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On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy

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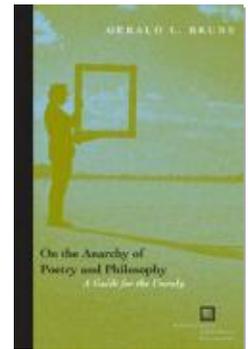
Published by Fordham University Press

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On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly.

Fordham University Press, 2007.

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Francis Ponge on the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin

Dear Lorca, I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut and squeeze—a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. I would like the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could suddenly be covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem, a moon utterly independent of images.

—Jack Spicer, *After Lorca*

Artspace. What becomes of things in art? This is still the question of questions in aesthetic theory, which has understood from the beginning of modernism that the terms “nonrepresentational,” “nonmimetic,” or “abstract,” however much they may capture something of what the experience of nontraditional works of art is like, have little application to twentieth-century art and literature. Modern art is filled with things. A cubist collage is made of real newspaper clippings, and so is a poem by William Carlos Williams. The method of modern poetry is, manifestly, “quotation, commentary, pastiche,” as if the poem had become a space for language rather than a use of it.¹ What kind of space? When Marcel Duchamp “invented” his Ready-mades, he altered the relation between works of art and real things in remarkably conservative fashion, as if to argue that the function of the modern work of art is neither to duplicate nor eradicate the world but to find somewhere else for it, which is perhaps all that

Mallarmé had in mind when he said that the world was made to exist in a splendid book.²

Call this a law of the conservation of ontology: in art nothing is added to the world, and nothing taken away, but simply moved. The rule of metaphor, after all, has always been to remove something from its usual place and to find another place for it in which, perhaps for no reason at all, or at least after a time, or for a while, it fits; but the thing itself remains what it is. Adorno writes: “Functional forms and cult objects may develop historically into artworks,” and so may pieces of prehistoric rubbish—but do we know how?³ The experience of modern art, perhaps of any art, is comparable to the anthropological experience of arriving somewhere where something apparently recognizable occupies a weird place in the order of things—human body parts get eaten, a specially colored insect is worshipped or feared, noise is music, and an empty canvas is sold at auction. What’s an anthropologist to think? Recall Stanley Cavell’s essay “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” wherein he cites Wittgenstein—“To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §19)—in order to apply this insight to the problem of Schönberg’s music: “The language of tonality is part of a particular form of life, one containing the music we are most familiar with; associated with, or consisting of, particular ways of being trained to perform it and to listen to it; involving particular ways of being corrected, particular ways of responding to mistakes, to nuance, above all to recurrence and to variation and modification.” Experienced against this background, atonality naturally makes us ask, “Is it music?” But Cavell thinks this question obstructs the real job at hand, which is to accommodate atonality, come what may, and this means (anthropologically) “naturalizing ourselves to a new form of life, a new world”—a world in which Schönberg’s *Six Little Piano Pieces* gives the definition of music.⁴ As Deleuze and Guattari would say, life with art is nomadic.⁵

Arthur Danto famously argued that every work of art presupposes an “artworld,” which is a form of life constituted by narratives, histories, concepts, theories, interpretations, and reasons why something might count as art. Experiencing a thing as art depends on how we inhabit such a world, whether we are in some fashion participants in its practices or merely puzzled onlookers. Danto’s exemplary work of art is Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* which, like one of Duchamp’s Readymades, looks very much to be the thing itself, but is not. “What

in the end makes the difference between a Brillo Box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo Box," Danto says,

is a certain theory of art. It is the theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. . . . Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting. It could not have been art fifty years ago. But then there could not have been, everything being equal, flight insurance in the Middle Ages, or Etruscan typewriter erasers. The world has to be ready for such things, the artworld no less than the real one. It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible.⁶

The trick is to understand exactly what sort of transcendental action these theories perform ("take up," "keep from collapsing").⁷ Imagine a theory that caused a thing to stop being art. Joseph Kosuth once said: "Actual works of art are little more than historical curiosities. As far as *art* is concerned van Gogh's paintings aren't worth any more than his palette is. They are both 'collector's items.'"⁸

Think about what becomes of words in a poem—for example, a poem by David Antin, who says,

i don't want to be
considered a poet if a poet is someone who adds art to
talking⁹

A poem by David Antin is made of talk, and is, on a certain view, artless (made of improvisations, lots of drift from topic to topic, indifference to triviality, that sort of thing). Unfortunately talk is a species of discourse that has always fallen below thresholds of formal description, so we haven't got a theory of it; but basically what David Antin does is stand up in front of an audience and talk. And since the social space in which he often does such a thing is that of a poetry reading, what one experiences is a sort of category mistake—an *ostranenie*-effect produced not so much by defamiliarization as by a reversal (or reversion) of the aesthetic into the familiar or everyday. Consider "a private occasion in a public place" (tb.211–12):

i mean if i were to come and read to you from a
book you would consider it a perfectly reasonable form of behavior
and its a perfectly respectable form of behavior generally

thought of as a poetry reading and it would be a little bit like
taking out a container of frozen peas warming them up and
serving them to you from the frozen food container and that
doesn't seem interesting to me because then i turn out to be a cook
and I dont really want to be a cook i dont want to cook or
recook anything for anybody i came here in order to make a
poem talking to talk a poem which it will be all
other things being equal

What is it to “talk a poem,” as against (as one supposes) composing it on a keyboard and then reciting it? If I understand, Antin would respond to a question of this sort by urging something like an analogy between words in a poem and furniture on a stage, where art is not a *work* of something (a construction or an artifact) but rather, as he says, “the act of putting it there”¹⁰—an event rather than (strictly) an object, which is what characterizes so much of the American art world since the 1950s, where, in the spirit of Duchamp and John Cage, performance trumps composition:

if vito acconci each day takes one
object from his apartment near sheridan square to leave it
in a gallery on upper broadway emptying in the course of
a conventional thirty day show his spare apartment of most
of the things on which his daily life depends and he
finds himself riding the subway to make use of his table lamp
for reading or his kettle to brew himself a cup of tea
do we when we walk into the gallery and confront this
accumulation of used appliances and books and clothing feel
like we're reading a diary looking into an apartment or
witnessing a dispossession (wim.162)

