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Violent Embrace

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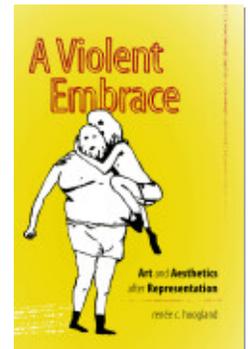
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Beauty is not like a superlative of what we imagine, a sort of abstract type we have before our eyes, but on the contrary, a new, unimaginable type that reality affords us.

Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*

TWO VIOLENT BECOMINGS

from the *informe* and the abject
to uncontrollable beauty

On September 16, 2001, five days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the controversial German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007) gained unprecedented fame, or notoriety, far beyond the relatively narrow circles of avant-garde music lovers, by describing the events of 9/11 as the “greatest work of art of all time.”¹ Widely dismissed as highly “distasteful, tactless comments,” his statements provoked such a moral outcry that the composer felt forced to apologize formally a few days later. That he publicly asked the “forgiveness of anyone who felt hurt by what he said”² did not, however, prevent a series of concerts featuring his work scheduled for the week following 9/11 to be canceled.

Stockhausen’s provocative and admittedly insensitive words subsequently became the starting point for extensive debates on a wide range of ostensibly unrelated topics, including the nature of terrorism and contemporary warfare,³ the power of the media, the “current information war,” the “process by which art develops,”⁴ as well on the nature, power, and limitations, especially the ethical limitations, of “the aesthetic” as such, both in theory and practice. The latter debates more or less coincided, if they did not also spur on, a renewed interest in ethics in the world of critical theorizing (“post-theory” that is) in which ethics had re-emerged not so much as a “master discourse” to be debunked—as it had been in the overall rejection of liberal humanism by all varieties of 1980s and

1990s poststructuralist and deconstructive theorists—nor as a “kind of moral orthopedics,” but instead, and precisely in the wake of the poststructuralist decentering of the subject, to be recentered, and “reconfigured, reformulated, and repositioned,” as a “praxis, but also a principle . . . a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually re-articulates boundaries, norms, selves, and ‘others.’”⁵

Curiously enough (or perhaps not so curious at all), the “ethical turn” in the world of especially literary critical theorizing in the early years of the twenty-first century appeared to be closely bound up with the renewed interest in theoretical aesthetics developing more or less simultaneously.⁶ While obviously a long-standing tradition harking back to at least the eighteenth century, this coincidence nonetheless poses a problem because the association of aesthetics with ethics has frequently led to an unwarrantable collapse of the one into the supposedly larger project of the other (however reconfigured or reformulated). It is against the background of this recurring collapse that I would like to take up the challenge posed by Stockhausen’s provocative comments and attempt in the present chapter to further substantiate my claims to a *differentia specifica* of art and, thus, of aesthetics as something fundamentally distinct from ethics. This will be done by thinking through a notion of the aesthetic that runs from Kant’s critical aestheticism through “the abject” as a specific mode of aesthetic operation, in conjunction with Bataille’s related notion of the “*informe*,” to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the “line of flight.” I will then extend my reflections on Bakhtin’s “dialogical prosaics” in tandem with Whitehead’s “theory of pure feeling” to posit an overall “aesthetics of existence” in which art nonetheless maintains its specificity as a site of “uncontrollable beauty.”⁷ By that I mean beauty, not—as Kant suggests—in its radical difference from the sublime, as mere “*restful* contemplation,”⁸ but rather as an equally potentially transformational, disorganizing, if not deterritorializing force, whose effects are not necessarily pleasant or reassuring⁹ and whose ethical implications are neither pre-given nor unambivalent. To do this, I must begin, again, with Kant.

The connection between beauty and morality is a theme that permeates Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (hereafter *CJ*). It is most prominently implied by two of the four “moments” he attributes to the aesthetic judgment, which are the disinterestedness of the spectator and the judgment’s obligatory nature. As a consequence of his overall supposition that the world is and can only be known to us through the senses, in *aesthesis*, Kant is concerned to show that aesthetic judgments are at once subjective and universal. Aesthetic judgments are subjective in the sense that they are the result of the way in which we are *affected* by an object, and that they do not necessarily involve properties of the object itself. Aesthetic judgments are nonetheless universal and not merely personal or individual because

they are disinterested; we do not stand to gain anything from the object beyond the “pure” pleasure we may derive from our encounter with it. Significantly, for Kant, even the ethical interest we may take in an artwork’s subject is not part of our aesthetic judgment of it: “Any taste remains barbaric if its liking requires that charms and emotions be mingled in, let alone if it makes these the standard of its approval” (CJ, 69). Kant nonetheless derives a moral function from the demand for the universality of aesthetic judgments and, furthermore, submits that aesthetic experience serves as moral instruction, in that the “beautiful prepares us for loving something, even nature, without interest” (CJ, 127).

For Kant, beauty and morality are thus not the same, and their operations do not coincide: “The beautiful pleases immediately (but only in reflective intuition, not, like morality, in its concept).” Yet aesthetic experience appears as a condition, as prior to the possibility for moral judgments since the beautiful “pleases apart from all interest (pleasure in the morally good is no doubt necessarily bound up with an interest, but not with one of the kind that are antecedent to the judgment upon the delight, but with one that judgment itself for the first time calls into existence).” As an exercise in selfless attention—the guiding principle of aesthetic contemplation—the disinterested nature of the aesthetic judgment links beauty to morality because it is the selfless attention being given to “pure beauty” that invokes the moral point of view: “Taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap; for taste presents the imagination as admitting, even in its freedom, of determination that is purposive for the understanding, and it teaches us to like even objects of sense freely, even apart from sensible charm” (CJ, 230).

