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Violent Embrace

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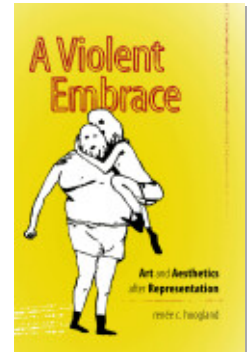
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For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity
or perception to exist, a certain physiological
precondition is indispensable: intoxication.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

ONE ARTISTIC ACTIVITY

dialogism, *aesthesis*, and corporeality

In one of his early essays, “Supplement: The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art” (1924; hereafter “CMF”), the Russian literary scholar and philosopher M. M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) describes the author-creator of a work of art as a “constitutive moment in artistic form.”¹ As such, the personality of the author-creator is “both invisible and inaudible” and is organized and experienced only as activity, as a “seeing, hearing, moving, remembering activity—as an embodying activity, and not as an embodied activity.” An author-creator does not exist prior to the work, Bakhtin submits, but acquires his or her “positively subjective creative personality” only in art, in creation (“CMF,” 316). Still, for the work of art to actually work, to generate and realize its aesthetic object (which “includes its creator within itself”), there needs to be a reader-recipient to “enter as a creator into what is seen, heard, or pronounced, and in so doing overcome the material, extra-creatively determinate character of the form, its thingness” in order actively to forge an “axiological relationship” with the author-creator—who is present in the work only as “organized activity.” The aesthetic object is hence for Bakhtin not a thing, but, in its distinctiveness, rather has the “character of an event,” a “realized, distinctive event of the action and interaction of creator and content” in which the reader-recipient feels herself as an “active *subiectum*,” as a “necessary constitutive moment” (“CMF,” 317).

Although his main concern in this essay, as in most of his writings, is with verbal art, Bakhtin's philosophical explorations of the aesthetic event, *qua* event, would appear to be equally relevant to other modes of artistic production, to art generally. Yet precisely because he emphatically claims that artistic creation is not so much an "embodied" as it is an "embodying" event, this does not lead to a notion of aesthetic activity as an undifferentiated process of overall becoming. On the contrary, for Bakhtin, the constitutive, embodying force of artistic form becomes productive only as an "actuality of a special, purely aesthetic order" ("CMF," 315). At once pointing up the subjectivating operations of aesthetic creation and the *differentia specifica* of art as activity, his reflections thus not only allow us to conceive of the aesthetic object as a "completely new ontic formation . . . which arises on the boundaries of a work by overcoming its material—extra-aesthetic—determinateness as a thing" ("CMF," 297), but also invite us to consider the specificity of different kinds of aesthetic events in their differentiated material effects/affects. In this chapter, I wish first to more generally reflect on aesthetic activity, and second, to briefly dwell on two alternative modes of artistic creation, respectively, music, as perhaps the most apparently disembodied form, and in the final section, the intrinsically body-related art of modern jewelry. But let me start with several preliminary observations on artistic creation/activity against the broader framework of philosophical aesthetics.

Bakhtin's dialogical model, with its emphasis on process over structure and on becoming over being at once appears to foreshadow and to acquire new significance in light of the recent turn in critical theory to affect, especially the line of thought that harks back from Deleuze and Guattari to Henri Bergson and Baruch Spinoza.² Since my interest here is not to "defend" affect theory *per se*, but rather to explore ways in which a focus on affect may help us to grasp what Bakhtin calls the "embodying activity" of artistic creation, I wish to place his early twentieth-century concept of the aesthetic object as "not a thing" in relation to contemporary forms of aesthetic theory—in the wake of the "affective turn"—that is to say, in the context of what is variously referred as "the new aestheticism," "the radical aesthetic,"³ or, quite simply, "neo-aesthetics."⁴ I wish to consider the relations between the aesthetic object as a "distinctive event" and growing concerns with art beyond the boundaries of traditional art history, with art—to borrow and slightly pervert Arthur Danto's provocative phrase—"after the end of art."⁵

As suggested in the introduction, by positing a certain specificity for different forms of art, I am not at all interested in defining or demarcating particular realms of contemporary art, for such definitions and demarcations are obviously culturally and historically specific, hence subject to change. My engagement with neo-aesthetic theory arises from my interest in what art does or does not do in

the world on the level of subjective experience, in grasping its operations in their specificity, qua art, and thus in approaching particular artworks as force fields distinct from perceptual and sensual phenomena not so defined in a given culture at a certain moment in history. By shifting attention away from the artistic object to the subject of aesthetic experience, I do not, however, mean to set up an alternative essentialized object of inquiry. As Bakhtin's notion of the reader-recipient as an "active *subiectum*," indeed, as a "necessary constitutive moment" in the aesthetic event suggests, the contemplating or observing subject, just as the aesthetic object, similarly only obtains, is only called "forth" or constituted in the activity of artistic co-creation. Hence, just as what may be seen to count as art changes over time and cross-culturally, so can no aesthetic experience ever be repeated in exactly the same way, whether in an individual from one hour to the next, or across and within different sociohistorical contexts. The mere fact, however, that perceptual properties of both objects and subjects are ultimately indeterminable, shifting, as well as insufficient for clearly distinguishing art from non-art, does not mean that aesthetic experiences do not constitute a viable starting point for theoretically exploring them as *events*. After all, without the possibility of aesthetic experience in its phenomenological sense, there would be no art and no aesthetic inquiry.

