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Violent Embrace

renee c. hoogland

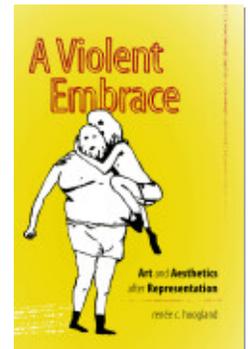
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There is still a popular fantasy, long since disproved by psychoanalysis and science, and never believed by any poet or mystic, that it is possible to have a thought without a feeling. It isn't.

Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

THREE NEO-AESTHETICS AND THE STUDY OF THE ARTS OF THE PRESENT

As more than one critic has noted, aesthetics has, since Kant, suffered from what Deleuze calls in *The Logic of Sense* (hereafter *LS*) a “wrenching duality.”¹ On one hand, Kant uses the term “aesthetics” to define the objective element of sensation, the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience, which critically rests on the a priori forms of time and space—this is the “Transcendental Aesthetic” developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the other hand, Kant deploys the term aesthetics to describe the subjective form of sensation, which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is the experience of pleasure and/or pain, the conditions of the real, or actual experience, advanced as the theory of beauty (and the sublime) in the *Critique of Judgment*.

Following William James, Deleuze adopts a “radical” or “transcendental” empiricism in his theory of art² and insists that we should not impose a priori criteria upon experience but must detect and intuit the conditions of experience from experience itself, and thereby overcome this founding duality of Kantian aesthetics. He claims that “for these two meanings” of aesthetics to be “tied together,” the “conditions of experience in general must become conditions of real experience; in this case, the work of art would really appear as experimentation” (*LS*, 260). The groundwork for the more elaborate theory of art he later developed in collaboration with Guattari was laid in Deleuze’s fundamental critique of West-

ern metaphysics in what is by some critics considered to be his magnum opus, *Difference and Repetition* (1968; hereafter *DR*):

It is strange that aesthetics (as the science of the sensible) could be founded on what can be represented in the sensible. True, the inverse procedure is not much better, consisting of the attempt to withdraw the pure sensible from representation and to determine it as that which remains once the representation is removed (a contradictory flux, for example, or a rhapsody of sensations). Empiricism truly becomes transcendental, and aesthetics an apodictic discipline, only when we apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, the very being of the sensible: difference, potential difference and difference in intensity as the reason behind qualitative diversity.³

As Daniel A. Smith has phrased it, this proposition entails that the two aspects of aesthetics can be “reunited only at the price of a radical recasting of the transcendental project” so that the conditions of *real* experience become one with the “structure of works of art.”⁴ My purpose in this chapter is to work through some of the implications of such a “radical recasting” and to explore what a Deleuzian model of art, based on a “transcendental empiricism,” may contribute to the development of a neo-aesthetics, an aesthetics that can be claimed as an “apodictic” discipline or, in effect, as a first philosophy, that is, to what extent it might meet the demands of the work done by the works of art today, by the arts of the present, and how we might go about studying such work.

For what does it mean, I ask myself, to study the arts of the present? In what ways or to what extent would this be different from studying the arts of the past? What kind of work does art do in this moment that we call the present, and how can we study such work? Let me begin by clarifying my use of the word “study” in this context, which I do not intend to mean to devote time and attention in order to *acquire knowledge* on or of certain artworks. Rather, I am returning the word to its original basis in the Latin *studium*, meaning “zeal, painstaking application,” so as to underline the active, animate, and animating aspects of studying art as activity, to foreground the passion, ardor, appetite, and intensity that come into what Kant (characteristically placidly) calls aesthetic contemplation. In addition to, and perhaps as a result of my desire to foreground the embodied or, to recall Bakhtin, the embodying dimension of aesthetic activity, I take the “study of the arts of the present” necessarily to suggest an approach to artworks that situates itself in the wake of the cultural turn, that is to say, as I put it more precisely in the subtitle of this book, to consider art and aesthetics after representation.⁵ This is an immediate consequence of my adoption of a perspective generally inspired by Deleuze and a result of his insistence on the decentering operations of the

modern artwork in its “pure presence,” and therewith in its “abandonment of representation” (DR, 69).

In *Difference and Repetition* (which appeared a year before *The Logic of Sense*), Deleuze brings these two aspects of the study of the modern artwork explicitly together and connects them directly to the “wrenching duality” of post-Kantian aesthetics:

The elementary concepts of representation are the categories defined as the conditions of possible experience. These, however, are too general or too large for the real. The net is so loose that the largest fish pass through. No wonder, then, that aesthetics should be divided into two irreducible domains: that of the theory of the sensible which captures only the real’s conformity with possible experience; and that of the theory of the beautiful, which deals with the reality of the real in so far as it is thought. Everything changes once we determine the conditions of real experience, which are not larger than the conditioned and which differ in kind from the categories: the two senses of the aesthetic become one, to the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation. (DR, 68)

This passage deserves to be quoted in its entirety, first, because Deleuze here effectively extends the Whiteheadian idea of the “reality of the real” as a question of aesthetic experience that nonetheless allows for a differentiation of the artistic encounter in its singularity and specificity, as experimentation, and second, because Deleuze’s dismissal of the Kantian categories as the “elementary concepts of representation” points the way to a possible mode of studying art that does not conflate hermeneutic procedures and ethical questions with aesthetic inquiry. Key in this undertaking is the notion of the encounter. An encounter in the Deleuzian sense is, not unlike Whitehead’s “prehension,” neither restricted to material entities nor defined by what we already know, nor is it determined by the traditional subject-object relation, that is, as an occasion at which one entity runs into or bumps up against another, with both entities existing before the event and remaining intact. An encounter is, Deleuze submits, a “happening” that makes us think. He writes, “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed” (DR, 139). As something that makes or forces us to think, the encounter is something that can only be sensed (or prehended) and is hence aesthetic in nature, that is, prior to thought, and has therefore nothing to do with either (re)cognition or with representation. As

defined by Deleuze, an encounter is accordingly not yet caught up in any system of meaning and being, at least in the moment of its occurrence, in its presentness.

Deleuze observes that in recognition, which is immediately related to both representation and to the practice of interpretation, the sensible is not that which can only be sensed, but instead that which “bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived,” and which engages the exercise of the senses and other faculties in a “common sense,” or comprehension. In the encounter, the object is not a “sensible being but the being of the sensible”; it gives rise to “sensibility with regard to a given sense” and is consequently the “imperceptible,” the ungraspable, but only so from the perspective of common sense. In the encounter, sensibility reaches its own limits, finds itself before that which cannot be grasped or apprehended by the other faculties, and must thus raise itself to the “level of a transcendental exercise: to the ‘nth’ power.” Since the encounter is a happening both in and of the world, in relation to which common sense functions as a limit to mark off the “specific contribution of sensibility to a joint labour” (*DR*, 139–40)—in that something that can only be sensed is crucial for the possibility of thought—Deleuze’s notion of the encounter [*rencontre*] gives us our first glimpse of what a “transcendental empiricist” approach to art permits.