At the same time, however, an active attention to beauty for Kant—and it should be clear that he is “strictly” referring to the beauty of nature—functions as a “symbol of morality,” as a token of a moral disposition: “I do maintain that to take a *direct interest* in the beauty of *nature* (not merely to have the taste needed to judge it) is always a mark of a good soul; and that, if this interest is habitual, if it readily associates itself with the *contemplation of nature*, this [fact] indicates at least a mental attunement favorable to moral feeling” (CJ, 166). The ambivalence emerging here as to the priority of the experience of beauty and morality reflects the ultimate duality of Kant’s thought—the dualism, or hylomorphism, so vehemently rejected by Bakhtin and Whitehead¹⁰—that brings aesthetics, as it was defined in 1735 by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) as “the science of how things are known *via* the senses,”¹¹ under the aegis of understanding or cognition. Sensation, Kant says, may give rise to pleasure but in order to be able to judge something to be beautiful, our sensation must engage our capacities for reflective contemplation. The outer, external, or bodily sense of *aesthesis*, as distinct from the sense of inner

consciousness, would thus appear to lose both its priority (Whitehead) and its distinctiveness (Bakhtin).

Most famously reflected in Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889–1951) dictum "Aesthetics and Ethics Are One,"¹² it is the still generally accepted link between aesthetic experience and ethics that is Kant's legacy and that which has both figured centrally in, and been most frequently challenged by, neo-aesthetic modes of thought, especially by those that presuppose a central function for affect in our engagement with art. In order to see the operation of the aesthetic in its own right, in terms of affect and singularity and not merely as a transitional force to accomplish something else, it seems, then, that we need to get a grip on or, better still, effectively disentangle the persistently recurring link between ethics and aesthetics. For if we follow Whitehead in his contention that the basis of all experience is "emotional," that the "basic fact is the rise of an affective tone originating from things whose relevance is given," then we need to study the affective operations of art as distinct from reflective contemplation, "before," as it were, they become subject to the sway of concepts, or Kant's Categories. After all, for Whitehead, *aesthesis*, or sense-perceptual experience, is largely unconscious and thus has little to do with understanding and cognition. Indeed, he takes this supposition even further in *Adventures of Ideas* (hereafter *AI*) by additionally pointing out that the "notion of mere knowledge is a high abstraction" and that "conscious discrimination itself is a variable factor only present in the more elaborate examples of occasions of experience" (175–76). Reflective contemplation in a Kantian sense is therefore not an immediate part of the a priori "prehension" of an object, the "special activity" that is provoked within a subject in its encounter with the world and with what is in the world, that is, the constructive activity that calls the subject into existence in the very "occasion of experience" (*AI*, 176).

Furthermore, in order to approach the aesthetic on its own terms, it is not only necessary to differentiate between aesthetics/intuition and ethics/cognition on one hand, but also, on the other, and no less importantly, between aesthetic inquiry and hermeneutics. For aesthetic hermeneutics, especially in the tradition of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), is primarily concerned with our *comprehension*, our conscious awareness and understanding, or even with the mastering of our experience of aesthetic pleasure, rather than with *prehension*, with the occasion of aesthetic experience (qua activity) as such. Aesthetic hermeneutics also lands us squarely in the domain of phenomenology with its central concern for individual comprehension and, therewith, under the assumption of a subject that exists prior to and that "intends" the world and its objects, rather than a subject that is constituted in the very encounter with the world.¹³

Both the ethical and hermeneutic traditions of thought in art history and criticism prove hard to shed, or even to sidestep, in the hierarchy of established and

generally respected disciplinary approaches. As Gabrielle Starr points out in her essay “Ethics, Meaning, and the Work of Beauty” (2002), many contemporary critics “tend to reenact the welding of categories at the heart of eighteenth-century British aesthetics,” extending the “merging of aesthetic inquiry with ethics or hermeneutics” so that the function of the aesthetic itself tends to get eclipsed by its presumed “ontological and disciplinary superiors.”¹⁴ Whereas it would make no sense, of course, to deny that the aesthetic has ethical, social, or hermeneutic significance, it still remains critical, as Starr correctly stipulates, to acknowledge that “neither ethics nor hermeneutics can answer aesthetic questions.”¹⁵

Before continuing to trace the more elaborate thread that traditionally connects ethics to aesthetics, let me take a moment to discuss an example in which the limitations of the latter project’s traditionally “significant other” (i.e., hermeneutics) become strikingly clear. The example is drawn from a mode of art criticism that has gained a certain popularity under the various rubrics of “visual narrative” or “visual narratology,” and which thus finds its origins in a methodology invented to study the operation of narrative texts, even if it tends to be substantially reconceived when applied to nonverbal art.

Narrative, writes Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, one of the founding voices in narratology, in her essay “Concepts of Narrative” (2006), has become an omnipresent term in current thought and discourse, flying across a variety of media and disciplines—or interdisciplines—within which it has acquired equally varied meanings and implications.¹⁶ Starting from her own early definition as “the narration of a succession of fictional events,”¹⁷ a definition that hinges upon the two minimal requirements of a “double temporality” and the “act of mediation or transmission which . . . is verbal,” Rimmon-Kenan makes a distinction between concepts of narrative deriving from narratology and those adopted in relation to psychoanalysis, ideology, and the “notion of ‘storied lives.’”¹⁸ While deploring the far too “elastic” nature of the latter three and bemoaning their implied neglect of the “formal properties dear to narratologists,”¹⁹ she is nonetheless willing to accede to a broadening of the concept from within narratology itself, an expanded use of the term based on the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula* and *suzjet*.²⁰ In the sense of *fabula*, Rimmon-Kenan concedes, narrative “was ‘always already’ . . . open to shaping in different media,” in that both “events are open to representation in different media,” and their “scope has been open to interpretation both within narratology and beyond.”²¹ In contrast, narrative as *suzjet*, she insists, is and must remain both language-bound and restricted, as it was originally understood, to “artistic composition,” as distinct from other modes of verbal organization.²²