Admittedly, Bakhtin's seminal concept of "dialogism"⁶ in artistic creation sprang from his immersion in neo-Kantianism at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷ It should be clear, however, that the idea of the aesthetic invoked here diverges from the popularized Kantian notion of the aesthetic act as detached contemplation and as a civilizing, humanizing force that enables proper judgments of taste and encourages ethical behavior. Instead, I posit a neo-aesthetic as a specific, transgressive, disorganizing, if not deterritorializing force the ethical implications of which are neither pre-given nor unambivalent. For if we follow the Russian philosopher in conceiving the aesthetic event as an activity, as an act of processual co-creation mutually realized by the author-creator and the reader-recipient, and if, furthermore, artistic creation per se is not so much an embodied as an embodying activity, and, finally, if it is clear that the reader-recipient similarly only comes into corporeal being through her or his participation in this event, by actively partaking in the "organized activity" that constitutes artistic creation, such activity equally entails the possibility, if not the inevitability, of the undoing, of the unbecoming of previously existing embodied selves, and therewith of a becoming anew. In its generality, this conception of the dis/embodying encounter and engagement with the work of art suggests the operation of the prepersonal forces of affect and presubjective emotion⁸ to be central to the artistic event and, by extension, to any form of aesthetic encounter.

In his writings of the early 1920s, Bakhtin's objective is to work toward a general

systematic aesthetics. And while he does not mention Kant in “Supplement,” it seems clear that his criticisms of “representatives of the so-called Formal or Morphological Method” are closely bound up with his engagement with the formalism of Kantian aesthetics as well. In the first section of his *Critique of Judgment* (1799), Kant famously defines aesthetic judgments as “disinterested,” in the sense that we judge something to be beautiful irrespective of whether it is “agreeable” to us—which would be a purely sensory judgment—or whether it meets our ethical standards, or conforms to moral law.⁹ We can certainly take pleasure in beauty, but this is a consequence of our aesthetic judgment and not its cause. The distinction between the “agreeable” or the “pleasurable,” on one hand, and the aesthetic, the beautiful, on the other, leads Kant to posit that the aesthetic judgment must be focused on the formal aspects of an object (shape, design, arrangement), and not on its sensible aspects (color, tone, material, texture), for the latter have a profound connection to the agreeable, and thus to interest. I will have more to say about this and about the additional “moments” (or features) that Kant attributes to aesthetic judgments (i.e., that they are both universal and necessary, and that beautiful objects appear to have been made or designed to be “purposive” without having any practical purpose, to be “final without end”) below. Here I wish to foreground the connection between Kant as the founder of formalism in philosophical aesthetics and Bakhtin’s critique of the inadequacies of the formalist method that prevailed in literary scholarship and in the so-called *Kunstwissenschaften* in Russia at the time of his writing, the first decades of the twentieth century.

While generally pleased with recent contributions to Russian scholarly literature by “valuable works on the theory of art, especially in the area of poetics” (“CMF,” 257), Bakhtin is critical of the “vogue for science” in contemporary art study, which he believes leads to an “extreme lowering of the level of problematics, to the impoverishment of the object under study, and even to the illegitimate replacement of this object—in this case artistic creation—by something entirely different” (“CMF,” 258). The misguided reliance upon scientific thinking in the domain of art study, he continues, is in the final analysis the result of a “common transgression of the study of art in all its branches, committed in the very cradle of this discipline: a negative attitude to general aesthetics, a rejection in principle of the guiding role of general aesthetics” (“CMF,” 258–59). In line with Kant’s attempts a century earlier to found a general systematic aesthetics, Bakhtin’s problematization of the three topics listed in the title of “Supplement”—content, material, form—therefore centers on the “aesthetic object” in general terms, on the aesthetic “in its distinctness of the cognitive and the ethical as well as in its interconnectedness within the unity of culture” (“CMF,” 259).

His deep involvement in neo-Kantianism—largely imported from Germany

and the most prominent school of philosophy at the time—notwithstanding, Bakhtin “abhorred the dualism in Kant’s account of how internal thought relates to external experience,” as Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist point out in their authoritative introduction to his work.¹⁰ Consequently, he primarily turns his argument against the Russian formalists’ investment in Kant as, first and foremost, the founder of formalism. Bakhtin rejects the program of “materialist aesthetics,” which he believes cannot but result in the separation of content from form and lead to an ambitious systematicity that fails to do justice to the specificity of any artwork’s unique effects in the real world, as well as entail the spurious isolation of art from life. The error of judgment founding the formalist project, Bakhtin argues, is not only its proponents’ failure to engage philosophical aesthetics, their disregard of the need to develop a “general systematic aesthetics,” but also, in their near-exclusive preoccupation with the materiality of form, to first separate “real life” material from art, and second, to assume that a “scientific” method means to isolate things. Bakhtin maintains that the autonomy of art is, paradoxically, to borrow the words of Bakhtin scholars Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, “guaranteed not by its isolation from life but by its precise participation in it.”¹¹ For Bakhtin, there are in fact three possible relations for human beings to have with reality: cognitive action, ethical action, and aesthetic action. That we can analytically distinguish among these relations does not mean, however, that we can factually separate them in “real life.” On the contrary, he maintains, since aesthetics is that which connects the realms of cognition (or “knowledge in general”) and ethics (which only knows “individual particularized value”), life “becomes real for us in ‘aesthetic intuition,’ and there is no ‘neutral reality’ that can be opposed to art.”¹²

Bakhtin thus places aesthetic activity squarely within the practice of everyday life, as an embodying activity, an enactment, or an en-(rather than an in-)corporation. Still, the fact that his major purpose in “Supplement” is a negative one, an attempt to expose the flaws of the “materialist aesthetics” of Russian formalism, implies that he first and foremost must show that the aesthetic object, which is an activity directed toward the work (or “content,” which at once informs and transforms material) of a given work of art, escapes both its organized materiality and its cognitive determination. In doing so, he repeatedly refers to what he calls the most “objectless” of all forms of art: music.