What is it for works of art and mere things to coincide within the same space (not to mention within the same physical properties, or should we say, entities?)¹¹ There is an array of unformulated questions here about what happens to things like vito acconci's household goods when they occupy the space of art. Possibly these questions fall in among others: the modernist's question of what happens when material ceases to be a form of mediation (words are treated as things, a painting is just paint, a wooden cube is a wooden cube); or the Artaud-like question of what happens to theater when it's removed from the auditorium and staged on the street.¹² To which one might add a question from performance art: When does an ordinary event or thing or behavior (two lovers having an argument in a restaurant) become theater? It doesn't seem enough to say that in these

cases the difference between art and non-art becomes difficult to determine or even nonexistent. So what if this is so? One could just as well say that the relationship between art and non-art has become intensely intimate, as if it were a relation of mutual habitation or proximity rather than one of appearance, cognition, representation, meaning, symbolization, or the negation of these things. This seems to be the point of Antin's anecdote about *vito acconci*, as indeed it is the point of John Cage's aesthetic ("we must bring about a music which is like furniture—a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment").¹³ Works and things lose their identity but gain their singularity when they leave or confuse their separate spheres.¹⁴ As Donald Judd once said, we may just not know where to put works of art since there doesn't seem to be any place for them, and so for the sake of economy we convert them into other things:

I bought a building in New York in 1968, which contains my work and that of others, and two buildings in Texas in 1973, which contain my work. One building in Texas has two large rooms and the other has one. Each of the two took two years of thinking and moving pieces around. The one room took about a year. One of the two rooms was the basis for the installations in the exhibitions of my work for the National Gallery of Canada in 1975, which occupies part of an office building and so has a fairly plain, decent space. Permanent installations and careful maintenance are [as] crucial to the autonomy and integrity of art [as] to its defense, especially now when so many people want to use it for something else.¹⁵

One could argue (1) that in the space of art things become more thingly, less objective, much in the way as Heidegger's hammer becomes more thingly, less equipmental, when it breaks—that is, it becomes useless and opaque, just like a work of art; and (2) that in the space of things (stacked up against a wall rather than hanging from it) art becomes less a work of spirit, more thing than object, as if materializing without making an appearance.¹⁶ Adorno calls this sort of materialization the "crisis of *semblance* [*Krise des Scheins*]" (AT.100/AeT.154), where "semblance" is what makes Duchamp's *Fountain* more than just another urinal (it shines out in a way the mere commodity does not). For Adorno, an artwork is its appearance: "Artworks become appearances, in the pregnant sense of the term—that is, as the appearance of an other—when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality. Artworks have the immanent character of

being an act, even if they are carved in stone. This is registered by the feeling of being overwhelmed when faced with an important work. The immanent character of being an act establishes the similarity of all artworks, like that of natural beauty, to music, a similarity once evoked by the term muse. Under patient contemplation artworks begin to move. To this extent they are truly afterimages of the primordial shudder in the age of reification" (AT.79/AeT.123–24). The problem with Duchamp's urinal—and for Adorno this is the failure of the avant-garde if not of all of modernism—is that it produces a shock but not a shudder.¹⁷ Its semblance or unreality—its otherness—is overwhelmed by its self-evident or empirical identity. A modernist work for Adorno is never completely a work of art; its form can never fully emancipate it from "its immanent condition as a thing" (AT.100/AeT.154). For Adorno a philistine is someone who can only experience the work as a mere thing. (So Duchamp makes philistines of us all.) Art for art's sake by contrast wants to purify the work of its thingness the way Mallarmé wanted a language no one ever speaks. Adorno's idea is to be blind to thingness without ever actually losing touch with it (AT.99/AeT.153). As he says, "The difference of artworks from the empirical world, their semblance character, is constituted out of the empirical world and in opposition to it. If for the sake of their own concept artworks wanted absolutely to destroy this reference back to the empirical world [i.e., their own thingness], they would wipe out their own premise" (AT.103/AeT.158–59). Adorno wants the work to show modernity for what it is (a reified thingworld) by being different from it (a nonreified thingworld).

Thingworld. Without abjuring Adorno, let me try to gain some purchase on these paradoxes with the help of the philistine French poet Francis Ponge (1899–1988), whose poetry tries to construct nonpoetic relations among words and things in a way that is symmetrical with David Antin's work. "I have never wanted to 'write poetry,'" Ponge says:

I write as I write, and I do not want it to be poetry. I do not intend to write poems. I express my feelings about things that move me, or that seem to me to be important to state. I have protested at length against my classification among poets, because lyricism in general disturbs me. That is, it seems to me that there is something too subjective, a display of subjectivity

which appears to me to be unpleasant, slightly immodest. I believe that things—how can I say it?—that emanate from your subjectivity, should not be displayed. Naturally, one never does anything but that. My own resolution was rather to reverse the situation and to try to say things that were generally valuable and pertinent. That is the reason why I have chosen things, objects, so that I would always have a break on my subjectivity, calling back the object as it exists when I write about it.¹⁸

And so, as Ponge says, when he writes he *takes the side of things* (a kind of French Objectivist). The poems in his first volume, *Le parti pris des choses* (1942), address things that, the odd eighteenth-century ode aside, do not always make it across thresholds of poetic description: a crate, a cigarette, an oyster, a doorknob, a loaf of bread, snails, a piece of meat, a pebble—most famously, a pebble, to which Ponge once wrote an “Introduction au galet” containing this apostrophe: “O ressources infinies de l’épaisseur des choses, *rendues* part le ressources infinies de l’épaisseur des mots!” (“O infinite resources of the thickness of things, *brought out* by the infinite resources of the semantical thickness of words”).¹⁹ Thickness here means: the task of poetry is not so much to describe things, rendering them transparent to view, as to relocate them in an environment of ordinary, often random talk, a move whose effect is to scale poetry itself down to the size of things themselves:²⁰

LE CAGEOT

A mi-chemin de la cage au cachot la langue française a cageot, simple caissette à claire-voie vouée au transport de ces fruits qui de la moindre suffocation font à coup sûr une maladie.

Agencé de façon qu’au terme de son usage il puisse être brisé sans effort, il ne sert pas deux fois. Ainsi dure-t-il moins encore que les denrées fondantes ou nuageuses qu’il enferme.

