter is to foreground the singularity of any given artistic encounter in its irreducibility to object or form. I develop my approach to art in its historical and sociocultural specificity as a site of experience that exceeds the determination and the materiality of objects while remaining rooted in the world because it only obtains in its affective, material, singular actualization. The Deleuzian notion of “intensity” is introduced to begin to “think” affect as both an

experiential force and a material thing that can compel systems of knowledge, history, subjectivation, and circuits of power. The chapter concludes that art, qua event, constitutes a force with a certain autonomy, an activity of partial becoming that transforms, if only momentarily, our sense of our selves and our experience of the world, and thus opens up the possibility of novelty.

I resume my dialogue with Kant in chapter 2, “Violent Becomings: From the *informe* and the Subject to Uncontrollable Beauty.” Here I engage Kant’s notion of the sublime to trace the idea of the *informe* (formless) as developed by Georges Bataille, back to Hogarth’s notion of the “serpentine line,” and up to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “line of flight.” Bataille suggests that “formless” operates within different forms to destabilize the organizing principle of form: the *informe* is defined more by what it does than by what it is. This allows me to distinguish the aesthetic from meaning and morality and to argue in favor of a neo-aesthetic approach that neither coincides with hermeneutics nor with ethics. Taking a particular “reading” of Louise Bourgeois’s monumental abstract sculpture as an example of the former, I argue against the common description of the French American artist as the “founder of confessional art,” whose work is commonly interpreted as wholly autobiographical and reduced to the traumatic events of her childhood. Instead, I elaborate on the disruptive, if not violent, or violating effects of Bourgeois’s art through the operation of the abject in my aesthetic encounters with it. Working from the *informe* through the “serpentine line” to the abject, the chapter additionally explores the political potential of art in its “eventness” and historical specificity—as opposed to the narratives we can also produce about it. I subsequently elaborate on the concept of the “line of flight” to approach the dis- and/or reorganizing force of art in its actualization of connections and multiplicities, evolving into creative metamorphoses and assemblages that open the possibility for the production of new paradigms of subjectivity, of becoming, rather than reinscribing traditional modes of being.

Chapter 3, “Neo-Aesthetics and the Study of the Arts of the Present,” takes up the duality at the heart of Kantian aesthetics, as at once the objective and the subjective aspects of sensation, to examine Deleuze’s “transcendental empiricist” theory of aesthetics in its significance for the study of the arts of the present. Deleuze’s notion of the “encounter” with an artwork, which he defines as a “bloc of sensations,” is put to work to accomplish two things: First, to overcome the negativity of poststructuralist modes of ideology critique in favor of a more affirmative, materialist approach to art, an argument that runs from art historian Hal Foster’s gloomy appreciation of so-called business art through Andy Warhol and Deleuze’s Nietzschean model of an “onto-aesthetic.” Second, to propose the classical procedure of *ekphrasis* as a possible model of aesthetic inquiry that allows us to do justice to the aesthetic on its own terms without abandoning or losing

sight of the ethical operations of a given artwork. The chapter concludes with a comparative exercise in *ekphrasis*, extending the notion of the aesthetic encounter as a form of partial becoming through a discussion of a several drawings by Kathleen Henderson and a series of Richard Barnes's photographs.

In chapter 4, "The Groundless Realities of Art Photography," I shift my attention to the photograph as a mode of visual culture "after representation" par excellence. The chapter is organized around the work of Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra and aims to address the image beyond the parameters of both "simulacrum" (i.e., in a Baudrillardian rather than a Deleuzian sense) and those of the "spectacle," as elaborated by Guy Debord. The emergence of so-called art photography—i.e., the fact that, from the 1980s onwards, photography began moving away from its journalistic/documentary functions and was self-consciously and deliberately made to hang in art galleries and museums—has led to an increase of theoretical interest in photography, which has not, however, resolved its controversial place in the world of art and art criticism: is it art or is it mere documentation? A focus on the photographic image as aesthetic event circumvents this fruitless discussion. The chapter investigates the ambivalence at the heart of the image—as at once representation and operation of art—by a discussion of Dijkstra's group portraits, works that are exemplary of the recent transfiguration of art photography in that they deliberately blur the boundaries between classical traditions of painting and the formerly documentary function of the photographic apparatus. Revisiting both Benjamin's and Barthes' influential writings on photography and the medium's transformation into a theoretical object, the chapter additionally explores the unbinding force of Dijkstra's work through Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of the image as a force field that enables a violent intimacy, the distinct jumping toward the indistinct, defying signification and definition.