Music, Bakhtin argues, is “devoid of object-related determinateness and cognitive differentiatedness, yet it has a deep content: its form takes us beyond the bounds of acoustic sounds, and certainly not into an axiological void” (“CME,” 266). Perhaps more “palpably” than any other form of art, music hence testifies to the fact that the aesthetic object, “detached and fictively irreversible,” is neither a thing nor an object, but the “event of striving, the axiological tension,”

which, to repeat his earlier quoted phrase, “arises on the boundaries of a work of art by way of overcoming its material—extra-aesthetic—determinateness as a thing” (“CMF,” 307). A strictly materialist formalism is an inadequate basis for studying and understanding precisely that which gives artistic creativity its “aesthetic distinctiveness and significance” (“CMF,” 263), for what it fails to take into account is the artwork’s “axiological constituent,” which is the “*emotional-volitional tension of form*” (“CMF,” 264). Using musical metaphors to characterize the extramaterial aspects of artistic form, Bakhtin thus recasts the terms of formalist aesthetics per se:

This emotional-volitional relationship [of the author and the contemplator *to* something apart from the material] that is expressed by form (by rhythm, harmony, symmetry, and other formal moments) is too intense, too *active* in character to be understood simply as a relationship to the material. (“CMF,” 264)

Bakhtin retains Kant’s first and third “moments” of the aesthetic judgment, that it is “disinterested” and thus distinct from the merely sensual pleasure and/or practical use we may derive from a work of art, by suggesting that an artwork, “understood as *organized material*, as a thing, can have significance only as a physical stimulus of physiological and psychological states or it must assume some utilitarian, practical function” (“CMF,” 264). His insistence on the intense, the active, and the emotional operations of artistic *form* nonetheless allow him first, to overcome the dualism of Kant’s thought, and second, to situate the dialogic relationship that characterizes aesthetic contemplation squarely in the realm of human experience as a whole, or, to put it even more strongly, to define aesthetic experience as foundational to all human activity. But the distinctiveness of the artwork or, more precisely, the “aesthetic object in its purely artistic distinctiveness” as it is actualized in the creative event, as organized activity, cannot obtain outside the specifically and “purely” aesthetic encounter that constitutes the axiological relationship of the author and contemplator to the work.

In the participative event that is aesthetic activity, the aesthetic object of a given work of art is, for Bakhtin, thus realized only in the actuality of its co-creation, which generates a “completely new ontic formation,” a “distinctive aesthetic existent.” In his later work, he came to locate this “distinctive aesthetic existent” almost exclusively in the extramaterial operation of language, of the word in its dialogic operations, more particularly, in novelistic discourse, which orchestrates worlds and provides “specific complexes of values, definitions of situation, *potentials* (not merely structures) for kinds of action.”¹³ The fundamentally antidualist approach to the relation between art and life, meaning and being, that characterizes all of his work, however, requires Bakhtin both to continue to insist

on the “unique, necessary, and irreplaceable place” art occupies *within* life and, to cite Morson and Emerson again, to demand of art the “same qualities that he demands of a person living a real ethical life: particularization, commitment, and ‘no alibi for being.’” This, as suggested earlier, does not entail a collapse of the distinction between art and life, but rather requires us to identify “the right sort of specificity,” which is “obtained not by abstracting a phenomenon or linking it up within a system, but by making it answer for its unique effects in the real world.”¹⁴

In its insistence on the “eventness” of aesthetic activity, on its embodying nature, as well as on its dialogic, enacting, or constitutive potential, Bakhtin’s “architectonic aesthetics” (the term “architectonics” refers to the science of relations, which, unlike a system, always requires the presence of human beings) is arguably more anti- than post-Kantian, especially in view of its essentially antidualist and anti-universalist sway. But there is yet another sense in which Bakhtin breaks with Kant and the post-Kantians, and that is, despite his concern with “general aesthetics,” in his ultimate rejection of any concept of universal principles, transcendental laws, or systematicity, whether in relation to actual, empirical reality, time and space, ethics, or, indeed, art.

In his early writings, Bakhtin still maintains that works of art offer an aesthetic whole, that they are the result of an act of “finalization” on the part of the artist/creator with which/whom the reader/recipient enters into an active relationship of co-creation. In the course of his career, however, he becomes increasingly wary of any and all finalizing discourses, and especially of the “monologic” conception of truth that, he argues, has characterized modern thought for hundreds of years and which he sees reflected not only in great thinkers like Kant and Hegel, but also in literature (before Dostoyevsky). Bakhtin’s concern for openness, for the possibility of innovation, for the genuinely new, and for potentiality, freedom, and creativity leads him to advance the term “unfinalizability” as an “all-purpose carrier of his conviction that the world is not only a messy place, but is also an open space.”¹⁵ Such openness is not, in Bakhtin’s view, a desirability or a utopian dream, but in fact an ethical and a phenomenal necessity—that is, in the sense that any living organism in the world must constantly respond to her environment and that she is accountable for her responses in their distinctiveness and particularity. This is what Bakhtin means with his statement that there is “no alibi for being.” In their discussion of his notion of “answerability,” Clark and Holquist define Bakhtin’s view as “both Neo-Kantian and Darwinian”:

The Kantian assumption of a gap between mind and world is understood by Bakhtin as a necessary interdependence between the two, making all discussion of a transcendental ego superfluous or at least inadequate. Such an interdependence is Darwinian in the specific sense that the one cannot exist without modification

by the other, and thus the privilege of making decisions resides exclusively in neither.¹⁶

The ongoing process of mutual modification of mind and world—and of everything that is in it—is thus a phenomenal necessity that renders both self and world unfinalizable, messy, and open, which in turn allows for the new, the surprising, the unexpected, and also for creative activity. In line with his abhorrence of (Kantian) duality and his rejection of “systematizers” generally, Bakhtin’s position in relation to the ratio of unfinalizability to finalization at some point definitively shifts to the former: both in life and in art, unfinalizability becomes the supreme value, the temporary need for finalization giving way to the ethical necessity of unfinalizability. Since Bakhtin here truly departs from while yet remaining indebted to Kant, and therewith gives a twist to the modern theory of aesthetics in a way that prefigures what I have called the project of contemporary neo-aesthetics, his notion of unfinalizability opens up the connections between his post-Kantian aesthetics and current theories of affect.