Encounters, Deleuze suggests, are what make work possible, work, that is, that necessarily occurs in solitude: “The only work is moonlighting and is clandestine.” Such solitude does not mean that there is nothing there; the workspace/time is densely “populated,” not with “dreams, phantasms or plans,” but with encounters, which may include people (“sometimes without knowing them”), but also with “movements, ideas, events, entities.” Although all these things have proper names, such denominators do not, Deleuze continues, “designate a person or a subject,” but rather name an “effect, a zigzag, something which passes or happens between two as though under a potential difference.” Being perhaps the “same thing as a becoming, or nuptials,”⁶ an encounter thus is a participation, an occasion from which something is taken in order to become something that is neither the property of the one nor of the other, but rather a kind of “double capture,” a “double-theft”; it is that which “creates not something mutual, but an asymmetrical block, an a-parallel evolution . . . always ‘outside’ and ‘between’” the forces that create it. Encounters, therefore, do not involve a subject and an object, or even two subjects, and as such do not belong to one or the other, but instead form something “which is between the two, outside the two, and which flows in another direction.” As a becoming, the encounter has, as suggested, nothing to do with recognition—which is in fact its opposite; it is not a meeting of two minds, or a question of kindred spirits, but a finding or stealing without any method other than a “long preparation”⁷—what I have called application or zeal, or, indeed, love.

While often evoked in relation to Deleuze's notion of "the fold," especially the folds of friendship as an existential mode of doing philosophy,⁸ my interest in the idea of the encounter springs from the fact that as occasions or happenings that force us to think, *rencontres* do not merely involve other human beings but equally include the intensities and multiplicities that constitute the experience of art and literature, of the aesthetic encounter in the narrow sense. In *L'Abécédaire*,⁹ Deleuze declares that any form of cultural activity may enable—if it does not form a precondition for—the kind of encounter that engages the very possibility of thought and creativity. As the evocation of a "long preparation" indicates, however, such encounters do not necessarily simply "happen." We need to seek them out, we must be on the lookout, with a certain commitment to being open to creatively productive possibility, to new becomings and to new sensations. Nor are these encounters necessarily or merely entertainment: it may be something troubling or amusing that one draws out of an encounter, but any encounter requires that we are being touched, that we are affected. Deleuze therefore encourages us to search for works of art that affect us, that insert us into the fold of the event that operates according to what he calls a "logic of sensation."¹⁰

For Deleuze, the encounter with an artwork is, in the first place, the precondition for work, for intellectual discovery, the possibility to "get beyond philosophy through philosophy."¹¹ Yet where philosophy, as a constructivism, consists in the creation of concepts and the laying out of a "plane of immanence" or a "plane of consistency,"¹² art, in contrast, produces percepts and affects. Although he elsewhere maintains that concepts themselves involve the "two dimensions" of percepts and affects,¹³ it is in his collaborative work with Guattari, more haphazardly in *A Thousand Plateaus* but more consistently in *What Is Philosophy?* (hereafter *WP*), that Deleuze expressly unfolds his theory of art in terms of sensation, more precisely, of the artwork as a "bloc of sensations," as something functioning in the terms of an assembled logic of sensation.

Bakhtin calls that which escapes both the material form and the symbolic determination of the artwork and that which neither resides in nor springs from the artist/creator, or in/from the reader/spectator, but which is what happens, the event of their "co-creation," the "aesthetic object." In Deleuze, this becomes the something that is preserved in the work of art: "Art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved." What is preserved, "and is preserved in itself," however, does not outlast its support or materials: "If art preserves it does not do so like industry, by adding a substance to make the thing last" (*WP*, 163). What is preserved, then, the "thing or the work of art," is a "compound of percepts and affects." Percepts escape the ones who experience them; they are not perceptions. Affects, similarly, are not feelings or emotions tied to a subject, but the prepersonal forces that make feelings possible in the first place: "Sensations,

percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived” (WP, 174). “Harnessing forces” that are neither subjective nor objective¹⁴ but that are in the world, that populate the world, that affect us, that make us become, yet that are invisible and inaudible, artworks “wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and from states of a perceiving subject” as much as they “wrest the affect from affections as passage from one state to another” (WP, 167). Since their function (or their potentiality) is to “extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensation” from the universe, the work of art is a “being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself” (WP, 163).

Earlier we have seen Bakhtin struggle with the ostensible contradiction of the nature of the work of art whose aesthetic object does not reside in and cannot be inferred from its material form, while yet exerting its embodying force in the concrete “act of co-creation” that makes up the axiological relationship, the act of striving, qua activity, between the author/creator and the reader/recipient, neither one of whom exists prior to the artistic event. Deleuze and Guattari similarly attempt to get at the *being* of art by stressing the materiality of the artwork, the matter in which it is realized, and the living forces of which it is composed. These forces, the compound of percepts and affects harnessed by/in the work of art, are both nonhuman and prepersonal, and yet material: “We paint, sculpt, compose and write with sensations,” but sensation is “not the same thing” as material, in that “sensation is not realized in the material without the material passing completely into the sensation, into the percept or affect. All the material becomes expressive” (WP, 166–67). It is as expressive materiality, then, a materiality that passes into sensation, that the artwork can be seen to function as a part of our environment, our lifeworld, and of the ways we orient our embodied selves in the world, within the circulation of the forces of life, of the universe.

In order for material to pass into sensation, to become expressive, and thus to preserve the sensation it embodies—“art preserves, and it is the only thing in the world that is preserved,” but it is “only preserved in itself”—the material needs to be worked, to be subjected to a method, to be organized or formed, which takes place on the “plane of composition.” When Deleuze and Guattari claim that “composition is the sole definition of art,” they do not mean, or at least not only, technical composition or technique, but instead aesthetic composition, “which is the work of sensation.” Indeed, “only the latter fully deserves the name *composition*, and a work of art is never produced by or for the sake of technique” (WP, 166–67).