While acknowledging the potentially enriching effects of a given concept’s adoption by and within other disciplines, and applauding the possibilities such conceptual travels offer for rethinking it, Rimmon-Kenan also warns against the

dangers of collapsing the *differentia specifica* of narrative in the narrow sense into those of the artistic and non-artistic modes of expression or discursive formations with which it shares what Wittgenstein has called some “family resemblance.”²³ Eventually, in the final section of her essay, titled “A Modest Proposal,” she suggests reserving the term “narrative” for those discursive formations in which a double temporality and a “transmitting (or mediating) agency” are dominant, and to attribute no more than “narrative elements” to those that do not meet these two requirements.²⁴

No such qualms about conceptual purity appear to beset another seminal figure in the field of narratology, the versatile, exuberantly interdisciplinary critical theorist Mieke Bal. In her “reading” of artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois’s multimedia *Spider* and *Cells* series (see figures 2.1 and 2.2)—installations that because of their abstractly architectural qualities would definitely fall outside the realm of narrative art as conceived by Rimmon-Kenan—Bal takes the concept and operation of narrative to be the central and defining aspect of these extremely powerful works.

While deploring what she describes as an “overdose of narrativity” in the “cul-



FIG. 2.1 Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (You Better Grow Up)*, 1993 (detail). Steel, glass, marble, ceramic, and wood, 83 × 82 × 83½ in. The Rachofsky Collection. Photo: Peter Bellamy.

© Louise Bourgeois Trust / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



FIG. 2.2 Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 2003. Stainless steel and fabric, 9 × 12 × 14 in.
Private Collection. Photo: Christopher Burke. © Louise Bourgeois Trust / Licensed by
VAGA, New York, NY

ture within which art functions today,” Bal nonetheless insists that narrative is a “function of Bourgeois’s architecture” because the artist “uniquely . . . infuses form, including the form that informs her work’s architecturality, with memory.”²⁵ Bal’s project in this essay, however, does not just concern the function of narrative in Bourgeois’s work; her secondary purpose is—by positing narrative as a “tool,” a “mediator,” and a “participant”—to evoke Bourgeois as a “philosopher and art critic who offers a theoretical position on the role of narrative in the discourse on art.”²⁶ Clearly not content with merely offering a “modest proposal” about the function of narrative in visual art, Bal’s argument meanders through a wide range of theoretical issues, a trajectory in which Bourgeois’s work—or, rather, Bal’s own instrumental “reading” of it—serves as the site of ultimate proof, that is to say, as the manifestation of the rivalry between the “narrative of viewing” and the “narrative of memory,” which the critic suggests to be the indeterminable yet undeniably “sense[d]” bedrock of Bourgeois’s work²⁷ and which, in the final instance, “emerges victorious” against its rival, the force of Bal’s own pages-long narrative of description.²⁸

To be sure, I do not have any problems with Bal’s suggestion that Bourgeois’s serial work, evolving over an extended period of time and only to be engaged within an equally extended period of viewing—as the critic quite rightly points out, “viewing is by definition a process”—imposes an awareness of temporality.²⁹ Nor would I contest her attribution of a certain degree of narrativity—what Rimmon-Kenan calls “narrative elements”—to nonverbal, in this case sculptural, artifacts. After all, as Marie-Laure Ryan reminds us, “from its earliest days on, narratology has been conceived as a project that transcends disciplines and media,” a project, moreover, that has French structuralism, more particularly Roland Barthes and Claude Bremond, to thank for the emancipation of narrative from literature and from fiction and for recognizing it as a semiotic phenomenon “present” not only within literature and fiction, but also within “oral conversation, drama, film, painting, dance, and mime.”³⁰ Nor do I find Bal’s argument that Bourgeois’ work offers a new kind of narrative by “articulat[ing] and activat[ing] temporality” entirely unconvincing.³¹ What I do find fault with, however, is first, the suggested *primacy* of narrative in Bourgeois’s artwork, to the neglect of its purely visual dimensions (after all, we *see*, rather than *read*, sculpture), and second, that Bal’s entire argument is grounded in the idea that every single narrative aspect of Bourgeois’s work is ultimately reducible to an undefined concept of “memory.” Memories attributed to the artist and memories of the viewer, both evoked by the work and in the descriptive account of the critic’s experience of viewing the work *after* the event, are interchangeably presented as the constitutive parts of a “visual narrative,” defined as a question not so much of “tell[ing],” but of “*build[ing]* a story.”³²

In addition to striking me as a primarily semiotic project rather than as an attempt to ask aesthetic questions, as distinct from ethical or hermeneutic ones, the argument here seems to flounder on Bal's eagerness to read *stories* into, instead of merely acknowledging the narrative aspects of Bourgeois's complex, and as an aesthetic event, unique and singular work. The contradictions of the narratologist's multiple investments in the project of art interpretation come even more poignantly to the fore when she eventually tries to analyze the undeniably representational elements in the artist's "visual narrative" while simultaneously insisting upon the works' unreadability: "Iconographically speaking," Bal maintains, Bourgeois's "work is non- or even antifigurative. At the same time it is far from abstract. Wildly figurative in fact, it nevertheless precludes an analysis that relies on figuration. It is as bodily as it is, and as such it is unreadable"³³—an assessment with which I heartily agree. The larger part of her essay, however, is precisely an attempt at "reading" these works, more specifically, at bringing close reading practices from literary studies to the study of visual art.³⁴