A central concept in Bakhtin’s thinking, unfinalizability is a positive term with which to argue against any approach of cultural process that assumes an underlying set of laws or systems from which an actual event merely emerges as a particular instantiation of some pre-existing structure. What such approaches miss, or preclude, is the essential fact of the “eventness” of any form of cultural process and production. Both formalist and structuralist models hence do not merely present a reductive view on cultural phenomena, they also render human creativity fundamentally impossible. Unfinalizability, real creativity, Bakhtin infers from this, cannot be located in a system of laws, but neither can it be assumed to exist in randomness, in a “realm of passive, chance phenomena.” That creativity is real, that it is always and everywhere, leads him to the assumption that creativity is, in the words of Morson and Emerson, “immanent in constant, ongoing processes,” and furthermore that such processes are open to the future, not because they are outside the law or random irruptions, but because “they are and have been the product of accumulated tiny alterations constituting the daily ‘event of being.’”¹⁷

In his insistence on the indissolubility of art and life, the dialogic character of the relation between mind and world, and the unfinalizability of the creative event in its realness and its eventness, Bakhtin comes close to defining life itself in aesthetic terms. Writing in roughly the same period, yet approaching Kant from a very different perspective, the English mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) arrives at a similar position. Whitehead takes Bakhtin’s post-Kantian critique a step further by, in Steven Shaviro’s gloss, defining aesthetics as both the “immanent criterion for order” and as the mark of “our *concern* for

the world, and for entities in the world,” thereby placing aesthetics “at the center of philosophical inquiry” per se. To pursue the connections between Bakhtin’s “architectonic aesthetics” and Whitehead’s response to Kant, I turn to Shaviro’s book *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*, which, in the overall context of a radical and experimental attempt to rethink postmodern aesthetic theory, presents, particularly relevant to my purposes here, a rereading of Whitehead’s “critique of pure feeling” in conjunction with Kant and Deleuze.¹⁸

I will have occasion to turn to Whitehead directly in later chapters. Here I wish to focus largely on *Without Criteria* (hereafter *wc*), for what interests me about Shaviro’s take on Whitehead is the way he develops the latter’s theory of feeling into an affect-laden notion of subjectivity in which *aesthesis* (or sensual perception) plays a constitutive role within a nonphenomenological model of becoming that appears remarkably commensurate with Bakhtin’s dialogical prosaics.¹⁹

Becoming, Shaviro submits, is “not continuous, because each occasion, each act of becoming, is unique,” and any appearance of duration, of endurance or continuity, needs to be actively produced, over and over again (*wc*, 19). Extending Bakhtin’s ideas about creative activity as an event of co-creation to the realm of experience and the world as a whole, Shaviro follows Whitehead in positing a notion of the self that is not so much a pre-existing entity that “phenomenologically ‘intends’ the world,” but rather, in direct opposition with post-Kantian thought, something that emerges from its encounters with the world: each subjective, embodied, and perceptual encounter—whether with actual, physical objects, or with ideas or “mental acts”—produces the subject “anew,” as so many new selves, as “fresh event[s]” (*wc*, 21). In Bakhtinian terms, neither the world nor the self is ever finalized, let alone finalizable, for the latter comes into being in the “very course of its encounter with the world” (*wc*, 21), which, in its turn, is in flux and multiply informed by such encounters.

Bakhtin’s rejection of any “monologic” conception of truth finds a parallel in Whitehead’s (and Kant’s) contention that there is no truth somehow already in the world, waiting to be discovered. There is no knowledge, of self or world, outside subjective experience and such experience is always partial, necessarily limited. “The given,” Shaviro writes, “always exceeds our representation of it” (*wc*, 49). For Kant, our perceptual or sensible reality is the reality of appearances; we do not perceive the reality of “things in themselves,” because to perceive objects/entities in time and space is a function of our minds, not something unchangeable or absolute in the world. It is the faculty of reason that enables us to invest structure into the randomness and order the chaos of our sensible experience. Kantian cognition is thus a dual process involving both intuition and understanding. Extending this founding assumption in his work on aesthetics, Kant argues that it is the function of judgment to recognize beauty and to grasp our

aesthetic experiences as part of an ordered, purposive natural world. Bakhtin follows Kant in the assumption that human beings come into existence in their everyday encounters with one another and with the world, but he rejects his dualist account of the relation between internal thought and external experience. Similarly, Whitehead accepts Kant's "Transcendental Aesthetics," according to which sensibility and receptivity are prior to understanding in our experience of the world, but he dismisses his "Transcendental Logic," according to which "ordered experience is the result of schematization of modes of *thought*, concerning causation, substance, quality, quantity."²⁰

Kant's mistake, according to Whitehead, is that he ultimately subordinates sensibility and receptivity, the faculty of intuition, and thus the a priori possibility of being affected by that which is given—and all we are given is appearances in space and time—to the imperative of understanding by the imposition of concepts, or Categories, in his formulation of cognition. He thereby, Shaviri writes, "unduly privileges those particular sorts of abstraction that are peculiar to human minds and other 'high-grade' organisms," reserving experience for "rationalist beings alone" (WC, 50). By assuming that our intuitions are passive and that appearances are just the raw data of experience that must be processed in the understanding by the imposition of concepts, Kant, Shaviri continues to point out, "in effect reaffirms the *cogito*: the Cartesian subject that is separated from, unconditioned by, and implicitly superior to the world that it only observes from a distance" (WC, 50). This reaffirmation of the *cogito* not only reinscribes the traditional opposition between (inert, passive, shapeless) matter and the (active, formative, constructive) mind, and thus "ignores all the *intermediaries* that are at work in any actual process of formation and construction" (WC, 53); it also essentially obviates what is crucial to Kant's aesthetics itself: the supposition of the a priori forms of intuition of space and time, of a prior sensibility and receptivity that allow us to be affected by the appearances of things and to be affected by such appearances in a particular way.