The technical plane of composition is “absorbed” by the aesthetic one, and it is “on this condition that matter becomes expressive”: either the “compound of sensations is realized in the material, or the material passes into the compound, but always in such a way as to be situated on a specifically aesthetic plane of

composition" (WP, 196). Just as for Bakhtin the author-creator is present in the artwork only as "organized activity," so does the artist for Deleuze and Guattari wrest percepts and affects from the world of everyday experience in order to use them as compositional elements, to render them expressive, and create sensations *within* the artwork. And only as such do they become available, perceptible to us. New beings of sensation created in the artwork in their turn call us forth in our encounter with it, where every encounter produces us as so many new selves: "Artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound" (WP, 175). As sensory, aesthetic experience, the encounter with an artwork is activity, an action of becoming, of "ceaselessly becoming-other," in a "matter of expression."¹⁵

The definition of art as a "bloc of sensation," as a "compound of percepts and affects," enables us, first, to overcome the reductive operations of hermeneutics and/or semantics and to approach artworks in aesthetic terms. Art, when it succeeds, that is to say, when it is genuinely creative and allows for the production of the new, for the possibility of novelty, and for different varieties of becoming-other, does not serve to re-present what is already there, what is already in existence, and thus cannot be a question of representation. As Deleuze puts it in the context of his critique of identity that is the major project of *Difference and Repetition*: "Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference. Representation has only a single centre, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilises and moves nothing" (DR, 55–56).

Second, this radically empiricist approach to art exposes the fallacy of studying art as the work of memory or even as "narratives of memory" (Bal). As presentations, in the matter of expression, of new and different varieties of affect, wresting affects from affections, and thus moving beyond everyday experiences already lived, art rather functions as the opposite of memory, "which summons forth only old perceptions." Deleuze and Guattari write: "It is true that every work of art is a *monument*, but here the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument's action is not memory but fabulation" (WP, 167–68).¹⁶

Third and finally, a Deleuzian theory of art, with its central emphasis on composition—"composition is the sole definition of art"—while clearly connected to Whitehead's constructive aestheticism, allows us to preserve the *differentia specifica* of art and to distinguish its function and operations from any other entity in the world that we experience through the senses, as a "bloc of sensations" that exceeds our perceptions and affections, that is, the subjective sensations from which the artwork wrests the nonhuman, nonpersonal compounds of percepts

and affects. Whether the sensation realizes itself in matter or, conversely, whether the material passes into sensation itself, the formation of matter on the plane of composition is necessary for matter to become expressive in the artwork.

All this may sound like a kind of neoromantic, all too naive, mystical undertaking, the forces of the universe or the cosmos—or, better, “chaosmos”—being “harnessed” in works of art that themselves are “blocs of sensation,” expressive matter. How can we study such works? And what has happened to critique in this life-affirming process of differentiation, of ceaselessly becoming-other? The increasing influence of Deleuzian thought in literary and art criticism, and indeed the affective turn generally, has provoked a range of similar questions, couched in more or less sophisticated dismissive arguments,¹⁷ and, I admit, with a certain legitimacy: the highly allusive style of their writing, the dizzying range of neologisms that populate their works (and that do not stay in place from one work to the next), the radicalness of their ideas, and, perhaps, their close association with “1968” and beyond, do not make for an easy transition between the two schizo-philosophers at the center of the affective turn and the mode of critique that dominated theoretical debates in the era succinctly described as that of the “discursive turn.” Yet to accuse Deleuze and Guattari of naiveté is erroneous.¹⁸ What is even more worrying about some of the objections raised against any of the current affirmative philosophies, and the affirmative aesthetics I have so far explored, is that such expostulations tend to revert to precisely the kind of cynicism, even nihilism, that they purport to identify and refute.

A case in point would be several shorter writings by art critic and art historian Hal Foster, whose work on the *avant-garde* in contemporary social and political critique, especially in the context of a radical postmodernism, I have always admired and greatly benefited from.¹⁹ His recent essays nonetheless strike me as both unproductive and, in their overall negative sway, expressing a profound sense of disgruntlement in a voice that sounds almost as “forlorn” as he suggests the “quasi-Adornian” position in contemporary critical theory is.²⁰ Before going into this in more detail, let me backtrack a little and point out, perhaps in his defense, that Deleuze clearly perceived that the late 1990s, the heyday of postmodernism and a certain “brand”—and I use the word advisedly—of conceptual art, the period in which *L'Abécédaire* was recorded and broadcast, was a period of cultural crisis and impoverishment, a “period of the desert.”

What Deleuze deplored and found disturbing, however, was not the cultural “poverty” itself, but rather the “insolence and arrogance of people who occupy the impoverished periods.” The “stupider they are,” he says, the “happier they are, like saying that literature is now a tiny little private affair.” Inveterate and irrepressible affirmative thinker that he is, Deleuze yet goes on to state “that it’s not all that serious, since there will always be either a parallel circuit for

expression, or a black market of some sort.”²¹ It is this possibility for something different, however minor, to emerge alongside “mainstream” (commodity) art, for some mode of expression that does not validate an overall cultural despair, that I find sorely lacking, and whose lack I find troubling, in Foster’s take on contemporary art and on art criticism. To be sure, I am not singling out Foster as a critic of a Deleuzian-inspired or vitalist aesthetics, even if he does, as we shall see below, appear casually to dismiss an affect-based approach to contemporary art. The point rather is to show the limits of the primarily negative mode of critique enabled and encouraged by poststructuralist and deconstructive modes of thought, the prevalent model of “critical theory” developed in the late twentieth century that was, as Sturken and Cartwright put it, “seen to be in crisis by the end of the century because the writing associated with it was not providing the kind of explanatory power or impetus to social change desired by many of its authors”²²—Hal Foster included. Let me explain this in more detail.

In October 2008, Foster published an essay in *The London Review of Books* titled “The Medium Is the Market”²³—a not-too-subtle reference to Marshall McLuhan’s insight that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not by the content delivered over the medium, but by the characteristics of the medium itself.²⁴ Foster does not quite follow through on the promise of his title, but his discussion of so-called Business Art, sparked by Damien Hirst’s auctioning of 223 new works directly at Sotheby’s in September 2008, bringing in a staggering total of £111.5 million, adequately suggests his gloomy view on the arts of the present and, more eerily, on their functioning in what art critic Peter Sheldal has called “our plutocratic democracy.”