A tous les coins de rues qui aboutissent aux halles, il luit alors de l’éclat sans vanité du bois blanc. Tout neuf encore, et légèrement ahuri d’être dans une pose maladroite à la voirie jeté sans retour, cet objet est en somme des plus sympathétiques, — sur le sort duquel il convient toutefois de ne s’appesantir longuement. (PP.38)

THE CRATE

Halfway between *cage* [cage] and *cachot* [prison cell] the French language has *cageot* [crate], a simple openwork case for the transport of those fruits that invariably fall sick over the slightest suffocation.

Put together in such a way that at the end of its use it can be easily wrecked, it does not serve twice. Thus it is even less lasting than the melting or murky produce it encloses.

On all street corners leading to the market, it shines with the modest gleam of whitewood. Still brand new, and somewhat taken aback at being tossed on the trash pile in an awkward pose with no hope of return, this is a most likable object all considered—on whose fate it is perhaps wiser not to dwell. (VT.34–35)

To speak strictly, this is not a prose poem, but a poem in prose.²¹ It is not difficult to read Ponge as a language poet, especially because of the way his poems internalize things at hand, as if inhabiting the world and not simply observing it; and also because of the way they internalize words, thickening them by calling attention to their etymological density (Ponge grew up reading an etymological dictionary, and is an obsessive punster). It seems to matter that the crate is a disposable object, or let us say a form of mediation (or transportation) designed to become intransitive or gratuitous, like a poem, which someone once described as leftover language. Of course, in the artworld poems are thought to achieve permanence: their words are used but not used up. However, Ponge thinks of his poems as belonging to a thingworld rather than an artworld.

That is, in Ponge's metaphysics poems and things share the same ontology. Their relation is outside the alternatives of subject and object, or of representational/nonrepresentational art—one could call it (after Emmanuel Levinas) an ethical relation of proximity that reverses subjectivity away from cognition toward contact with things themselves:²²

LES MÛRES

Aux buissons typographiques constitués par le poème sur une route qui ne mène hors des choses ni à l'esprit, certains fruits sont formés d'une agglomération de sphères qu'une goutte d'encre remplit.



Noirs, roses et kakis ensemble sur la grappe, ils offrent plutôt le spectacle d'une famille rogue à ses âges divers, qu'une tentation très vive à la cueillette.

Vue la disproportion des pépins à la pulpe les oiseaux les apprécient peu, si peu de chose au fond leur reste quand du bec à l'anus ils en sont transverses.



Mais le poète au cours de sa promenade professionnelle, en prend de la graine à raison: "Ainsi donc, se dit-il, réussissent en grand nom-

bre les efforts patients d'une fleur très fragile quoique par un rébarbatif enchevêtrement de ronces défendue. Sans beaucoup d'autres qualités,—*mûres*, parfaitement elles sont mûres—comme aussi ce poème est fait." (PP.37)

BLACKBERRIES

On the typographical bushes constituted by the poem, along a road leading neither away from things nor to the spirit, certain fruits are formed of an agglomeration of spheres filled by a drop of ink.



Black, pink, khaki all together on the cluster, they offer the spectacle of a haughty family of varying ages rather than a keen temptation to pick them.

Given the disproportion between seeds and pulp, birds care little for them, since in the end so little is left once through from beak to anus.



But the poet during his professional stroll is left with something: "This," he says to himself, "is the way a fragile flower's patient effort succeeds for the most part, very fragile though protected by a forbidding tangle of thorns. With few other qualities—blackberries [*mûres*], are perfectly ripe [*mûres*]—just as this poem was made." (VT.34)

Is there a place (between things and the mind) where the poem begins and the blackberries leave off? Ponge wants to say no, rather there is a space in which different things happen all at once, as in a pun, and he likes to imagine puns that are made of things as well as of words. The poem is made of blackberries, even as, being part of the poem, the blackberries are made of ink, and then one naturally asks what ink is made of (in antiquity, of pokeberries, whose juice is black), and in turn what poems are made of, and whether we should suppress the habit of figuring poets as birds—not birds who sing about blackberries but birds who eat them, secreting blackberries (or is it poems?) in the form of ink.

Just so, taking the side of things means siding *with* things, taking sides against the human world, scaling down the ways in which the human subject posits itself as a sovereign ego presiding over creation, perhaps even constructing it. "Notes pour un coquillage," for example, contrasts a seashell with assorted wonders of the world—the pyramids, the temples of Angkor, and also the Louvre, which (in another thing-pun) Ponge imagines surviving the end of man as a dwelling place for birds and monkeys, or in other words, as a shell

for larger versions of the hermit crab, which in *Le parti pris des choses* is Ponge's signature thing, creeping from poem to poem. Inverting the scale, a snail's shell is likened to an ideal work of art, not so much because of its form (contrast Valéry's seashell) as for its restraint and acceptance of finitude:

Et voilà l'exemple qu'ils nous donnent. Saints, ils font œuvre de leur vie, — œuvre d'art de leur perfectionnement. Leur sécrétion même se produit de telle manière qu'elle se met en forme. Rien d'extérieur à eux, à leur nécessité, à leur besoin n'est leur œuvre. Rien de disproportionné — d'autre part — à leur être physique. Rien qui ne lui soit nécessaire, obligatoire. (PP.54)

And that is the lesson they offer us. They are saints, making their life into a work of art—a work of art of their self-perfection. Their very secretion is produced in such a way that that it creates its own form. Nothing exterior to them, to their essence, to their need is of their making. Nothing disproportionate, either, about their physique. Nothing unessential to it, required for it. (VT.45)

We think Michelangelo's *David* a great work of art, but a greater work would be a niche or shell proportioned to fit a human body exactly, with little room left over (PP.76). The problem with monumental works of art, especially since the onset of modernity, is that they are in excess of the world; there is no place for them, and so we house them in artificial rooms like museums, where there is either too much space or too little. As Ponge has it, the task of the poet is to insert poems into the world the way the snail secretes its dribble:

De ce point de vue j'admire surtout certains écrivains ou musiciens mesurés, Bach, Rameau, Malherbe, Horace, Mallarmé —, les écrivains par-dessus tous les autres parce que leur monument est fait de la véritable sécrétion commune du mollusque homme, de la chose la plus proportionnée et conditionnée à son corps, et cependant la plus différante de sa forme que l'on puisse concevoir: je veux dire la PAROLE. (PP.76–77)