Whitehead counters Kant's dualist/rationalist argument by introducing what Shaviri considers to be one of his "most important notions," that is to say, the idea of "'subjective' form." Every "prehension," every grasping or sensing of one entity by another, includes what in traditional epistemological terms would be called a subject and an object,²¹ but, more importantly, includes a third aspect, namely the particular way in which a *datum* is prehended, the *quale* of the *sensa*; this is what Whitehead calls "subjective form." Taking into account that prehension is not necessarily conscious and that the subject does not exist before the encounter with the object in which it is produced, it is this third aspect, the "affective tone determining the effectiveness of that prehension in that occasion of experience,"²² Shaviri maintains, that is the "really crucial one," since it entails

that in the determination of an object, there is always “some margin of indeterminacy,” depending on how the subject *feels* the (objective) datum (wc, 55). Such indeterminacy is the equivalent of what for Bakhtin is, in the artistic encounter, the aesthetic object, that which escapes the object’s organized materiality and its cognitive determination as a consequence of the fact that our experience of it is first of all affective in nature. Objects (whether actual material entities or mental acts) affect us, prior to and irrespective of our understanding of them. In the immediacy of our sense perception, our experience acquires a significance that refutes the binary opposition between mind and matter, for the “affective tone” that, in Shaviro’s words, “suffuses every experience of perception,” both “determines and exceeds cognition.” And since perception, he proceeds, is “first of all a matter of being affected bodily,” every perception or prehension “provokes the body” into being in a particular way: “Contact with the outside world strengthens or weakens the body, stimulates it or inhibits it, furthers or impairs its various functions.” This is “already the ‘subjective form’ of the prehension,” Shaviro writes, for it is the way phenomena are felt, the way the “feeling entity” interacts with other entities—which is the same as saying that being affected or changed in/by the prehension is the “very content of what it feels” (wc, 57, 59). Hence Bakhtin’s otherwise quite startling assertion that the “organized activity” of an artwork constitutes the (invisible, inaudible) creator as an “embodying, and not as an embodied activity.”²³

Shaviro’s reading of Whitehead’s philosophy, it will be clear, in the first place seeks to displace the *cogito* from its privileged position by replacing reason with affect in its primacy and productivity, and to expose the reductive implications of any cognitive theory of mind by reading them against Whitehead’s “theory of emotions.” My reason for discussing the latter’s “critique of pure feeling” derivatively, by way of Shaviro, however, is not only that his reading of Whitehead appears to offer an overall philosophical foundation to Bakhtin’s contemporaneous yet more narrowly focused “architectonic aesthetics.” Shaviro’s project in *Without Criteria*, at least the section I have hitherto focused on, also allows me to take Bakhtin’s notion of artistic creation as both activity and as embodying event from its primarily antiformalist, originating moment into the current one, that is, into the context of the emergent formation of a neo-aesthetics in the wake of the affective turn. This, finally, enables me to substantiate my initial claims with regard to the *differentia specifica* of art, as activity and as aesthetic event, and briefly to reflect, in the concluding paragraphs of this chapter, on the affective, embodying operations of an art form that is not generally recognized as such, and that in its “ontological ambivalence” thus constitutes a productive site to explore the aesthetic as a “distinctive event” while still being firmly located in the practice of life, which, to recall Bakhtin, only becomes real for us in “aesthetic intuition.”

For Kant, as we have seen, the world and everything within it exists for us in our sensible, perceptual experience of it; there is no possibility for us to know the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Yet in defining the process of cognition as both intuition and understanding, Kant brings our (hence necessarily contingent, messy, and open) experience of the world—and ourselves—under the ordering principle of reason. Whitehead, in contrast, positing feeling rather than cognition as the basis of all experience, assumes our experience to be ordered and organized from within, from within subjective feeling. He thus postulates, Shaviro writes, an “immanent criterion for order” as something that can “only be an aesthetic one” (wc, 66). Since there is nothing outside our subjective experience, Whitehead identifies aesthetics as, to repeat Shaviro’s formulation, the “mark of . . . our *concern* for the world.” On the face of it, such an immanent ordering function would seem to render change, newness, disorder, and novelty impossible, and thereby negate what Bakhtin in the course of his writing came to regard as the supreme value: unfinalizability in art as in life, which, he argues, is not only an ethical necessity, but a phenomenal one as well. Such appearances notwithstanding, Whitehead’s notion of prehension nonetheless places newness, novelty, change, at the center of our being in the world, because the critical factor of “subjective form” in every prehension entails that the immanent (aesthetic) order of our experience is always marked by a certain indeterminacy, in the sense that the way we perceive or feel a given object is likely to be different from the way it has and will be perceived by other subjects and, moreover, from the way we feel/perceive it from one encounter to the next. In other words, we are never affected in exactly the same way twice by any “objective datum,” and since our selves are continually produced anew in a discontinuous process of aesthetic encounters, novelty is an intrinsic aspect of becoming, of affecting and of being affected. The important thing for Whitehead is “not *what* something is, but *how* it is—or, more precisely, how it affects, and how it is affected by, other things.” This may well render novelty, as Shaviro concedes, a “function of *manner*, rather than of essence” (wc, 56), but it simultaneously makes it into a necessary, inalienable aspect of becoming, because each occasion, each act of becoming (within the series of occasions that jointly make up the event), is “unique” and thus entails the “production of novelty” (wc, 20).

If, as Shaviro argues, an “act of feeling is an encounter—a contingent event, an opening to the outside—rather than an intrinsic, predetermined relationship,” and if feeling “changes whatever it encounters” (wc, 63), it follows that all entities in the affective event are subject to change, opening onto novelty and to the future. To the extent that any entity exists in its relations to other entities and that it is affected by these relations, an existence of its own may thus be attributed to that which Whitehead calls an “objective datum,” but such existence is never

fully determined: both present and past relations have and continue to inform it, to affect it, and to be affected by it. To re-evoked Bakhtin's terms, creativity, the creation of the new, is immanent in constantly ongoing, yet discontinuous and transformative processes, and thus not a random interruption but, on the contrary, the constitutive result of the accumulated variations that make up the daily "event of being."