In singling out a narratological approach to suggest the limitations of aesthetic hermeneutics in trying critically to address artworks in their "special, distinctive quality as well as [their] infinite potential," I do not mean to contest the use of the term "narrative" as inappropriately used outside the context of fictional language, for works of visual art obviously may evoke all kinds of stories in a recipient or spectator. The problem arising from Bal's expanded use of narrative or narrativity in her approach to Bourgeois's (and other contemporary artists') work, however, is the interpretive framework's ultimate inadequacy to address the aesthetic dimension, the way the work affects me, how it makes me feel. Put differently, and with reference to Kant, my active experience of these works may well give rise to ideas at the very occasion of my prehension, but such ideas are essentially aesthetic in nature; they are "inner intuitions to which no concept can be completely adequate." As the "counterpart (pendant) of a *rational idea*," to which "no *intuition* (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate," the "aesthetic idea," for Kant, may well be called an "idea," because it "at least strive[s] toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience." Yet as a "presentation of the imagination," the aesthetic idea "prompts much thought" to which "no determinate thought whatsoever . . . can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it" (*CJ*, 182–83). By insisting on the primacy of narrative in Bourgeois's *Spiders* and *Cells*, Bal loses sight of precisely that which makes these works, in effect, "unreadable," the ineffable aesthetic feelings prompted in and by the occasion of our actual (ap)prehension of them.

If the project of a neo-aesthetics has any viability, that is to say, if there is anything "new" to be thought in the context of the affective turn and, thus, if a so-called new aestheticism is to amount to something more than a reinforcement

of several of the main tenets of eighteenth-century theories of art, and therefore be able to answer aesthetic questions rather than ethical and hermeneutical ones, it seems clear that aesthetic inquiry should not be made to produce meanings that are the central concern of other branches of critical thought, but rather should ask what kinds of questions aesthetic inquiry can raise (and perhaps answer) that ethical and hermeneutic inquiries by definition cannot.

Two problems appear to emerge at this point. First, how are we to distinguish between objects and experience in conducting aesthetic inquiry? And second, given that aesthetic experience fundamentally involves affect, sense-perception, and/or intuition, rather than conscious understanding and cognition, how are we to analyze its operations when, as Isobel Armstrong has argued, for affect “we have no (or few) terms of analysis”?³⁵ As to the first problem, I wish briefly to return to an aspect of Whitehead’s re-articulation of the subject-object relation as discussed in the previous chapter. We recall that Whitehead accepts the philosophical account of this relation as the “fundamental structural pattern of experience” but that he departs from the prevailing Cartesian model in which it is cast as the “bare relation of knower to known” (AI, 175). Instead, as we have seen, he defines a “prehension” as consisting in the three factors of the encounter, the “occasion of experience” itself, the “datum” that provokes the activity, and the “subjective form, which is the affective tone determining the effectiveness of that prehension in that occasion of experience” (AI, 176). This means, as suggested before, that no experience of any object can ever be exactly repeated and that, in line with Kant’s critical aestheticism, the aesthetic value of an object cannot be fixed over time and space. This is the case, first of all, because spatiotemporality is neither objective and real, nor a substance, nor an accident, nor a relation. Instead, spatiotemporality is subjective in nature in that it originates from the mind in its attempt to coordinate everything “sensed externally,” which is the same as to say, the way we experience the world *aesthetically*. Second, and perhaps more importantly, because even if the object provokes the occasion of its relevance, it is what Whitehead calls the “subjective form” and that which becomes the “occasion of an absolute reality,” which “enjoys its decisive moment of absolute self-attainment as emotional unity” (AI, 177).

Since experience generally is the occasion, the “moment” at which the subject is born and at which it is born anew in its singularity, over and over again, as so many “fresh events” in an ongoing process of discontinuous transformation, aesthetic experiences not only change in one person from that of another, as much as they change cross-culturally and historically, but they also “bring forth,” in a Heideggerian sense, the subject itself as a “threshold occasion” that will never be the same from one occasion to the next. Hence, what we subsequently *make* of a certain aesthetic experience, that is to say, in reflective contemplation *after* the

event,³⁶ is an effect of critical thought, subject to the law of reason rather than the effects of the activity of experience itself. The changeability of the experiential effects of such occasions thus implies that aesthetic experience is by definition transient and elusive, a circumstance that simultaneously differentiates the ways artistic objects work and what they do from what critical discourse tries to capture about them within the determinate system of language or cognitive evaluation.

As to the second problem, the relative lack of terms or tools of analysis when dealing with experiences that are essentially affective in nature, I propose that it may be necessary, at least for the moment, to suspend the critical need for analytical closure and focus instead on the possibilities for actualization that are opened up in/by the aesthetic event, possibilities that emerge precisely because of its transient character. Thinking tools that may nonetheless be helpful in approaching the transformative makings and doings of the aesthetic can be found in, if not quite an alternative, then definitely a complement to the post-Kantian tradition of aesthetic theory, one that runs from the eighteenth-century English painter, satirist, and writer William Hogarth to the twentieth-century French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The connection between these respective thinkers is not only the generally acknowledged “radical” character of their ideas in defiance of dominant post-Kantian modes of aesthetic inquiry, but also, and more relevant to my purposes here, the conceptual echoes between the former’s notion of the “serpentine line” in art or aesthetics and the latter’s elaborations of the “lines of flight” operative in overall processes of creativity.³⁷ In order to clarify these conceptual echoes, a brief detour is required through a third critical term, one that has not coincidentally frequently been associated with the work of Louise Bourgeois, and that is the notion of the abject. I paradoxically invoke this term in order to connect Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming” with both Kant’s and Whitehead’s notions of “beauty” so as to approach the function of art, in its *differentia specifica*, and in the occasion of its actualization, on the level of affect.

In proposing the abject as a critical hinge in trying to think through an operational form of aesthetic inquiry that does not immediately threaten to collapse into ethics or hermeneutics, I do not mean merely to evoke images of objects of disgust. I am thus not using the term in the sense of lacking in dignity or falling short of the standards befitting humans, or the state of being cast out. Instead, I put “the abject” to use in its more abstract sense, as that which falls outside the established order of signification and/or symbolization, as a site where the relationship between signifier and signified collapses, and as a moment that escapes determination and the materiality of objects while yet maintaining its connections to the real world in that it only obtains in the actualization of the aesthetic event.