Although, as Foster admits, the “production for the marketplace has been a fundamental condition of art since the Renaissance,” the Hirst phenomenon (see figure 3.1 and plate 5), which he defines as “an entire career strung together by shock and scandal and a body of work whose medium is a compound of media and market events,”²⁵ not only indicates a structural shift in the relations between art, mass culture, and corporate capitalism. It has also, he maintains, profoundly affected contemporary art as such. The rise of the celebrity artist who produces work that plays up to commodity culture and the fashion industry, corporate sponsorship, and an overall lack of critique are among the immediately visible effects of some artists’ enthusiastic embrace of the business model and their perfection thereof in multitasking studio factories. Foster numbers Jeff Koons and the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami—not coincidentally, both representative of the open, if not defiant, celebration of kitsch, cuteness, and bad taste in their successful attempts to reach across socioeconomic registers—among Hirst’s most prominent peers in Business Art. (As an aside, the largest sum paid for a work by Koons is *Balloon Flower (Magenta)* [figure 3.2], which sold for £12,921,250

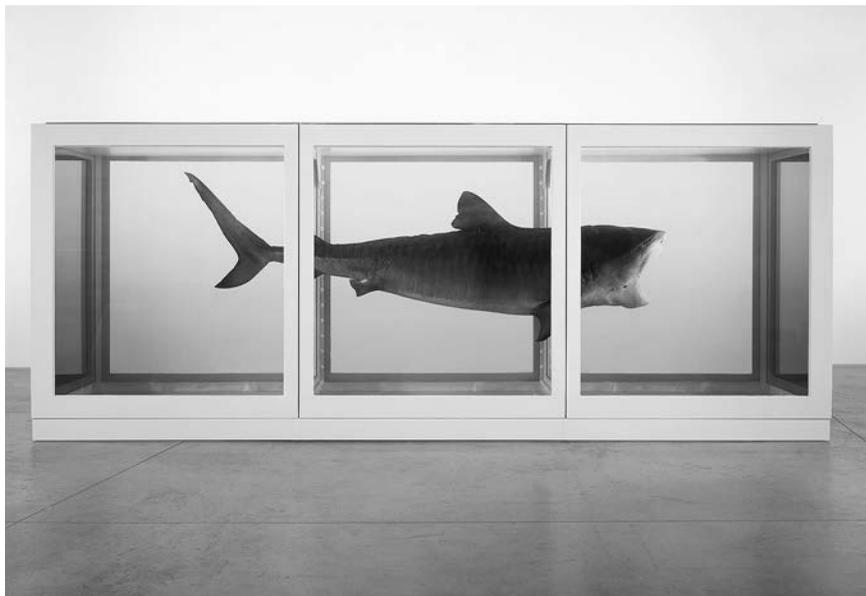


FIG. 3.1 Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991 (sideview). Glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark, and formaldehyde solution, 85.43 × 213.39 × 70.87 in. (2170 × 5420 × 1800 mm). © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2013 / ARS, NY. Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

(\$25,765,204) at Christie's London in June 2008. Murakami's "My Lonesome Cowboy" [1998], an anime-inspired sculpture of a masturbating boy, sold for \$15.2 million at Sotheby's in May 2008.) All three "business artists" oversee studio factories in which the production of computer-generated designs—to be fabricated by assistants and merely signed by the artist—clothing lines, restaurants, publishing houses, radio shows, packaging, animation, and consultancy services, as well as exhibition development and website production, unproblematically converge into the most spectacular model of artistic practice in what Gilles Lipovetsky has called our "hypermodern times."²⁶

Not surprisingly, Foster concludes his essay on a somber note, declaring the "ambiguous achievement" of the trio of Koons, Hirst, and Murakami to be the updating and extension of what Walter Benjamin, in his reflections on the "embittered realisms and bankrupt surrealisms" of the 1920s and 1930s, famously designated the "incorporation of nihilism into the bourgeoisie's apparatus of domination."²⁷ I am not suggesting that Foster does not have a point: the callousness of an increasingly market-driven contemporary art scene and the lack of sustained critique are undoubtedly worrisome. Bearing in mind, however,



Fig. 3.2 Jeff Koons, *Balloon Flower (Magenta)*, 1995–2000. High-chromium stainless steel with transparent color coating, $133\frac{3}{4} \times 112\frac{1}{4} \times 102\frac{1}{4}$ in. (340 × 285 × 260 cm).

© Jeff Koons

Deleuze's suggestion that the "cultural poverty" Foster quite rightly identifies in/with contemporary Business Art may not be all too "serious," and definitely not the only thing that is happening, his altogether negative critique does not allow us much room to look for what is happening in what Deleuze calls a "parallel circuit for expression, or a black market of some sort." This is all the more disturbing since the line from Benjamin's relentless socio-aesthetic critique to Foster's implicit declaration of contemporary art's ethical bankruptcy runs, of course, through Andy Warhol, invoked by Foster as the "master" of 1970s Business Art and subject of the art critic's sustained scholarly interest, as well as the only pop artist referenced, however marginally, by Deleuze.

As is commonly known, Warhol, whose studio was not called the Factory for nothing, used silkscreens to mass-produce images the way capitalist corporations mass-produce consumer goods. He assembled a menagerie of "art-workers" to help him create his paintings and star in his films, and he wrote in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* that "making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."²⁸ Although this would seem to render Warhol an ideal target for Foster's socio-aesthetic critique, the fact that he keeps returning and writing about the pop artist's work suggests otherwise, or at least points to a much more ambivalent position than his essay on Hirst et al. would appear to validate. I will return to this in a moment.

In the more recent essay cited above, Foster continues his gloomy musings on the conditions for the study of the arts of the present, shifting his perspective from contemporary art per se to the "sheer out-of-date-ness of criticism" in an art world that, he submits, evidently "couldn't care less." Foster laments the loss of support for and investment in the project of what he alternatively names "critical theory," "critical art," "critique," and "criticism," a broad dismissal he sees to have pervaded both the academy and the art world at large from the 1980s onwards. Foster's analysis of the situation is sound and worth considering—he mentions as some of the main causes for the "fatigue that many feel with critique today," among other things, the poststructuralist critiques of representation and of the subject, the popular presentation of postmodernism as the "rote expression of neoliberal capitalism," critique's "dependence on demystification," and the reduction of the viewer to passive consumer in critical investigations of cultural power structures.²⁹ In this sense, he and I are in full agreement: the limitations of an overwhelmingly negative mode of critique do not only emerge in the art world at large, but also in the academic fields in which the linguistic and cultural turns respectively have most dramatically changed the direction and purport of critical/analytical debates. Foster's outright rejection of alternative, "post-critical" approaches to contemporary art and culture, effectively (and admittedly quite amusingly) framed as a string of rhetorical questions—"What are the options on

offer? Celebrating beauty? Affirming affect? Hoping for a ‘redistribution of the sensible?’³⁰—nonetheless appear to be as crude as the reduction of postmodernism to commodity capitalism. Nor does his conclusion—that the “post-critical condition” has “for the most part . . . abetted a relativism that has little to do with pluralism”—strike me as particularly convincing.³¹