In this sense I most admire a few restrained writers and musicians—Bach, Rameau, Malherbe, Horace, Mallarmé—and writers most of all, because their monument is made of the genuine secretion common to the human mollusk, the thing most

proportioned and suited to his body, yet as utterly different from his form as can be imagined: I mean WORDS. (VT.60–61)

Think of a poem as skin. As if the poem were less a mode of self-expression than a mode of sensibility and therefore less a way of seeing the world than of being touched by it.²³ On this line of thinking our relation with things would not be declarative or possessive but accusative in the way Emmanuel Levinas figures our relation with other people (but also things), where we find ourselves in a condition of sensibility rather than one of cognition and representation. One of Levinas's words for this condition is obsession: others (but one could say things just as well) do not exist for me (*pour soi*), they beset or besiege me (obsession is related etymologically to the ancient and medieval siege); they get under my skin and absorb me—in horror, perhaps, but also in ecstasy or satisfaction. Touching me in this way, or in one way or another, the world materializes itself. It no longer has the spirituality of a concept; it has a thickness to be savored. Levinas writes:

Savor inasmuch as it satisfies a hunger, savor as quenching, is a breaking up of the form of a phenomenon which becomes amorphous and turns into “prime matter.” Matter carries on, “does its job” of being matter, “materializes” in the satisfaction, which fills an emptiness before putting itself into a form and presenting itself to the knowing of this materiality and the possession of it in the form of goods. Tasting is first satisfaction. Matter “materializes” in satisfaction, which, over and beyond any intentional relationship of cognition or possession, of “taking in one’s hands,” means “biting into.” . . . To bite on the bread is the very meaning of tasting. The taste is the way a sensible subject becomes volume, or the irreducible event in which the spatial phenomenon called biting becomes the identification called me.²⁴

The movement of Ponge's “Le pain,” where observation gives way to biting, captures nicely the scaling down the subject from cognition to sensibility:

La surface du pain est merveilleuse d'abord à cause de cette impression quasi panoramique qu'elle donne: comme si l'on avait à sa disposition sous la main les Alpes, le Taurus ou la Cordillère des Andes.

Ainsi donc une masse amorphe en train d'éructer fut glissée pour nous dans le four stellaire, où durcissant elle s'est façonnée en vallées, crêtes, ondulations, crevasses. . . . Et tous ces plans dès lors si nettement articulés, ces dalles minces où avec application couche ses feux,—sans un regard pour la mollesse ignoble sous-jacente.

Ce lâche et froid sous-sol que l'on nomme la mie a son tissu pareil à celui des éponges: feuilles ou fleurs y sont comme des sœurs siamoises soudées par tous les coudes à lafois. Lorsque le pain rassit ces fleurs fanent et se rétrécissent: elles se détachent alors les unes de autres, et la masse en devient friable . . .

Mais brisons-la: car le pain doit être dans notre bouche moins objet de respect que de consommation. (PP.46)

The surface of a crusty bread is marvelous, first because of the almost panoramic impression it makes: as though one had the Alps, the Taurus or the Andes at one's fingertips.

It so happened that an amorphous mass about to explode was slid into the celestial oven for us where it hardened and formed valleys, summits, rolling hills, crevasses. . . . And from then on, all those planes so neatly joined, those fine slabs where light carefully beds down its rays—without a thought for the unspeakable mush underneath.

That cold flaccid substratum is made up of sponge-like tissue: leaves or flowers like Siamese twins soldered together elbow to elbow. When bread grows stale, these flowers fade and wither; they fall away from each other and the mass becomes crumbly . . .

But now let's break it up: for in our mouths bread should be less an object of respect than of consumption. (VT.39)

In satisfaction matter materializes—and so do I. I am no longer a consciousness that thinks, a soul beholding the world through looking-glass eyes, but a sequence of openings traversed by the bread that I bite, chew, swallow, digest; and I am nothing without it, a statue by Giacometti at best, but in its wake I am able to maintain a certain density, displace a certain volume of the here and now, before eventually returning, like the bread, to the earth.²⁵

Of course it follows that taking the side of things is inevitably comic and satirical in its consequences, since in the thingworld human beings are things (not objects, mind you, but things—unless, Sartre-like, you see someone staring at you).²⁶ The thingworld is not for sovereign souls. “Les plaisirs de la porte” begins: “Les rois ne touchent pas aux portes” (“Kings do not touch doors”), and so are deprived of “le bonheur d’empoigner au ventre part son nœud de porcelaine l’un de ces hauts obstacles d’une pièce” (“The pleasure of grabbing the midriff of one of these tall obstacles to a room by its porcelain node”) (PP.44/VT.38). Presiding over the world deprives one of the experience of it, as if one had to become thinglike in order to know what things are like (one could call this Ponge’s Principle).

Meanwhile, on another register, in “Le Gymnaste” the gymnast’s density is captured in his letters:

Comme son **G** l’indique le gymnaste porte le bouc et la moustache que rejoint presque une gross mèche en accroche-cœur sur un front bas.

Moulé dans un maillot qui fait deux plis sur l’aine il porte aussi, comme son **Y**, la queue à gauche. (PP.64)

Like his **G**, the gymnast wears a goatee and moustache almost reached by the heavy lock on his low forehead.

Molded into a jersey that makes two folds over his groin, he too, like his **Y**, wears his appendage on the left. (VT.52)

(The **Y** should not be printed but handwritten according to the Palmer Method.)

In “R.C. Seine n°,” Kafka-like, a stairwell that funnels employees like coffee beans to and from a modern office becomes a window onto filing cabinets, typewriters, ledgers, forms, carbon paper, and the passage of the daily mail across the poet’s desk—Ponge is no outsider but is himself a thing in the thingworld:

Deux ou trois fois par jour, au milieu de ce culte, le courrier multicolore, radieux et bête comme un oiseau des îles, tout frais émoulu des enveloppes marquées de noir par le baiser de la poste, vient tout de go se poser devant moi.

Chaque feuille étrangère est alors adoptée, confiée à une petite colombe de chez nous, qui la guide à des destinations successives jusqu’à son classement.

Certains bijoux servent à ces attelages momentanés: coins dorés, attaches parisiennes, trombones attendent dans des sébiles leur utilisation. (PP.68)

Two or three times a day, in the middle of this ceremony, the mail—multicolored, gleaming, dumb, like tropical birds—suddenly plops down in front of me, fresh from envelopes bearing a black postal kiss.