There are, in effect, two aspects of the notion of the abject as it has gained currency in critical theory and art criticism, following Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of it in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), which are relevant in this context. First, the sense in which the abject dissolves the traditional distinction between subject and object. Kristeva articulates this as follows:

The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an object, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to it.³⁸

Building upon the seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) by social anthropologist Mary Douglas,³⁹ the second aspect that is central to Kristeva's psychoanalytically inspired notion of abjection is its designation of our complex response, a mix of revulsion of and desire for bodily fluids, open wounds, sexual detritus, vomit, slime, spittle, menstrual blood, sperm, putrefaction, and decay. While additionally picked up by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) to designate the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject, the site where those abjected from society, such as women and homosexuals, are supposed to dwell,⁴⁰ it is this second aspect, the idea of the abject as a moment of "horror and wonder," that has since Dada been primarily evoked in relation to art and with respect to successive artistic movements that deliberately set out to transgress against and threaten established standards of propriety. The actual phrase "abject art" has nonetheless only gained particular currency since the Whitney Museum in New York gave these movements their name by staging an exhibition in 1993 titled "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art,"⁴¹ which included work by such mainstream artists as Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick, Gilbert and George, Robert Gober, Carolee Schneemann, and Jake and Dinos Chapman (see figures 2.3 and 2.4), while at the time more marginal figures such as Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Ron Mueck, Sarah Lucas, and Sam Taylor-Wood are also generally regarded as key contributors to the abject in art (see figures 2.5 through 2.7).

Using the term "abject" in connection with art inevitably evokes the sense in which it has largely been used in contemporary art criticism, even if the transgressive potential of the work of some of the artists most frequently tagged as "abject art" appears to have substantially worn off since their co-optation by/within the artistic establishment and critical community. As respectable citizens of the dominant art world, the once "minoritarian" visual discourse of some of the artists mentioned above has lost much if not all of its power to shock or to



FIG. 2.3 (left) Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1991. Wood, beeswax, leather, fabric, and human hair, 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 45 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (33.6 × 41.9 × 117.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Werner and Elaine Dannheisser (173,1996). © Robert Gober, Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by sCALA / Art Resource, NY

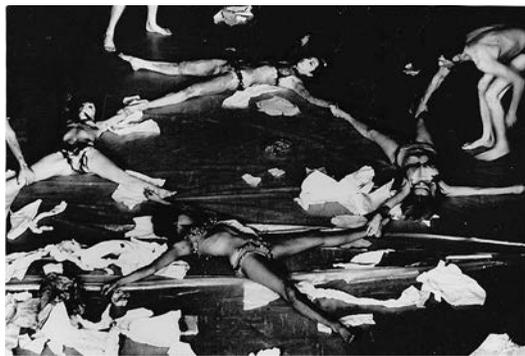


FIG. 2.4 (right top) Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964. © Carolee Schneemann. Photo: Tony Ray-Jones, 1964



FIG. 2.5 (right bottom) Kiki Smith, *My Blue Lake*, 1995. Photogravure, à la poupée inking and lithograph on mold-made En Tout Cas paper, edition 11/41, 43 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 54 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (110.4 × 139 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. © Kiki Smith and Universal Limited Art Editions, Inc. Photo: Albright-Knox Gallery / Art Resource, NY

produce outrage or disgust. While this does not mean that these works have also lost their deterritorializing force, to use the terms of Deleuze and Guattari, it does mean that the qualification “abject” no longer appears to apply or to suggest anything meaningful about the function of these works in the “concern” they are likely to provoke in the experience of the contemporary spectator.

The reason I introduce the abject in the context of an attempt to think through neo-aesthetic activity is therefore not that I wish to retain the second aspect of Kristeva’s influential formulation, that is, its association with revulsion and



FIG. 2.6 Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man)*, 2000. Pigmented polyester resin on fiberglass, 80¼ × 47½ × 80½ in. (203.8 × 120.7 × 204.5 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest and in Honor of Robert Lehrman, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, 1997–2004, for his extraordinary leadership and unstinting service to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

disgust, explored within a largely psychoanalytic framework. It is the first, more philosophically framed problematic of the subject-object relation of the Kristevan notion of abjection that interests me, that is to say, a sense of the abject in which it was originally introduced by the French surrealist Georges Bataille (1897–1962), in its connection with and distinction from the latter’s concept of “formless,” or the *informe*, which he elaborated in the “critical dictionary” published in his periodical *Documents* (1929–1930). In its ostensible simplicity, and because of its current notoriety, it is worth quoting Bataille’s entry on the *informe* in full:



FIG. 2.7 Sam Taylor-Wood, *Soliloquy IV*, 1998. C-type color photograph in artist's wood frame, 87 × 101 in. (221 × 256.5 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, 2003. Photo: Lee Stalsworth

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.⁴²

While often seen as closely related terms, the differences between the “object” and the *informe*, as used with respect to contemporary art practice, are nonetheless considerable. Indeed, as Rosalind Krauss has suggested, in its thematization of the marginalized, the traumatized, and the wounded, much of what is

categorized as “abject art” in fact runs counter to the idea of the *informe* in that it produces a “thematics of essences and substances” that advances a semantic engagement with the work rather than foregrounding its operations as a “process of ‘alteration,’ in which there are no essentialized or fixed terms, but only energies within a force field, energies that, for example, operate on the very words that mark the poles of that field in such a way as to make them incapable of holding fast the term of any opposition,” whether between subject and object, pure and impure, inside and outside, or signifier and signified.⁴³ That I would still, for the moment and albeit provisionally, like to hold on to the term abject, rather than fully revert to Bataille’s notion of the *informe*, has to do with the fact that, first, the qualification still appears to have some purchase in art critical discussions, and second, because, in its boundlessness, in its insistence on breaking down borders, provoking both horror and wonder, the abject resonates remarkably with the Kantian sublime, to which I will turn below.