Since subject and object are relational and thus relative terms, the critical function of "subjective form" in every act of prehension means that the "objective datum" is affected itself, informed by the encounter, by the act of feeling that calls it into being in the first place—and never once and for all, never in the same way twice. What is more, even if, for Whitehead, the most important thing is to show that the basis of all sensible experience (and not just in the creation and reception of works of art) is aesthetic, there is a differentiation, even a hierarchy in the modes of feeling, in the degree of intensity that marks the aesthetic fact in its uniqueness, qua experience. Such relativity, rather than leading to an overall indifference, reducing, say, a Rodin sculpture to the rock I bump my toe against (although the latter will clearly produce an intensity of feeling), instead allows us to postulate a specific place for art as a particular zone of intensity in which a given object, already informed by previous relations, by other acts of feeling, past and present, does not so much enter into a relation with my pre-existent subjectivity, but calls me into being as what Bakhtin calls an "active *subiectum*," as a contemplating subject, a subject that, as Shaviro puts it, "subsists only to the extent that it resonates with the feelings inspired by that object" (wc, 13). Such feelings, upon which our existence as subjects depends, are thus both pre- or nonpersonal and pre- or nonsubjective.

To maintain the possibility of a *differentia specifica* of art and, with Bakhtin, to insist on the "unique, necessary, and irreplaceable place" art occupies *within* life, we do not need a definition that helps us to separate art off from non-art on the basis of its intrinsic qualities, of its formal and material aspects, its thingness: the operation of any object as "art" is fully contingent upon the degree of the aesthetic intensity, on the way it affects us, and on the uniqueness of the contemplative event. Decisions about the "value" of artworks, about their function in the activity of aesthetic creation, furthermore, are never final, or finalizable, because there is always a certain indeterminacy about such decisions, depending on the "subjective form," on the way the object is perceived or felt by the observer. Whereas art acquires its necessary place in life from its transformational potential, from the ways the encounter with an artwork is something that actively happens to us, an event that constitutes us anew as subjects, an ambivalent, dynamic event that enables novelty per se, such decisions—or aesthetic "judgments"—on the contrary, are not, nor are they universal. As "happenings" in the world, artistic encounters, or

occasions, are at once specific, unique, and purposive only to the effect that they are capable of making things happen—of what Bakhtin calls the production of a “distinctive aesthetic existent,” a “completely new ontic formation.”

Whitehead’s notion of “subjective form,” his emphasis on the *how* as distinct from the *what* of prehension, the affective tone that suffuses any and all sense-perception, additionally allows us to grant, evoking Bakhtin, “the right sort of specificity” to a particular artwork in its “unique effects in the real world,” in its *haecceity* or “thisness.” Such effects, it should be clear, cannot be limited to the artwork’s formal aspects, or even to what Bakhtin awkwardly defines as the “emotional-volitional relationship that is expressed by form,” to the exclusion of its materiality, its “thingness.” Since our experience of the world and the entities of the world primarily affect us, are felt by us, in our bodies, on a corporeal level, that is to say, in our fully animate being, these effects do not merely engage the traditionally (at least in art criticism) privileged modes of sense-perception of seeing and hearing, the detached, distanced contemplation that Kant considered essential for aesthetic judgment. On the contrary, they also centrally involve all other forms of embodied (or embodying) perception, such as the senses of smell, touch, and taste. This entails that in addition to formal aspects, such as shape, design, and arrangement, as well as rhythm, harmony, and symmetry, the material aspects of tone, color, and material texture, those qualities Kant relegates to the interested domain of the “agreeable” and the “pleasurable,” are intrinsic and equally active and intense *qualia* of the experience of, and constituted in, artistic creation and contemplation.²⁴

That the material, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory aspects of art have generally been neglected and subordinated to sight and hearing is not only the result of the legacy of Aristotle’s classical hierarchy of the senses, but it also derives from the conventional distinction, in line with this classical model, of the division of the field of creative practice into that of arts and crafts. This distinction and the different evaluative connotations these terms evoke traditionally find their basis in the differences between both certain practices and certain products. Painting, sculpture, and printmaking, for example, are regarded as practically “useless” activities springing from the imagination and/or from the genius of the individual artist. Ceramics, fiber/textile, and wood- and metalwork, in contrast, are practices associated with technical ability, which result in skillfully produced objects that are largely appreciated in terms of their practical usefulness.

This distinction in evaluation was first formally called into question at the turn of the twentieth century when the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and elsewhere, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, sought to elevate the status of craftsmanship and the “decorative” arts and to expand the application of the *aesthetic criterion* hitherto reserved for the “fine” arts to include the

“vernacular” forms of the creative practices of craft and design. Writing against this background, and against that of an emerging avant-garde modernist movement that would equally, and perhaps even more fundamentally, call into question all classical distinctions and appreciations of art forms and genres, Bakhtin and Whitehead, each in his own way, and to divergent purposes, appear to respond—whether deliberately or not—to these developments by effectively foregrounding precisely those aspects of aesthetic activity that obtain in the sensual and perceptual body in its entirety, that is, on the prepersonal and presubjective level of affect, and thus provide a philosophical framework in which to place contemporary developments in the world of art and craft at large.

Art as organized and experienced activity, in its eventness, as something active and intense, something that *happens*, does not only mobilize the “higher” senses of sight and hearing, but necessarily includes, if it does not in effect “trigger,” the “lower” senses of smell, touch, and taste as well. This phenomenal inevitability is theoretically borne out by Bakhtin’s notion of artistic creation, *in tandem* with Whitehead’s “theory of pure feeling” and its focus on affect and singularity, of aesthetic activity as not so much an embodied as an “embodying event.” The central concern with “the new,” which the two thinkers share in common,²⁵ furthermore unmistakably identifies the *poietic* function of art—that is to say, *poiesis* in the Heideggerian sense of a “bringing-forth,” or a threshold occasion, a moment when something shifts from where, what, and how it was, to become another—in the reality of the aesthetic fact.