So even if I do share some of Foster’s concerns, I cannot ultimately subscribe to his overall analysis of the contemporary art critical climate. First, because a Deleuzian approach to art and aesthetics—unmistakably evoked by the dismissive rhetorical question/phrase “affirming affect?”—does anything but preclude “critique,” if what we mean by critique is not so much criticizing existing or prevailing values but to create new or better ones. Deleuze professes that his Nietzschean definition of critical philosophy has “two inseparable moments: the referencing back of all things and any kind of origin to values, but also the referencing back of these values to something which is, as it were, their origin and determines their values.” This leads to an affirmative notion of critique that is firmly grounded in the later philosopher’s “radical empiricism” and that is neither a random embrace of cosmic forces nor a mere celebration of affect. Whereas for Deleuze critique is just as “opposed to absolute values as it is to relative or utilitarian ones,” it simultaneously is, as it is for Nietzsche, “never conceived as a *reaction* but as an *action*.” Refuting both “criticising things in the name of established values” and criticizing or respecting values by “deriving them from simple facts, from so-called ‘objective facts,’”³² Deleuzian critique is an activity, and at its most positive (and this is its affirmative aspect) an act of creation.

Second, I find myself reluctant to subscribe to Foster’s wholesale condemnation of both contemporary art and art criticism on the basis of the exceptionally spectacular and supra-lucrative careers of the trio of Hirst, Koons, and Murakami, because his analysis practically erases the differences between these latter-day Business Artists and less economically successful contemporary artists populating a “black market of some sort,” but also between their “empires” and the much more ambivalent Andy Warhol Enterprises established in 1957. As I have already suggested, Warhol is—in light of the above, perhaps paradoxically—of obvious interest to Foster. In his recent book on Pop art, the critic devotes a chapter to the one-time “master of business art” titled “Andy Warhol, or the Distressed Image.”³³ This highly informative book generally engages the postwar shift in artistic practices that collapsed traditional distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, between private and public, and between image and self, or *Imago* and *Subjectivity*, which Foster sees most suggestively registered in the work of the five artists he discusses (Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter, and Ed Ruscha), who initiated the “first age of Pop” and whose origins are assumed to lie in the mid- to late 1950s.

In the chapter on Warhol, Foster takes Freud, Lacan, Barthes, and Benjamin as his main theoretical interlocutors to explore Warhol and his serial work in terms of the question of difference and sameness in relation to repetition, a question the ambivalent locus of which he projects onto the notion of “distress.”³⁴ The word “distress” is used both literally, in relation to the “Warholian distressing of the image,” as well as metaphorically, in relation to both the postwar subject-in-distress, a subject increasingly mediated by (then) new (now old) technologies, such as photography, television, and cinema, a subject increasingly suspended upon such technologies’ imaginary operations, and in relation to the actual feelings of trauma, loss, melancholy, and mourning that Foster perceives to be compulsively repeated and produced in Warhol’s life and work.³⁵ In view of these key concerns (difference and repetition, affective states, new becomings that necessarily entail unbecomings), it is surprising to find that Deleuze is not mentioned once in the almost sixty pages to which the chapter runs. I think this is a pity. A more affirmative perspective (rather than the negative critiques of Freud, Lacan, Barthes, and Benjamin) might have led Foster to a less desolate—if not a less distressed—appreciation of Warhol’s work in its expressive materiality, and, furthermore, might have enabled him to much more effectively capture the critical and revolutionary power of the quintessential Pop artist’s techniques and repetitions. Let me try to clarify this supposition in more detail.

Previous critics of Warhol, especially those arguing against Arthurs Danto’s well-known interpretation of his serial work, which in highly oversimplified terms revolves around the question of the status of the work of art and its relation to reality³⁶—in other words, the question of what art (and not-art) *is*, and not about what it *does* in the world—do occasionally build upon Deleuze’s brief, parenthetical reference to Warhol in *Difference and Repetition*. As is sufficiently known, Deleuze’s engagement with visual art at some point largely shifted to painting and to color as the locus of sensation, especially in his collaborative writings with Guattari and in his solo discussions of Cézanne and Francis Bacon. It is in his earlier, Nietzsche-inspired philosophical work, however, that he explicitly talks about Pop art and “Warhol’s remarkable ‘serial’ series” (*DR*, 293)—an allusion, Stephen Zepke helpfully points out, must, given the book’s publication date (1968), “refer to the so-called ‘screen-print’ paintings Warhol begins in 1962 and developed over the next five years in what is known as the ‘Death and Disaster’ paintings” (see figures 3.3 and 3.4; see also plate 6).³⁷

Zepke takes up this reference to explore what he calls Nietzsche’s “onto-aesthetics” in relation to Deleuze’s condemnation of any aesthetics that separates art from life. Where Deleuze, echoing Bakhtin, writes that “there is no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life” (*DR*, 293), Nietzsche more exuberantly exclaims, “Art and nothing but art! . . . It is the great

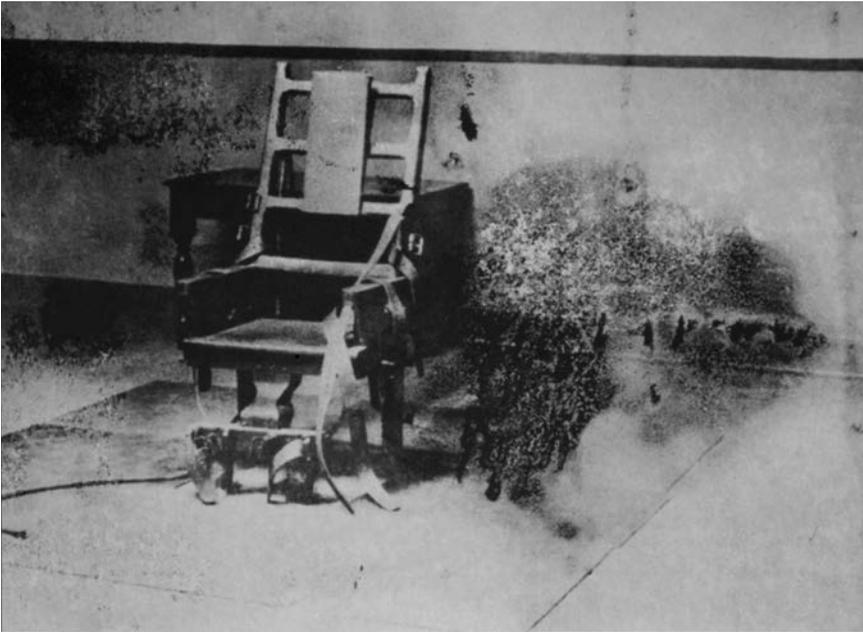


FIG. 3.3 (top) Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair*, 1971. Screenprint on white paper, 35½ × 48 in. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / ARS, NY