Thinking of the abject *operationally*, as suggested by Bataille’s term the *informe*, and as distinct from the thematization of the marginalized, the traumatized, and the wounded, privileged by the conventional art critical use of the term, the concept of abjection would refer to the splitting apart of meaning from within, to the unassimilable, nonrepresentational, fundamentally processual aspects of the aesthetic event that effectively resist or actually foreclose its recuperation within either the project of ethics or the practice of hermeneutics. Seen in this light, Stockhausen’s comments on the collapse of the twin towers, whose endlessly repeated televised relays kept us all glued to the screen in fear and fascination, do not so much suggest a fundamental lack of good taste or insensitivity on the part of the septuagenarian composer, but rather a keen insight into the compelling force of the abject, that is to say, *not* as a quality or an essential aspect of any object, but as a singular response or reaction, as a particular structure of experience in a Whiteheadian sense, where the “occasion” of experience “at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject, with an affective tone drawn from this object and directed towards it” (AI, 176). In a day and age in which little, if anything at all, has retained its power to shock, to destabilize, and, with specific respect to art, to resist co-optation and assimilation into an increasingly market-driven, commercialized art world, it was perhaps the unimaginable mediated reality of 9/11 that was still capable of generating the “abject” feelings of horror-*cum*-wonder, the ambivalence of what Kant calls the “*terrifying sublime*.”⁴⁴

By not entirely disconnecting the abject from the *informe*, as Krauss appears to advocate in the essay cited above, it becomes possible first to foreground the fundamental interdependence of the terms in the subject-object relation while not losing sight of the fact that the (abject) object is nonetheless given, something

to be received, potentiality to be actualized in the occasion that is the subject/experience, and that the only reason for its actualization is, in Whitehead's words, our active "concern" for it, concern "divested of any suggestion of knowledge" (*AI*, 176), including the modes of knowing required for ethical judgments. Second, by retaining a notion of the abject in an operational sense, as an entity in a process of alteration in which the critical term is what Whitehead identifies as the "subjective form," that is, the affective tone that permeates our immediate perception (prehension), we can not only recognize the appeal of that which, in a rational sense, would merely provoke our revulsion and disgust (and thus the fact that such effects wear off and are fundamentally contingent), but also that the difference between the attractive and the repulsive, the beautiful and the sublime, is one of degree rather than kind. That is to say, it is a difference not so much in terms of an opposition as one originating in the degree of affective intensity that marks the occasion of highly differentiated aesthetic experiences—experiences that, critically, include a sense of beauty.

To be sure, to bring beauty into a discussion of contemporary aesthetics is a risky, if not regressive, undertaking. As Shaviri aptly points out, "most aesthetic theorists and innovative artists of the twentieth century tend to disparage the very idea of beauty" and to privilege the sublime for its "disruptive, transformative, potentially redemptive" qualities, in comparison to which beauty appears "staid, conservative, and recuperative." Shaviri continues to suggest that there are also considerable political risks involved in returning to or hanging on to the notion of beauty, in that "beauty" today has become, on one hand, a "mere adjunct of advertising and product design," and, on the other, is "exalted as an eternal value, an essential attribute of great art, something that miraculously transcends, and nullifies, all social and political (let alone commercial) considerations" (*wc*, 153, 154). In this section of *Without Criteria*, it is Shaviri's aim to elucidate the ways in which Whitehead's aestheticism, even if the latter does not "himself offer us any concepts of directly political import," is nonetheless "radical enough that it nudges and cajoles us away from the complacencies and satisfactions of commodity culture" (*wc*, 157, 159). My desire to "return" to beauty must be understood in the more narrowly defined terms of my major concern in this chapter, which is the specific, if not privileged, position of art as a transformative force field in the context of a general aesthetics of existence.

In interrogating the relations between beauty on one hand, and the abject, the *informe*, and the "terrifying sublime" on the other, I follow Kant and Whitehead in the supposition that in distinguishing among such qualifications, we are not making a distinction between object-immanent qualities but instead between different feelings or affects. As Kant writes in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (hereafter *BS*), the "various feelings of enjoyment or of

displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain" (BS, 45). This does not mean that such feelings of "pleasure or pain" are merely personal, solely the effect of individual predilections or taste. To the extent that all our affective reactions to the world are largely unconscious and hence prepersonal, a judgment of taste, in Shaviro's words, "involves an uncoerced response, on the part of the subject, to the object that is being judged beautiful" (WC, 2). The object that produces the occasion of our experience presents itself, in Whitehead's compelling phrase, as a "lure for feeling" (*Process and Reality* [hereafter *PR*], 25),⁴⁵ and it is in the way we uncoercedly respond that the subjective form is actualized. Whitehead infers from this that the "only actuality implicated in the subjective form is the immediate occasion in process of self-formation" (AI, 254).

The moment I part ways with both Kant and Whitehead is, it will be clear, in their insistence on a strict separation between beauty and the sublime. If the difference between these two basic forms of aesthetic experience is, in Shaviro's helpful gloss, that the "sublime is about immensity, excess, and disproportion" and "concerned with questioning the limits of representation and form," whereas beauty is "about harmony and proportion" and "entirely contained within, and satisfied with, those limits" (WC, 153), it would appear that this difference, in oversimplified terms, revolves around the separation between the formed and the formless or, more precisely, between form and the *informe*. To the extent that the function of all art, at a minimum, is to provide us with unexpected "lures for feeling," to prevent us from succumbing to the ease of nonfeeling, the *informe*, as, to recall Krauss's description, a "process of 'alteration,' in which there are no essentialized or fixed terms, but only energies within a force field," is as critical to the operation of the beautiful as it is to the sublime, so that the differential relationship between them is not so much oppositional as it is complementary. As Bataille's dictionary entry on the *informe* makes sufficiently clear, the differential between these two forms of aesthetic experience plays out in art—as much as it does in the (always contingent) distinction between art and non-art—in the degree of intensity that marks each aesthetic fact in its singularity. This, finally, brings me to the suggested conceptual echoes between Hogarth's "serpentine line" and Deleuze and Guattari's "lines of flight."