My focus on the photographic image extends into chapter 5, "The Ruse of the Ruins, or: Detroit's Nonreal Estate." The equivocation at the heart of the image is here addressed through Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser's notion of the technical image and German philosopher Lambert Wiesing's theory of the image as that which "alone makes the artificial presence of things possible." I interrogate the visual presentation of Detroit as a series of architectural still lifes, of its abandoned buildings and collapsing houses as, quite literally, the hollowed out carcasses of what once constituted the city's reputation as the "Paris of the Midwest." Through a series of recent visualizations of Detroit's ruins—a site somewhere between the beautiful and the sublime—Julia Reyes Taubman's monumental collection of photographs called *Detroit: 138 Square Miles*, I explore the productive power of non-narrative in the polyvalent visual presentation of a city that is both more and less than the sum of its aesthetically

compelling visualizations. Arguing against the dismissals of contemporary “ruin porn”—as mere nostalgia for modernity or as a displacement of underlying social issues—the chapter traces Western culture’s fascination with ruins to its current postindustrial moment to foreground the pictorial surface of the pictures of Detroit’s ruins as a site that brings about consciousness, functioning as an event of partial becoming, which in its turn extends the question of the operational force of the aesthetic as such.

Chapter 6, “Visualizing the Face: *Face Value* and *dévisage*,” shifts the attention from the still or photographic image to the moving image of documentary film. Loosely organized around the work of Dutch filmmaker Johan van der Keuken (1938–2001), the chapter returns to the equivocation/ambivalence at the heart of, in this case, the moving image by addressing the question of the face, or of what Deleuze calls “faciality,” as it functions in the “affection image” par excellence, the close-up. I trace the differences and commonalities between Levinas’s notion of the face as a “source from which all meaning appears”—yet emphatically not the site of meaning itself—and Deleuze’s concept of the face in cinema as close-up, as the “expression of affectivity or the emotional quality of a situation.” This enables me to discuss the operation of the face/close-up in van der Keuken’s film *Face Value* as an exploration, if not an actualization, of “effacement,” or *dévisage*, a dissolution of meaning and being as it appears to be written on, yet escapes the signification of, the human body. Rather than representing something else or functioning as a partial object, the face/close-up in cinema, I argue, foregrounds the equivocation of the image by stripping the face of its three ordinary functions—individuation, socialization, communication—to generate a signifiatory *indifférence*, functioning as a site of zéro degree of signification, which, paradoxically, simultaneously gives it its life, its singularity, as a site of potential becoming.

In the concluding chapter, “Lines of Flight and the Emergence of the New,” I bring the various theoretical strands and arguments developed in the preceding chapters together to propose an affirmative and materialist attitude to contemporary art and to posit art as a “project” with multiple levels of implications: scholarly, pedagogical, and sociopolitical. I do so by first elaborating on Deleuze’s and Whitehead’s respective notions of the “event” from within their shared neovitalist focus. I subsequently trace the implications of their abstract philosophical thoughts on the ethics of becoming for the production of subjectivity in the postindustrial context of “hypermodernity” by way of Félix Guattari’s psychoanalytically inspired, ecosophic paradigm of “chaosmosis.” My concluding suggestion is that art and aesthetic activity are as essential for change for the new as they are for the invention of sustainable modalities of being on both individual and collective levels, now and in worlds yet to come.