FIG. 3.4 (left) Andy Warhol, *Suicide*, 1963. Silkscreen in on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 111½ × 80⅓ in. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / ARS, NY

means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life.”³⁸ Zepke argues that Nietzsche’s notion of art as “procreative,” as both an “affirmative process and the active things it creates,”³⁹ is at once fundamentally antidialectical, antirepresentational, and radically empiricist. For Nietzsche, the affirmation of life forces is the condition for the creation of art, for the art-work/artwork as an “individuation of the world, an interpretation constructing a singularity in which the will to power is expressed as an evaluation that constructs itself.”⁴⁰ The artwork, then, on Nietzsche’s view, is expression—a “harnessing of forces,” in Deleuze’s alternative terms—and not a representation of something else because it only exists as an action or activity in an affirmation of forces that escape the Idea (Plato), or the Categories (Kant).

Using a term largely absent from his later work, in *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze follows Nietzsche in defining the modern artwork as a simulacrum or simulacral. He intends the term, however, not in the negative sense of a distorted reproduction (Plato) or, alternatively, as a perversion of reality, a pretense of reality, or as something that bears no relation to reality whatsoever (Baudrillard), but, in contrast, as “systems in which different relates to different *by means of* difference itself.” “Essential” for Deleuze is that:

We find in these systems no *prior identity*, no *internal resemblance*. It is all a matter of difference in the series, and of differences of difference in the communication between series. What is displaced and disguised in the series cannot and must not be identified, but exists and acts as the differenciator of difference. (*DR*, 299–300)

The simulacrum in a Deleuzian sense is therefore not an impoverishment of reality, but the very means by which the world constitutes and renews itself; it is, in Zepke’s phrase, the “continued creation of the world, the becoming of a world constructed into a mobile series, differentiating and differentiated.”⁴¹ Modern art, having rejected representation in favor of simulacra, is thus the “affirmation of a creative becoming, creating divergent series in which the art-work is continually becoming-other.”⁴² In Deleuze’s own terms, and with specific reference to Pop art:

Art does not imitate, above all, because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by virtue of an internal power (an imitation is a copy, but art is simulation, it reverses copies into simulacra). Even the most mechanical, the most banal, the most habitual and the most stereotyped repetition finds a place in works of art, it is always displaced in relation to other repetitions, and it is subject to the condition that a difference may be extracted from it for these other repetitions. . . . Pop art pushed the copy, the copy of the copy, etc., to that extreme point at which it reverses and becomes a simulacrum. (*DR*, 293–94)

In breaking down the Platonic dualisms between the copy and the real, between art and life, modern art generally, and Pop art particularly, does not reflect or even constitute a loss of some reality existing outside or prior to the artwork, but rather succeeds in injecting itself into daily life “in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition.” In this way, it fulfills the “highest object of art,” which for Deleuze is to “bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decentring; to embed them in one another and to envelop one or the other in illusions the ‘effect’ of which varies in each case” (*DR*, 293).

A similarly affirmative take on Pop art in general, on Warhol’s iconophilia, and on his “serial series” in particular, is presented by Gary Shapiro within the larger context of his book *Archeologies of Vision* (2003). This study of “Foucault and Nietzsche on seeing and saying” centers on the former thinker’s critical interrogation, as it is influenced by the latter’s thought on the visual, of the “differential character of various visual regimes,” and of the “disparate and possibly conflicting visual practices of a single era.”⁴³ Shapiro takes Deleuze’s attempt to reverse Platonic dualism to consist in “replacing a representational image of thought with a form of thinking that understands difference and repetition as primary features of being that need not be traced back to concepts of identity and resemblance”—a revolution in thought that, he goes on to suggest, Deleuze likens to the shift in painting from representation to abstraction: painting “abandons the image, but not visibility, through abstraction.”⁴⁴ Letting go of the image (but not the visual) means that a space is opened up for a decentered perspective on visibility that transforms repetition from a “dreary succession of the identical” into a “displaced difference,”⁴⁵ a mode and notion of repetition that emphasizes multiplicity, change, novelty, the new.

Deleuze’s remarks on Pop art suggest that in rupturing the traditional hierarchy between copy and original and, in the case of Warhol, the use of technological means of reproduction, the emptying out of meaning (whether as essence, substance, or reality) effected by such works is neither distressing nor a cause for mourning, but rather to be embraced as a perspective on a space of “displaced difference” in which the spreading of serial simulacra reveal multiplicity with nothing at its center. Within such a regime of the visual, difference and otherness replace the foundational concepts of the original and its (imperfect) copy. “The truth of art,” Shapiro concludes, “is not in imitation, but in repetition.”⁴⁶ And since for Deleuze repetition is always the repetition of difference, that is, the repetition of difference as, in Zepke’s formulation, the “compositional principle of modern art,”⁴⁷ produces, in Deleuze’s own words, an “internal resonance,” a “forced movement which goes beyond the series itself,” a movement that is pure

affect or the “affective charge” (*LS*, 260, 261) that dissolves the relational identities of subject and object and enfolds them both in the singularity of the expressive event. A Deleuzian onto-aesthetics thus by no means obscures the function of art in its ethical modality because, as Zepke argues, precisely in its “transvaluation of representation,” art emerges in its active, affirmative, productive function, as life forces, the “harnessed forces” or “simulacral signs that construct the world.”⁴⁸

Not only, then, does a Deleuzian, affirmative approach allow us to perceive the ethical dimension of art, and thereby maintain the possibility of critique, albeit not in its all but exclusively negative mode; it additionally enables us to differentiate Warhol’s Business Art from the sad and saddening repetitions of more recent Business Artists⁴⁹—whose commercial and commodified work is, I concede, characterized by the “insolence and arrogance” that Deleuze quite rightly attributes to “people who occupy the impoverished periods.” This brings me to the final reason why I prioritize a Deleuzian, or Deleuze-inspired approach to the study of the arts of the present over and above the negative form of critique whose decreasing influence Foster so eloquently bemoans. For however urgent it may be—and such urgency is beyond dispute—this mode of critique also runs the risk of giving so much importance to the dominant figures successfully operating a cultural “period of the desert” that it discourages us, as suggested, from looking for encounters elsewhere, for works of art that affect us, that force us to think in what Deleuze calls “either a parallel circuit for expression, or a black market of some sort,” and to ask after what ideas such artworks generate.