Originating in the Renaissance *figura serpentinata*, the "serpentine line" finds its paradigmatic definition and exploration in Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), "written with the view of fixing the fluctuating ideas of taste," as the work's subtitle reads.⁴⁶ Hogarth's theory of aesthetics is, like Kant's and like that of most other eighteenth-century thinkers, primarily concerned with natural beauty, with the harmony and grace of natural form, and with the superior beauty of the form of the human body in particular: "The human frame hath more of its

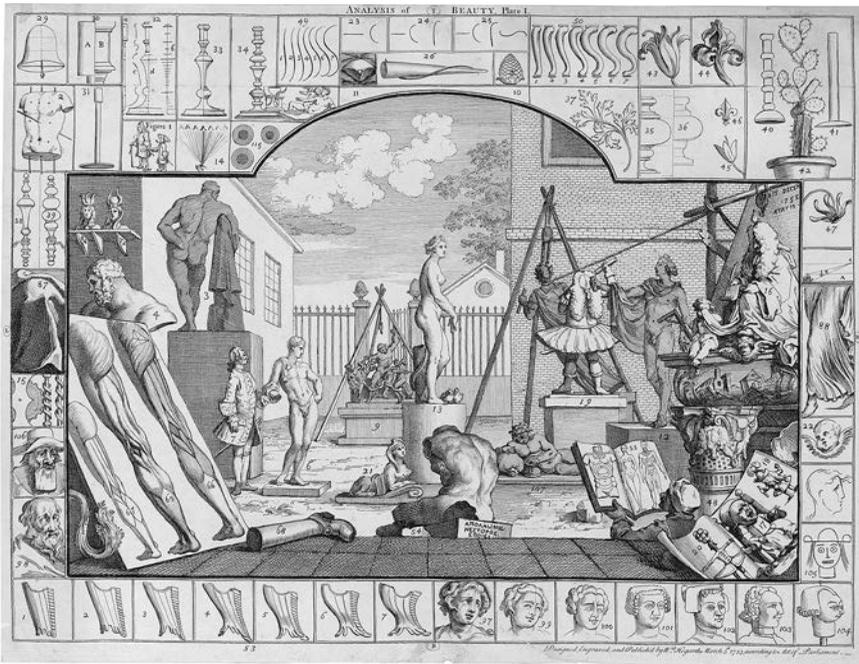


FIG. 2.8 William Hogarth, *Analysis of Beauty*, Plate 1. © The Trustees of the British Museum

parts composed of serpentine-lines than any other object in nature; which is a proof both of its superior beauty to all others, and, at the same time, that its beauty proceeds from those lines.” Also defined as the Line of Beauty, the term the “serpentine line” qua form refers to a “two-dimensional waving line that has been twisted so that it spirals into three dimensions” (see figure 2.8).

Despite Hogarth’s focus on the classical representation of the graceful human body, the line makes less sense as an actual form than as that which embodies aesthetic desire; it “mimics the processes the mind performs in searching for and in apprehending the beautiful.”⁴⁷ It is important to bear in mind, though, that some serpentine lines are not beautiful, in the sense that they do not mainly involve “restful contemplation” (Kant). On the contrary, within an object, as the boundary line of an object, or as a virtual boundary line formed by the composition of several objects, serpentine lines generate liveliness or activity and energize the attention of the recipient/spectator, in contrast to straight lines, parallel lines, or right-angled intersecting lines, which convey stasis, finitude, closure. This concept of the serpentine line incorporates and resembles the operation of the Kantian sublime in its encounter with which the “mind feels *agitated*.” Such “agitation,” says Kant, can be “compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid altera-

tion of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object” (CJ, 115). It also prefigures Whitehead’s ostensibly paradoxical—in the sense that it appears to clash with his privileging of the harmonious function of the beautiful over the destructive operation of the sublime—elaboration on the relation between “Harmony and Discord.”

“Fortunate experience,” Whitehead writes, is the “enjoyment of Harmony,” and a “factor in this enjoyment is the intuition that the future . . . is increasing the grounds for Harmony.” Destruction is absent from such experience. Yet, he goes on to suggest, “there can be intense experience without Harmony,” since the requirement for the new, for novelty, for change to be possible, some form of discord appears to be quintessential: “In Discord there is always a frustration. But even Discord may be preferable to a feeling of a slow relapse into general anaesthesia, or into tameness which is its prelude. Perfection [beauty/form] at a low level ranks below Imperfection [destruction or the sublime/formless] with higher aim” (AI, 263–64). Hogarth’s Line of Beauty situates such discord and its power to animate, to energize, at the very site where Whitehead conceptualizes “subjective form,” as the third, yet critical aspect of the subject-object relation, and thus as a processual phenomenon, rather than as a factor that is immanent either to the object or as a subjective state or condition. By identifying the animating or “agitating” force of the serpentine line *in art* at the very heart of beauty, Hogarth, essentially simply ignoring the dualism of Kantian aesthetics, furthermore anticipates what in the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari would become “lines of flight,” as characteristic of the “untimely” operations of art and philosophy.⁴⁸ I will have more to say about Deleuze’s aesthetics in subsequent chapters. I wish to conclude the present one, however, by introducing the idea of “lines of flight” in its specific relation to art further to support my claim to art’s *differentia specifica* while still remaining within the framework of the overall aesthetics of experience offered by Whitehead’s metaphysics, that is, within his “critique of pure feeling.”