Each foundling sheet is then adopted, handed over to one of our little carrier pigeons who guides it to successive destinations until its final classification.

Certain jewels are used for these temporary harnessings: gilded corners, glowing clasps, gleaming paper clips all wait in their beggars' cups to be of service. (VT.54)

In Ponge's metaphysics there is no order of things but only a ceaseless flow of traffic in which the poet, one random floating particle among others, accompanies with his rich, colorful language the ongoing large and small career of things—for example, at lunchtime, he flows into a restaurant favored by fellow office workers, Lemeunier's, on the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin (according to Walter Benjamin, a philistine street):²⁷

Des glaces biseautées, des dorures partout. L'on y entre à travers des plantes vertes par une passage plus sombre aux parois duquel quelques dîneurs déjà à l'étroit sont installés, et qui débouche dans une salle aux proportions énormes, à plusieurs balcons de pitchpin formant un seul étage en huit, où vous accueillent à la fois des bouffées d'odeurs tièdes, le tapage des fourchettes et des assiettes choquées, les appels des serveuses et le bruit des conversations. (PP.70)

Bevelled mirrors, gilded moldings everywhere. One enters past green plants through a darker passage, against whose walls a few clients are already tightly installed, which leads to a room of huge proportions with a number of wooden balconies forming the figure eight. There you are assailed by billows of warm odors, clattering cutlery and dishes, shouting waitresses and the din of conversation. (VT.56)

It is, the poet says, a scene worthy of a painting by Veronese or Manet, but since a fixed point of view is impossible, the scene can only form itself in fragments:

Des entremets à plusieurs étages crémeux hardiment superposés, servis dans des cupules d'un métal mystérieux, hautes de pied mais rapidement lavées et malheureusement toujours tièdes, permettent aux consommateurs qui choisirent qu'on les disposât devant eux, de manifester mieux que par d'autres signes les sentiments profonds qui les animent. Chez l'un, c'est l'enthousiasme que lui procure la présence à ses côtés d'une dactylo magnifiquement ondulée, pour laquelle il n'hésiterait pas à commettre mille autres coûteuses folies du même genre. . . .

Par milliers cependant les miettes blondes et de grandes imprègnations roses sont en même temps apparues sur le linge épars ou tendu.

Une peu plus tard, les briquets se saisissent du premier rôle; selon le dispositif qui actionne la molette ou la façon don't ils sont maniés. Tandis qu'élevant les bras dans un mouvement qui découvre à leurs aisselles leur façon personnelle d'arborer les cocardes de la transpiration, les femmes se roiffent ou jouent du tube de fard.

C'est l'heure où, dans un brouhaha recrudescant de chaises repoussés, de torchons claquants, de croûtons écrasés, va s'accomplir le dernier rite de la singulière cérémonie. Successivement, de chacun de leurs hôtes, les serveuses, don't un carnet habite la poche et les cheveux un petit crayon, rapprochent leurs ventres serrés d'une façon si touchante par les cordons du tablier: elles se livrent de mémoire à une rapide estimation. C'est alors que la vanité est punie et la modestie récompensée. Pièces et billets bleus s'échangent sur les tables: il semble que chacun retire son épingle du jeu. (PP.72-73)

Creamy layered desserts piled daringly high—served in bowls of mysterious metal, handsomely footed but rapidly washed and always warm, alas—allow the diners who chose to have them displayed, to manifest more effectively than by other signs their deep feelings. For one, it is enthusiasm generated by the splendidly curved typist at his side, for whom he would not hesitate to commit a thousand equally costly follies. . . .

Meanwhile, thousands of blond crumbs and pink blotches appear on the scattered or spread linen.

A little later, cigarette lighters take the leading role, according to the striking device or manner of handling; while the ladies, raising their arms in such a way that their armpits reveal each personal style of wearing perspiration's badges, rearrange their hair or toot their lipstick tubes.

This is the moment—amid the increasing tumult of chairs scraping, napkins snapping, crumbs crushing—for the final ritual in this unique ceremony. Moving their sweetly aproned tummies close to each guest in turn, a notebook in their pocket, a pencil stub in their hair, the waitresses apply themselves from memory to a rapid calculation. It is then that vanity is punished and modesty rewarded. Coins and bills change hands across the table, as though everybody were cashing in his chips. (VT.57–58)

Notice how things occupy the grammatical site of agents—“cigarette lighters take the leading role,” “[c]oins and bills change hands”—and when humans appear they are (or at least the women are) materialized as perspiring armpits, fingered hair, lipsticked lips, and aproned tummies: figures of one thing touching or being touched by another.

Traditional poetics thinks of language as mediating the space between mind and things, turning things into the mind by means of figures, images, or various propositional attitudes that elevate things to the level of the concept. Ponge's poetics thinks of language as mediating the space between mind and things in the other direction—not elevating things to the category of spirit but turning spirit into things by means of the thingliness of words, emphasizing the way words have histories and so are self-subsistent like things in themselves and thus set apart from the way we try to reduce them to their logical or semantic operations. So words cease to be instruments of the spirit and become instead components of the thingworld, drawing us out of ourselves and into the world, which is where, Ponge seems to think, we are better off. At any rate the point is to think of the word not as a medium for inserting the world into the mind but of inserting the mind into the world. The materiality or, what amounts to the same thing, the historicity of language makes this inhabitation possible. The poet Charles Bernstein reincarnates Ponge's ghost when he writes:

The thickness of writing,
far from rivaling that of the world,

is on the contrary the sole
means it has to go to the heart of things
by making itself part of the material world, absorbed
by it.²⁸

Realpace. Placing a real thing in the space of art transforms or, to use Arthur Danto's word, "transfigures" it: the thing is still what it is and yet at the same time is beside itself, irreducible to what it is empirically.²⁹ Remove the chair from the stage and it becomes a chair again. Meanwhile the musician John Cage shares with Francis Ponge and David Antin the desire to reinsert works of art into the everyday world. In an essay on Erik Satie (who once said, "J'emmerde l'Art," and once composed a piece called "Furniture Music") Cage writes: "We must bring about a music which is like furniture—a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself."³⁰ Naturally one thinks again of Adorno to give this point its definition: "The concept of form marks out art's sharp antithesis to an empirical world in which art's right to exist is uncertain. Art has precisely the same chance of survival as form does, no better" (AT.141/AeT.213; cf. AT.252–53/AeT.375). But in Cage's aesthetic the artwork can no longer be distinguished from real things by means of formal criteria. The artworld has, so to speak, been blended into the thingworld and has become, to all appearances, imperceptibly a part of it.