To ask after the ideas a work of art generates is not, perhaps, too dissimilar from asking what a work of art does, how it operates in the world, and how it affects its participants, questions that inevitably return us to the ethical dimension of art, albeit in a vein radically different from Foster’s negative critique of Hirst and his peers. As I have tried to suggest, in his ambivalent lamentation on the corporatization of some forms of artistic production, Foster, following Benjamin, cannot but ultimately succumb to precisely the kind of nihilism he so obviously deplors. An alternative approach would be to espouse the originally classical procedure also adopted by Foucault, which is to pursue the path of *ekphrasis* and to attempt to describe the visual impression or effect of a particular artwork, or a body of work, to articulate what we see when we look at it, the wonder or astonishment we feel, what is new or unexpected in our observations, instead of trying to determine or understand what the artwork means or represents.

Let me use the final paragraphs of this chapter to explain what I mean by this by focusing on two encounters with very different bodies of work in different media by two contemporary artists—encounters that made me think, each in its own way, and that in effect gave rise to the writing of this chapter in the first place, and hence to the thoughts unfolded herein.

The first was a mid-career retrospective at the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, showcasing a range of recent works by acclaimed photographer Richard Barnes, titled *Animal Logic*.⁵⁰ One series is of particular interest to me in this context, a series called “Refuge,” which consists of a number of interconnected works that focus, according to the exhibition catalogue, on “the ‘hybrid architecture’ of urban bird nests that incorporate the detritus of human life.” The series comprises a total of eleven meticulously finished, large-scale close-up photographs of birds’ nests, seven of which are rendered in velvety full color, four in black and white. Every print has its individual title, and the black and white ones are all identified as “Nest” followed by a number and the year in which the picture was taken. The color prints are named after the type of bird whose nest appears in the picture, some in Latin, others in English (see figures 3.5 and 3.6; see also plate 7). Not only do these titles suggest a kind of taxonomic, near scientific identification of the photographic object, the words, as signifiers, also come to stand in for the signified, the nests that in and of themselves operate as signifiers for the living animals that are absent from the pictures. I do not see birds in these images, but intricately crafted nests made up of dead materials (twigs, leaves, thread), and I read the captions, the words, that represent the birds rendered invisible behind the sign at two removes.

The great visual detail with which these artfully constructed animal habitats meet the eye gains momentum in its stark contrast with the solid black background. There is no context but for the black hole from which the photographed object emerges, becomes visible in its two-dimensional presence. Unique as animal artifacts thus captured, framed, and potentially endlessly reproduced, the nests, the longer I look at them, to me become aesthetically pleasing abstractions, representations presented in serial form and inserted into a classifying system that does not sufficiently jar with the fragility of the nests, “shot” as they are within a visual register that appears just as hermetically sealed as the systematic truth discourse evoked by the bird names/work titles. With the empty nests standing in for the living birds, these photographs do not offer me an access point, do not take me into a different realm of experience, leave me no option but to remain anchored in my spectator’s subject position, enjoying the aesthetic pleasure provided by beautiful still lifes of lifeless objects.

Second was an ostensibly modest series of drawings by Kathleen Henderson, shown under the lengthy and awkwardly self-conscious title *What if I Could Draw a Bird that Could Change the World?*, in fall 2008 at the Drawing Center in New York.⁵¹ The exhibition comprised twenty-three drawings in oil stick on paper, all between 17 × 25 or 19 × 25 inches in size, the majority untitled, with a few significant exceptions (see figures 3.7 and 3.8). Crudely drawn, mere black lines on white paper, most of the images present what appear to be human figures, but



FIG. 3.5 Richard Barnes, *Nest #07*, 2000. Archival digital C print, 48 × 42 in.
© Richard Barnes



FIG. 3.6 Richard Barnes, *Happy Wren*, 2000. Archival digital C print, 48 × 42 in. © Richard Barnes

some of them have animal faces while others seem to be wearing masks, showing no facial features other than black dots suggesting eyes, sometimes a nose and a mouth. The figures largely emerge against an empty background, with an occasional big black blot in a corner of the paper (a shadow? an oil spill? a puddle?) or numerous smaller dots that seem to indicate some kind of surface. Most of the figures, however, float in a two-dimensional space of rectangular whiteness. Several of the drawings contain handwritten words, two repeating (several times) the drawings' titles, while the work that gives the exhibition its title integrates what almost strikes me as a kind of mantra: "What if I could draw a bird that could change the world? In a good way, I mean in a good way. I know this is not that bird. I know that" (see figure 3.9).

Though clearly not "narrative" in the traditional sense suggested by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, or even by Mieke Bal, these drawings, the clumsy black lines and black dots, appear to be telling me a story, or various stories, but not stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end. As images containing narrative elements, they start in the middle, tracing out into multiple directions, drawings drawing me in and drawing me out into where I may not want to go. The two figures in socks, for example (figure 3.10), are they two men, or a man and a woman? Does

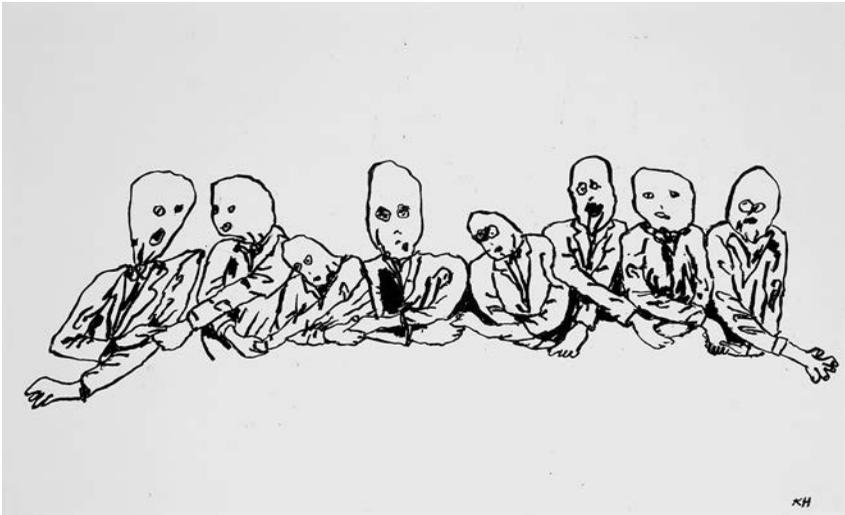


FIG. 3.7 Kathleen Henderson, *Untitled (rabbit in the woods with gun)*, 2006. Oil stick on paper, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ \times 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. © Kathleen Henderson. Courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica

FIG. 3.8 Kathleen Henderson, *Solidarity*, 2006. Oil stick on paper, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ \times 31 in. © Kathleen Henderson

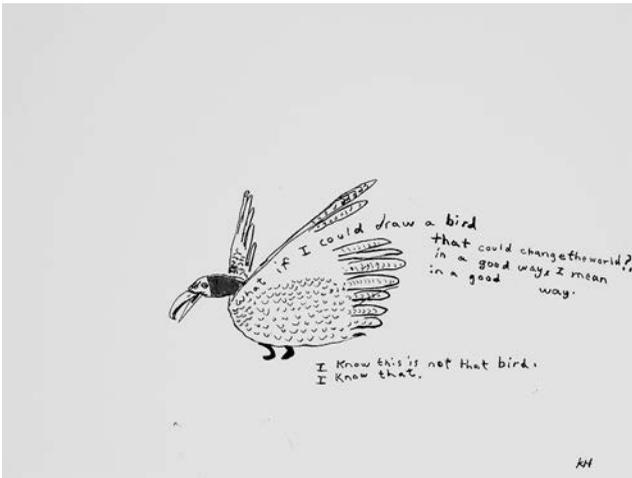


FIG. 3.9 Kathleen Henderson, "What if I Could Draw a Bird that Could Change the World?" 2007. Oil stick on paper, 19 × 25 in.
© Kathleen Henderson

it matter to know this? What is or has been happening here? The smaller figure on the right appears to be jumping, in fear or in fright, onto the lumpy, big, solid figure on the left, but the latter's face and body are turned out, toward me, disconnected, unaffected by the impact of the other's clinging bodily materiality. Why are they in their underwear and wearing socks, and how and why is it that their bag heads, their masked faces, immediately evoke images of the hooded knights of the KKK and their racial hatred and violence? What kind of blatant threat or latent violence is leaping at me from these cartoonish figures, making me flinch, wince?

Or the eerie encounter between the animal-faced figure in full suit (Is it a rabbit? A dog? A cat?) leaning over from his chair to pat a pair of lambs (plate 8). The dark shadows cast by the chair and the lambs render the ambivalence of this image even more pronounced than does the contrast between the figure's lugubrious face, with his pointed ears, one glaring eye, and widely opened mouth, and the symbolic value of the innocent lambs: is he patting the lambs, or is he planning on eating or molesting them? Whence the pronounced sense of violence, of destruction, or self-destruction, that I feel to be implicit in this scene of animal-animal, animal-human interaction, of animated, active assemblage?

And, finally, one of the titled drawings, showing a frail male figure wearing wings, turned away from the viewer, with a distinctive straight haircut that is joltingly explained by the drawing's title "Hitler with Wings" (figure 3.11). A story of horror taking wings, the myriad lines drawing out from the Holocaust, from



FIG. 3.10 Kathleen Henderson, *Untitled (two figures with socks)*, 2006. Oil stick on paper, 24 × 19 in. © Kathleen Henderson. Courtesy of the artist and Pierogi



FIG. 3.11 Kathleen Henderson, *Hitler with Wings*, 2006. Oil stick on paper, 17½ in. Collection of Dean Valentine and Amy Andelson, Los Angeles. © Kathleen Henderson

Hitler as the time-proof symbol of evil to angelic beneficence, Christian mythology, Hitler as the angel of death, the harbinger of truth about human evil, and/or the closeness between creative and destructive forces? The clash between the Hitler image stored inside me, in my mind, in my dreams and in my nightmares, woven together of so many visual, narrative, and imaginary strands, and the fragility of this human cherub, dreaming of reaching for the skies, doomed like Icarus, driven by ambitions and aspirations that are, perhaps, not all that different from what drives me, us, individually and collectively, toward imaginary elsewheres, unforeseeable futures?

No more than black lines drawn on paper, Kathleen Henderson's almost child-like figurations do not leave me alone, intact. They uproot me, take me away from where I thought I was, dissolve me as a subject-viewer into a participator in a scene, a space/time or chronotope in which the lines between subject and object can no longer be clearly drawn, an in-between space in which I am necessarily implicated, albeit not as my familiar, subjective self. These haunting images find me, and I steal them, as sites for the possibility of thought; they entangle me in lines of flight whose ethical implications are, just as the work or the operations of these artworks themselves, neither straightforward nor unambivalent. In their tangible, inescapable visibility, these drawings do not teach me anything that I

already know; they touch me, they affect me, and they force me to think; they take me up in a violent embrace that profoundly disorganizes me, that compels me to thought, to do work that I could not otherwise have envisaged, that I would not have been urged to do, clandestinely, if I had not sought out and been captured in and by the encounter with these works and been given to the actual, empirical experience of its “effect,” be touched by the “zigzag,” the “something which passes or happens between two as though under a potential difference.”

If such encounters amount to anything at all, if art has anything to offer outside and beyond any practical or utilitarian purpose, it would be precisely as the conditions for work, by forcing us to think. Art, I submit, in the solitude of the office in which I am writing this chapter, is good to think with. Rather than turning to art as social critique or as merely one among many representational practices, the main task for the study of the arts of the present, it seems to me, is to search for such works, perhaps living in the margins of a dominant art world ruled by commercial interests and global market forces, to forge aesthetic encounters in order to ask what art is genuinely creative, and what ideas it generates. For art is not just a weekend activity, but a means of transformation and, as such, it generates its own kind of thought. Admittedly, to adopt such an “affirmative” and empiricist attitude toward art does nothing to contribute to traditional art historical and critical undertakings, such as authenticating, classifying, interpreting, regulating, and judging individual artifacts. Through its power to activate the aesthetic, the autonomy of art emerges in our encounter with it, an encounter that is a partial process of always partial becoming; an “a-parallel evolution” that is always “outside’ and ‘between,” and that moves or flows in another direction. Such an aesthetic praxis cannot evolve from pre-established paradigms or result in programmatic clarity, but it may present us, at times, with a total, radical dissection of orders and lineages, while at other times, perhaps, doing no more (and no less) than allowing us a shy and nervous peering into things.

In the following three chapters, I will pursue these suppositions by seeking out distinct encounters with different bodies of visual art, and I will attempt to suggest more extensively in what ways such an affirmative and empiricist attitude diverges from more traditional models of art criticism, as well as what its experimental practice may afford.