Transformation, change, novelty, all require the contingent, messy, and open experience of the world—and of ourselves, an equally messy process in which art, when it is truly creative, plays a constitutive, if indeterminate and ultimately indeterminable, role. While claiming such a *poietic* function, and thus also a certain autonomy for art overall, I recognize, pace Bakhtin, that there is no point in “abstracting a phenomenon or linking it up with a system,” and that in order to account for its unique and singular effects in the world, we need to approach every aesthetic fact with the “right sort of specificity.” Let me therefore, in provisional conclusion and before I narrow my focus in subsequent chapters to various forms of visual art, say a few words about a kind of “threshold” art form in and of itself, a form that necessarily enchains the body and all its senses in its operations: that which is alternately designated “modern,” or “art jewelry.”

The awkward phrase “modern/art jewelry” serves to distinguish its practice and products from the more commercial and mass-produced objects of fashion jewelry. (See figures 1.1 through 1.4, as well as plates 1 and 2.) It is nonetheless difficult to differentiate, at least in traditional art historical terms, works of “modern jewelry” as particular kinds of *artworks* from the products of its “monologic” counterpart, which, as precious objects, largely serve decorative, ornamental func-



FIG. 1.1 Seth Papac, *Iris Jewelry Portrait*, necklace, 2009.
Diamonds, burl wood, silver,
velvet ribbon, 28 × 15 × 10 cm.
© Seth Papac

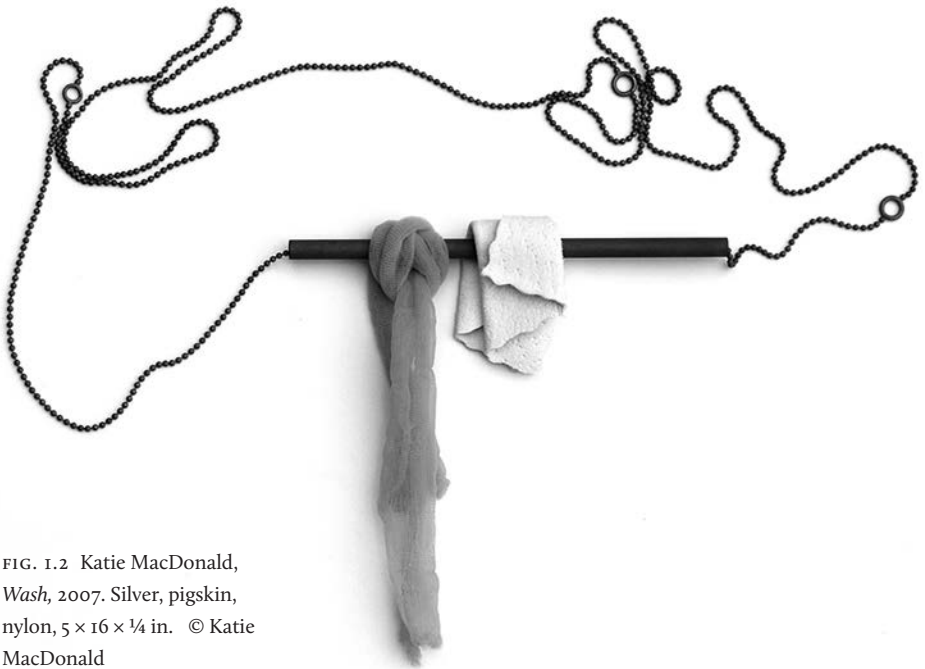


FIG. 1.2 Katie MacDonald,
Wash, 2007. Silver, pigskin,
nylon, 5 × 16 × ¼ in. © Katie
MacDonald

tions. While undeniably the result of processes of making and doing, objects of the latter kind, so-called fashion or costume jewelry, do not constitute processes of making and doing in the sense Bakhtin allows us to perceive in the aesthetic event proper; they do not, in other words, serve *poietic* functions themselves. Because of its undeniable connections and its shared traditions (in terms of some materials and techniques) with fashion jewelry, modern/art jewelry is not often credited with the power to generate what Bakhtin calls a “completely new ontic formation,” to enable a form of perceptual experience that leads to a “distinctive aesthetic existent.” Moreover, as one among a number of art forms inelegantly qualified as “body-related,” contemporary art jewelry has traditionally, and at least until the 1970s—not least because of the legacy of Kantian aesthetics—been relegated to the lower regions of artistic hierarchies. Defying the possibility of merely “disinterested” contemplation, and emphatically forging connections with the materiality of the flesh rather than offering themselves exclusively to the eyes or to the disembodied operations of the rational mind, body-related artworks, even if they do not necessarily privilege matter over mind, inescapably inscribe the body of the spectator-recipient into the force field that makes up the aesthetic encounter: the event that is at once intense activity, affective experience, and a process of co-creative reorganization on the level of the body in its actualization, of a de- and reconfiguring corporeality.

Yet whereas some forms of performance art may have, since the 1970s, gained critical respectability (perhaps primarily because of their daring, radical, and, sometimes scandalous qualities), such benevolence has thus far not been generously bestowed on modern/art jewelry, precisely because of its unabashed and inescapable materiality and tactility.²⁶ In light of what I have been suggesting throughout my discussion of Bakhtin’s and Whitehead’s respective post- or anti-Kantian critiques, this does not in any way diminish such works’ potential operation as art, that is, as temporarily and relatively congealed complexes that generate an “aesthetic object in its purely artistic distinctiveness,” or as potentials for specific kinds of conscious and unconscious action. I would go so far as to say that it is its essential “objectness,” its ineluctable “thingness,” that does not so much obviate the operations of modern/art jewelry as aesthetic event as it points up the crucial function of touch, smell, and taste, in addition to sight and hearing, in our actual experience of art form as activity. Certain forms of body-related art, but especially those art forms in which tactility plays a central, literal role, also underline the requirement, in aesthetic reflection, to identify “the right sort of specificity” that will enable us to make an individual artwork “answer for its unique effects in the real world.”²⁷

Since modern/art jewelry is directly related to the body rather than to the contemplative mind, in the sense that these works are literally to be worn, af-

fectively present (though not necessarily “knowable”) as things-in-themselves, to be touched, handled, and assembled into the clothes, bodies, and flesh of their wearers, instead of being treated with the lofty detachment of the contemplating gaze, modern/art jewelry has, in the post-Kantian context of most traditional art history and criticism, been both feminized with respect to its practice and products and has been marginalized as a form of craft in relation to modes of “high” art, such as painting and sculpture. Placed in the context of an emergent neo-aesthetics, possibilities for which it has been my aim to begin to outline in this chapter, it is because of its distinction from other modes of art, more precisely in its essentially tactile specificity, that modern/art jewelry allows us to acknowledge the centrality of animated/animating feeling, of the forces of embodied affect. Such forces function over and above those of understanding and cognition, that is to say, they obtain in the *poietic*, transformative operations of art in its *differentia specifica*, in that they enable a form of experience that resists the pull of objective determination and material finalization.