Perhaps all but imperceptibly; perhaps almost but not quite imperceptibly. In "Experimental Music" (1957) Cage says that in his music "nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. This openness exists in the fields of modern sculpture and architecture. The glass houses of Mies van der Rohe reflect their environment, presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees, or grass, according to the situation. And while looking at the constructions in wire of the sculptor Richard Lippold, it is inevitable that one will see other things, and people too, if they happen to be there at the same time, through the network of wires" (S.8). Of course, what is presented to the eye in one of Mies van der Rohe's glass houses are not the *images* of trees and grass (nor perceptions of them) but the things themselves; likewise what is presented to the

ear in a performance of one of Cage's compositions are not musical sounds set apart in a world of their own but musical sounds restored to the real space we inhabit. The question for Cage in this event is not how to tell the music from nonmusic but how to inhabit a world in which the two are no longer detachable on the basis of distinctive features; in other words, *how to listen*, not just in the music hall, but in everyday life. Aesthetics has, in effect, been reconceptualized as ethics.

What kind of ethics, then? Not an ethics of rules but (invoking Levinas again) an ethics of proximity, sensibility, and responsiveness ("In the ethical relationship with the real, that is, in the relationship of proximity that the sensible establishes . . . the visible caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches" [CPP.118]). Cage imagines a composer with two choices. One is to create new sorts of sound by electronic means (a new technological innovation at the time Cage wrote his essay); the other is to "give up the desire to control sound, clear [one's] mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments" (S.10). The idea here is not to elevate mere sound to the status of art but to relocate art at the level of everyday experience. Cage thinks of this as learning to inhabit the world in a new way, learning to acknowledge the world instead of reflecting ourselves out of it as Adorno urges. In an essay on "The Abstract Expressionist Coca-Cola Bottle," Arthur Danto writes:

Pop redeemed the world in an intoxicating way. I have the most vivid recollection of standing at an intersection in some American city, waiting to be picked up. There were used-car lots on two corners, with swags of plastic pennants fluttering in the breeze and brash signs proclaiming unbeatable deals, crazy prices, insane bargains. There was a huge self-service gas station on a third corner, and a supermarket on the fourth, with signs in the window announcing sales of Del Monte, Cheerios, Land O Lakes butter, Long Island ducklings, Velveeta, Sealtest, Chicken of the Sea. . . . Heavy trucks roared past, with logos on their sides. The sound of raucous music flashed out of the windows of automobiles. I was educated to hate all this. I would have found it intolerably crass and tacky when I was growing up an aesthete. As late as my own times, beauty was, in the words of George Santayana, "a living presence, or an

aching absence, day and night." I think it still is that for someone like Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer. But I thought, Good heavens. This is just remarkable! (BBB.139–40)

The Collector. Walter Benjamin says that Eduard Fuchs's achievement as a collector began with his break with "the classicist conception of art."³¹ No more masterpieces. "He is not the only great collector to feel an aversion to museums" (GS.2.2:502/SW.3:282). Not a collector, in other words, like Henry James's Adam Verver (Morgan, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Getty), who ransacked Europe's treasures and transported them to the museum of museums in "American City." According to Benjamin, Fuchs's "goal was to restore to the work of art its existence within society" (GS.2.2:503/SW.3:283). He did this by collecting not artworks but the products of mass culture—in particular, caricatures and pornography—as if a true collector collected from below. But, as Benjamin complains, we lack a theory of the collector (GS.2.2:489–90/SW.3:275). Literature gives us no interesting representations of collectors, with the exception of Balzac's Cousin Pons, who gives collecting a kind of precapitalist poetics (GS.2.2:490/SW.3:275).³² Benjamin would have rejected Henry James's collectors, even though the true collector for James is a woman like Maria Gostrey who gathers small, inexpensive things that are nevertheless exquisite to a sensibility like Lambert Strether's, on whom nothing is lost. Benjamin would have preferred André Breton, or anyhow the narrator of *Nadja*, who goes frequently to the Saint-Ouen flea market in search of "objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse."³³ It seems important to him that the objects intimate a principle of nonidentity, "like, for example, that kind of irregular, white, shellacked half-cylinder covered with reliefs and depressions that are meaningless to me, streaked with horizontal and vertical reds and greens, preciously nestled under a legend in Italian, which I brought home and which after careful examination I have finally identified as some kind of statistical device, operating three-dimensionally and recording the population of a city in such and such a year, though this makes it no more comprehensible to me" (N.52). On another day he finds a new copy of Rimbaud's *Œuvres complètes*, "lost in a tiny, wretched bin of rags, yellowed nineteenth-century photographs, worthless books, and iron spoons" (N.52–55), but what is important to him are "two sheets of paper stuck between the pages: one a typewritten copy of a poem in free verse, the other

a pencilled series of reflections on Nietzsche” (N.55). As if the true collector were not an art collector or a collector of valuables but simply a keeper of *Wunderkammern*. But what Breton is after may be something like sheer thingness (the nonidentical thing).

Jacques Lacan admitted to being a collector of sorts, like Freud. But Freud liked exotic objects. Lacan’s theory, which unfortunately he only sketches, is that the true collector doesn’t collect “objects.” He recalls visiting his friend the poet Jacques Prévert during the Occupation when of course no one could afford to do much collecting, but Prévert had assembled (of all things) a collection of match boxes:

Only the match boxes appeared as follows: they were all the same and were laid out in an extremely agreeable way that involved each one being so close to the next one that the little drawer was slightly displaced. As a result they were all threaded together so as to form a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to a door. I don’t say it went on to infinity but it was extremely satisfying from an ornamental point of view.⁵⁴