Put in oversimplified terms, the notion of “lines of flight,” first developed in the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/2003; hereafter *TP*)—Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborative effort to “construct,” in Masumi’s phrase, a “smooth space of thought” (*TP*, xiii)—is a specific mode in the overall process of becoming. Approaching things not as substances, as “things in themselves,” but as “assemblages” or multiplicities, as well as in terms of unfolding forces, that is, bodies and things in their power to affect and be affected, Deleuze and Guattari invent concepts that foreground the ways things connect rather than how they are. “Reality,” for them, is not a given or a mere inversion of the past, but rather the result of tendencies that could evolve in “creative mutations.” A line of flight is in this context, then, to borrow Tamsin Lorraine’s words, a “path

of mutation precipitated through the actualisation of connections among bodies that were previously only implicit (or ‘virtual’) that releases new powers in the capacities of those bodies to act and respond.”⁴⁹

While a “line of flight” is critical for such creative mutations to occur, and whereas they are in fact everywhere—“lines of flight are immanent to the social field” (*TP*, 205)—a line of flight is only one of three kinds of lines that Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to every assemblage in its interaction with the world. There is the “molar” line that sustains the “territorial” connections that define the assemblage, its stability. There is the “molecular” line that is capable of “deterritorializing” or destabilizing the assemblage but the effects of which may be resubjected to stabilization or “reterritorialization.” Then there is the line of flight, or the “*cutting edges of deterritorialization*,” that carries away all the assemblage’s stabilized, territorial sides, and propels a new, different actualization of connections (*TP*, 88, 89). In distinguishing among these lines, we should bear in mind that—as suggested by the fact that lines of flight are “immanent to the social field,” are not substances or fully determinable—the three lines cannot in fact even be neatly separated, for they always coexist and may transform into one another.

Equally importantly, especially in the context of what I have been trying to think through in this chapter, which has been the interrelations and distinctions between aesthetics and ethics on one hand, and those between aesthetics and hermeneutics on the other, is, first, that the line of flight may take up a privileged position in art and philosophy, in that it disconnects singularities or planes of consistency, effecting a process of deterritorialization, the place and nonplace where new mutations may be actualized, where new hybridities, novelty, may be enunciated. This does not mean, however, that its powers are necessarily beneficent or even desirable. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari emphatically warn us against such an assumption: “The line of flight blasts the two segmentary series apart; but it is capable of the worst, of bouncing off the wall, falling into a black hole, taking the path of greatest regression, and in its vagaries reconstructing the most rigid segments” (*TP*, 205). It is for this reason, because of the unpredictability of its operations in art, in its equal potential for regressive as well as liberatory effects, that the transformative power of the aesthetic as a line of flight, a modality of becoming that breaks through established forms and frames of meaning and being, cannot be equated with the ethical. In effect, the deterritorializing force of the *informe*, as much as that of the line of flight, renders the collapse of the two “projects” not only theoretically unwarrantable, but also fundamentally irresponsible, if not politically dangerous.

Second, the fact that lines of flight, again, particularly in the “privileged” context of artistic activity, may well be seen as a productive force, as the power of

becoming anew, precipitating a crossing of boundaries, an escape from figuration, metaphor, and the proper name, does not mean that its operations are meaningful in and of themselves. As we have seen, lines of flight are not given or even entities that are easily separable from the two “segmentary” lines with which they share a “mutual immanence.” Deleuze and Guattari write: “It is not easy to sort them out. No one of them is transcendent, each is at work within the others. Immanence everywhere” (*TP*, 205). This means that in an attempt to approach or to trace the function of the aesthetic as a force field, as a provisional coagulation of singular and affective energies, or, in Deleuze’s own, much more succinct phrase, as a “bloc of sensations,” hermeneutics, being a search for meaning and interpretation, simply falls short. For the lines that compose the artistic assemblage, just as they do any other assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari maintain, essentially “mean nothing”:

It is an affair of cartography. They compose us, as they compose our map. They transform themselves and may even cross over into one another. Rhizome. It is certain that they have nothing to do with language; it is, on the contrary, language that must follow them, it is writing that must take sustenance from them, *between* its own lines. It is certain that they have nothing to do with a signifier, the determination of a subject by the signifier; instead, the signifier arises at the most rigidified level of one of the lines, and the subject is spawned at the lowest level. It is certain they have nothing to do with a structure, which is never occupied by anything more than points and positions . . . and which always forms a closed system, precisely in order to prevent escape. (*TP*, 205)

In order to maintain the possibility of “escape,” of the new, of novelty and creativity—which for both Whitehead and Deleuze, Shaviro reminds us, is the “highest criterion for thought” (*WC*, 71)—or, in Heidegger’s alternative terms, for the *poietic* function of art to remain viable in an increasingly disagreeable consumerist and politically destructive commodity culture, it is necessary to continue to take the risk of the aesthetic in its indeterminate, if not indeterminable, de- and reterritorializing function, in both its “uncontrollable beauty” and in its essential “untimeliness.” Put differently and more poetically, it is necessary to remain open to the “lures for feeling” given in and by art, and to accept the attraction/repulsion force of its violent embrace.

Without denying the ethical, social, or hermeneutic dimensions of aesthetic creation—which would be clearly nonsensical—what needs to be acknowledged is that neither hermeneutics nor ethics can answer aesthetic questions. The encounter with a work of art, as aesthetic experience, consists in the “eventness”

of its singularity and in the intensive time of its duration. Irreducible to symbolic meaning, escaping the control of the signifier, and thus neither necessarily pleasant nor reassuring, it is in the *haecceity* of the aesthetic event, qua activity, that we literally find our selves (anew). What this may entail for contemporary art study will be addressed in the next chapter, in which I will pursue my post-Kantian inquiry into aesthetics by continuing my engagement with the work of the decidedly anti-Kantian, schizo-philosophers, Deleuze and Guattari.