Seth Papac’s *Iris Jewelry Portrait*, for example, combines a traditional precious metal—silver—with diamonds, burl wood, and a velvet ribbon (see figure 1.1). Forming a loose and changing configuration in warm colors of browns and yellows, the piece plies and folds itself in relation to its context: showcase, human body, wall pin. The diamonds more or less disappear into the burl wood, defying both the symbolic meaning of this most precious of gems and its traditional appearance as the centerpiece of a ring, tiara, or necklace. The diamond’s legendary purity is furthermore contained in, and thus overshadowed by the burl, partly polished, partly showing itself in its gross excrescences, like a cancerous growth or an extracted tooth. Burl is a peculiar and highly figured wood, prized for its beauty by many, but the whimsical shape of the unpolished wood underlines the fact that it results from a tree undergoing some form of stress and may be caused by an injury, virus or fungus. Beautiful in terms of arrangement, colors, and composition, the piece’s contradictions emerge in its variegated tactility, in the clash between the perishability of the ordinary ribbon, the soft silver, the porous wood, and the rock-hard diamonds. This piece of jewelry is, by definition, in process; it embodies growth, endurance, and evanescence at once. Wearing a piece like this, especially since its title suggests that this is a portrait of a human being who temporarily resides on my body, as part of my body, makes me complexly aware of my experience of embodiedness in its materiality, its inescapability, as well as its finiteness, my mortality, the perishability of the flesh.

Or Iris Eichenberg’s strange piece called *Broek*, made of different shades of knitted pink wool and shaping itself into some kind of abstracted conglomerate of truncated human legs, a female breast, a garment (see plate 2). What does this object have to do with ornamentation, how does it relate to jewelry, when all



FIG. 1.3 Iris Eichenberg,
Untitled, from the series
Tenement/Timelines, 2007.
Brass, iron, bone, 12 × 1 × 9 cm.
© Iris Eichenberg



FIG. 1.4 Katie MacDonald, *Half-Stop*, 2007. Porcelain, pigskin, 1½ × 26 × ½ in.
© Katie MacDonald

it suggests is the intensity of a body making something (the traditional craft of knitting) in its most utilitarian sense, suggesting a connection between the animal (a sheep's skin transformed into thread) and pink human flesh—but not in its juicy, blood-filled, throbbing materiality, but rather in its homey coverings, the knitted sock, the warmth of a covering without content? Yet the piece cannot but escape its feel, its suggestion of warmth, of protection, of domesticity, despite its simultaneous lugubrious presentation of tactile and partially visible corporeality.

As a minoritarian mode of artistic expression par excellence, modern/art jewelry provides us with the “exceptional circumstances” under which we can become quite viscerally aware (on the level of our bodily mass) of the processual character of our selves, and of the constitutive function of affect in the process of our continued coming-into-being. By entering into its force field, by attaching myself corporeally (a self that will not outlive this particular moment of its actualization) to an individual work of art jewelry, I find myself solicited into a process of becoming in a Bakhtinian/Whiteheadian sense, that is to say, I experience the unfinalizability of a self, which, to use Shaviro's phrase, is “animated by the feelings that comprise it” (WC, 12), and which must thus be constantly renewed, triggered, or brought forth.

The *poietic* (transformative, transgressive, disorganizing, if not deterritorializing) force of the aesthetic in its operational mode surfaces occasionally in the uncanny material aspects of these works. For instance, when, in Katie MacDonald's *Wash* (figure 1.2), the process of making and the choice of materials suggest a familiarity that stands in sharp contrast to the transgression of bodily boundaries the work in its actualizing presence, in its “thisness” or *haecceity*, effects (see also plates 3 and 4).

At the same time, as data, or givens, these objects are constantly in flux, both in their “thingness”—there are, for example, no limitations with respect to the choice of materials for individual works (which hence range from traditional ones such as gold, silver, and other metals, to nylon, pigskin, brass, iron, bone, porcelain, wool, felt, cotton, silk, and wood, some of which emphatically inscribe their own material evanescence, their factual perishability)—and as far as their spatiotemporal operations are concerned, since they move from the hands of the maker, via stores, fairs, and galleries, to the variety of clothes, bodies, and flesh of their equally various owners with whom/which they become momentarily assembled, and from whom/which they inevitably also detach themselves. Unlike my experience of looking at a painting or sculpture in a museum, with the usually explicit instruction “do not touch,” the activity of wearing a work of modern/art jewelry urges me to forge singular, sometimes fleeting im/material corporeal connections with its energetic force, its intensity, so that I temporarily emerge

as a “fresh event,” a new self in and as a never-to-be-fully stabilized or finalized plane of consistency—*and it makes me aware of this.*

It is because of the latter aspect that art jewelry not only quite literally affects me in my actual embodied encounter with it but also provides me with the unusual circumstances that make me inevitably and consciously aware of its *poietic*, transformative force, that the experiential events staged by this “minor” mode of art offer a way of approach of the aesthetic on its own terms. It allows us to begin to see what neo-aesthetic inquiry into art, in its simultaneous indeterminacy and phenomenological actuality, may entail. In the next chapter, I will stage additional artistic encounters, not with a minoritarian art form like modern jewelry, but with the majoritarian practices of sculpture and painting to further explore some of the larger theoretical questions raised by contemporary aesthetics, which will be discussed in connection with, and in distinction from the conventionally related projects of ethics and hermeneutics.