However, the ornamental point of view is not, Lacan thinks, the relevant one: “I believe that the shock of the novelty of the effect realized by this collection of empty boxes—and this is the essential point—was to reveal something that we do not perhaps pay enough attention to, namely, that a box of matches is not simply an object, but that, in the form of an *Erscheinung*, as it appeared in its truly imposing multiplicity, it may be a Thing” (SJL.114). The match box is not an object *pour soi*, that is, it is not (philosophically speaking) an intentional object or even an equipmental being on the order of Heidegger’s hammer. In its throwaway condition (these are empty matchboxes, which is to say they no longer serve their function), the match box is like a broken hammer in Heidegger’s ontology: it falls out of the world to which it has belonged and so becomes (like the stone in Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”) a merely thingly thing, part of the self-secluding earth. It exists, thinglike, as a nonproductive expenditure of being, a being for nothing or in itself, like Rilke’s song (“a breath for nothing”).⁵⁵ As Lacan formulates it, “This arrangement demonstrated that a match box isn’t simply something that has a certain utility, that it isn’t even a type in the Platonic sense, an abstract match box, that the match box all by itself is a thing with all of its coherence of being. The wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superflu-

ous, and quasi-absurd character of this collection pointed to its thingness as match box. Thus the collector found his motive in this form of apprehension that concerns less the match box than the Thing that subsists in the match box" (SJJL.114). Of course, Lacan is allegorizing the match box as a Lacanian *Ding*. The point may be more elementary: the collection of match boxes just bears witness to the match box as a thing in itself, a *singularity* (not a particular vis-à-vis a universal). The collection does not constitute a genus or category; each match box makes its appearance as its own thing and not as a stand-in for something else. Like Meister Eckhart's rose, it is "without why."

Naturally thoughts fly to Jacques Prévert: how would he explain his match boxes? Like Ponge (and like the language poets) Prévert was thoroughly at home in the nonpoetical world. And so his poems are occasionally no more than inventories of expressions and sometimes of mere things, as if, as a poet, he were still simply a collector of things like match boxes. His first collection of poems, *Paroles*, is a collection of *paroles*. One of the poems in the collection is "Inventaire":

Une pierre	One stone
deux maisons	two houses
trois ruines	three ruins
quatre fossoyeurs	four gravediggers
une jardin	one garden
des fleurs	some flowers
une raton laveur	a racoon
une douzaine d'huîtres un citron	a dozen oysters a lemon a loaf
un pain	
un rayon du soleil	a ray of sunshine
une lame de fond	a groundswell
six musiciens	six musicians
une porte avec son paillon	a door with doormat
un monsieur décoré de la légion d'honneur	a man decorated with the legion of honor
une autre raton laveur	another racoon
un sculpteur qui sculpte des Napoléon	a sculptor who only sculpts Napoleons
la fleur qu'on appelle aussi	the flower called marigold
deux amoureux sur un grand lit	two lovers on a big bed
un receveur des contributions une chaise trois dindons	a tax collector three chairs a turkey

ecclésiastique un furoncle	a clergyman a carbuncle
une guêpe	a wasp
un rein flottant	one floating kidney
une écurie de courses	a racing-stable
un fils indigne deux frères	one worthless son two dominican
dominicains trois	brothers
sautereles un strapontin	three twisters one jump-seat
deux filles de joie un oncle	two whores one pederast
Cyprien. . . .	uncle. . . . ³⁶

And so on. The poem adds some fifty further items to its list, including four or five more racoons. Poetry as kitsch? Or poetry as a *Wunderkammer* that collects ordinary things instead of oddities? (A *Pleinkammer*?—think of Joseph Cornell’s Boxes.) A critical point would be to see the poem as testimony to the way the poet inhabits his world. For example, Benjamin distinguishes the collector from the *flâneur* by saying that the one is in contact with things that the other merely observes (a Levinasian reversal): “Possessions and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts. Moreover, with the recent turn away from naturalism, the primacy of the optical that was determinate for the previous century has come to an end” (GS.5.1:274/AP.206–7). The *flâneur* is a window-shopper in the arcades where things are for sale; the collector constructs an environment in which things are no longer fungible but can now simply exist, abiding opaquely in themselves (that is, nothing is to be seen by trying to look through them)—although Benjamin thinks that inside every collector an allegorist is struggling to get free (GS.5.1:279–80/AP.211). One can imagine Duchamp as a collector whose desire is not simply to see the world in a certain way (as an impressionist or cubist, for example) but simply to relocate things in a kind of free space (as if following the law of Bataille’s general economy). However we imagine him, Duchamp fits Benjamin’s definition: “the true collector detaches the object from its functional relations” (GS.5.1:274/AP.207). To what end? Perhaps to achieve a kind of transcendence that Benjamin alone knew how to experience:

There is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of order and disorder. Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well: to a very mysterious relationship to ownership . . . ; also, to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their

usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object. In this circumscribed area, then, it may be surmised how the great physiognomists—and collectors are the physiognomists of the world of objects—turn into interpreters of fate. One has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired. So much for the magical side of the collector—his age-old image, I might call it.³⁷

This suggests a question concerning the difference between collected and uncollected things that is perhaps analogous to the question of what happens to things in art. Recall that Ponge's things remain unappropriated: Ponge does not preside over them, has no claim on them—quite the reverse. In Heidegger's lingo, he lets things be things. Benjamin's things are objects, that is, things that have been transformed, although not, strictly, into works of art, as if the collector belonged to a between-world made of “no-longer-things” and “not-quite-artworks”: the world of the uncommodified fetish (post-cards, children's books).

Transfiguration. Heidegger complains that for philosophers there are no such things as things, only objects held in place by concepts and assertions. Likewise in the *Gestell* of modernity things do not exist; there are only materials that we feed into conversion-systems where they come out as mere objects or products. Left to themselves, however, things produce nothing. They simply *thing*. In the thinging of the thing, nearness comes into play, drawing together earth and sky, gods and mortals. So a world is gathered together in which building and dwelling can occur.³⁸ A future is possible if we let things be things (*Gelassenheit zu den Dingen*). Likewise for Adorno there are (owing to modernity) no things, only products or fetishes. The task of art is to lift products out of their reified condition and restore them

to thingness, that is, to their singularity on the hither side of identity: “In its relation to empirical reality art sublimates the latter’s governing principle of *seae conservare* as the ideal of the self-identity of its works; as Schönberg said, one paints a painting, not what it represents. Inherently every artwork desires identity with itself, an identity that in empirical reality is violently forced on all objects as identity with the subject and is thus travestied. Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality’s compulsion to identify. . . . Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience” (AT.4/AeT.14). Again: “In its relation to its other—whose foreignness it mollifies and yet maintains—form is what is antibarbaric in art: through form art participates in the civilization that it criticizes by its very existence. Form is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom” (AT.143/AeT.186).

“The transfiguration of the existing”: so art is redemptive (thinks Adorno), as in, “The idea of art as the idea of the restoration of nature that has been repressed and drawn into the dynamic of history. Nature, to whose image art is devoted, does not yet in any way exist; what is true in art is something non-existent. What does not exist becomes incumbent upon art in that other for which identity-positing reason, which reduced it to material, uses the word nature. This other is not concept and unity, but rather a multiplicity” (AT.131/AeT.198). That is, what we call “nature” is made of singularities: not things constituted as an order of things but nonidentical things, opaque and self-standing in their reserve.

But what would Adorno accept as an instance of transfiguration? He has his heroes (Beckett, Kafka, Schönberg), but mostly Adorno is impressed by the failure of modernism to bring redemption to term (“what after all is left to do but scream?” [AT.30/AeT.51]). Recall his contrast between impressionism and montage (“the sudden, discontinuous juxtaposition of sequences”): “Impressionism dissolved objects—drawn primarily from the sphere of technical civilization or its amalgams with nature—into their smallest elements in order to synthesize them gaplessly into the dynamic continuum. It wanted aesthetically to redeem the alienated and the heterogeneous in the replica. The conception proved ever less adequate the more intense the superiority of the reified prosaic world over the living subject became. The subjectivization of objective reality relapsed into romanti-

cism. . . . It was against this that montage protested, which developed out of the pasted-in newspaper clippings and the like during the heroic years of cubism" (AT.154–55/AeT.232). By "admitting into itself literal, illusionless ruins of empirical reality," cubism inaugurates modernism as objectivism and fragmentariness. Henceforward, "The artwork wants to make the facts eloquent by letting them speak for themselves. Art thereby begins a process of destroying the artwork as a nexus of meaning. For the first time in the development of art, affixed debris cleaves visible scars in the work's meaning. This brings montage into a much broader context. All modern art after impressionism . . . may be called montage" (AT.155/AeT.232–33). However, this is not to redeem things. "Montage is the inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it. The negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form" (AT.155/AeT.233). But this is a form that dissipates in a twinkling: "The principle of montage was conceived as an act against a surreptitiously achieved organic unity; it was meant to shock. Once this shock is neutralized, the assemblage once more becomes merely indifferent material" (AT.233/AeT.155–56). As in Duchamp, after the initial shock, the form of "the work" is swallowed up by form of the thing itself, semblance gives way to a "barbaric literalism" (AT.158/AeT.103), so one is left to explain, in the manner of Arthur Danto, how "anything can be a work of art," even though not everything can be one all by itself (TC.65).

Danto's standpoint is much like Adorno's—not surprisingly, since the starting-point for both is Hegel. Like Adorno, Danto believes that art is irreducible to the stuff of which it is made. Like Adorno, he holds the now-canonical idea that modernism just *is* the pressing of art to the material (although maybe not the conceptual) limits of its possibility. Recall Clement Greenberg's famous statement about modernism: "The essential norms or conventions of painting are at the same time the limiting conditions with which a picture must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limits can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that the further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed and indicated."³⁹ Unlike Greenberg (and Adorno), Danto thinks that the artwork (Warhol's *Brillo Box*, say) can stop looking like a picture and start looking for all the world like an arbitrary object and still be something different from "a mere thing." The difference is what Danto calls transfiguration, after "the

Hegelian ideal in which matter is transfigured into spirit” (TC.111). Danto says that art was invented to give reality something to contrast itself with (TC.78–79). Modernism narrows this contrast to the point of indiscernability, whence the history of art can be said without metaphor to have come to an end in the sense that the artwork (*Fountain*, *Brillo Box*, thingpoem, talkpoem, monochrome) ceases to be an aesthetic object and becomes an object that asks, with thinglike inscrutability, a philosophical question: What is art?⁴⁰ — as if the art object were to be defined as an object that raised this question. Of course, if the transfigured thing, as Joseph Margolis points out, is after all still the thing it is, however thoughtful or eloquent, we can imagine it to be asking just as well what a thing is.⁴¹

Assuming that the form of the question, “What is —?,” is adequate to the task. For a thing, at the end of the day, is *matter*. Let me conclude in an open-ended way by citing Jean-François Lyotard. In an essay, “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” Lyotard says, in his characteristically paradoxical fashion, that “matter” is *immaterial*: that is, the mind cannot constitute it as an object of any predicate. Modernism for Lyotard is what gravitates toward this resistant or indifferent “matter” that “can only ‘take place’ or find its occasion at the price of suspending [the] active powers of the mind.”⁴² (He mentions John Cage vis-à-vis sounds that are allowed to be themselves.) The “matter” of modernism is a *thing* of pure exteriority:

The paradox of art “after the sublime” is that it turns toward a thing which does not turn toward the mind, that it wants a thing, or *has it in for* a thing which wants nothing of it. After the sublime, we find ourselves after the will. By matter, I mean *the Thing*. The Thing is not waiting to be destined, it is not waiting for anything, it does not call on the mind. How can the mind situate itself, get in touch with something that withdraws from every relationship?

It is the destiny or destination of the mind to question (as I have just done). And to question is to attempt to establish the relation of something with something. Matter does not question the mind, it has no need of it, it exists, or rather *insists*, it sists “before” questioning and answer, “outside” them. It is presence as unpresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp. It does not offer itself to dialogue and dialectic. (IR.142)

So a *thing* cannot be thought. It is a limit-experience. Lyotard asks: “Can we find an analogue of matter in the order of thought itself?” —

that is, a quasi-*thing*? I think he gives a good answer: “Perhaps words themselves, in the most secret place of thought, are its matter, its timbre, its nuance, i.e. what it cannot manage to think. Words ‘say,’ sound, touch, always ‘before’ thought. . . . Words want nothing. They are the ‘un-will,’ the ‘non-sense’ of thought, its mass. . . . But like timbres and nuances, they are always being born. Thought tries to tidy them up, arrange them, control them and manipulate them. But as they are old people and children, words are not obedient. As Gertrude Stein thought, to write is to respect their candor and their age” (IR.142–43).