The concept of philosophical aesthetics has an antiquated quality, as does the concept of a system or that of morals. This feeling is in no way restricted to artistic praxis and the public indifference to aesthetic theory. Even in academic circles, essays relevant to aesthetics have for decades now noticeably diminished. This point is made in a recent dictionary of philosophy: “There is scarcely another philosophical discipline that rests on such flimsy presuppositions as does aesthetics. Like a weather vane it is ‘blown about by every philosophical, cultural, and scientific gust; at one moment it is metaphysical and in the next empirical; now normative, then descriptive; now defined by artists, then by connoisseurs; one day art is supposedly the center of aesthetics and natural beauty merely preliminary, the next day art beauty is merely second-hand natural beauty.’ Moritz Geiger’s description of the dilemma of aesthetics has been true since the middle of the nineteenth century. There is a double reason for this pluralism of aesthetic theories, which are often even left unfinished: It resides on the one hand in the fundamental difficulty, indeed impossibility, of gaining general access to art by means of a system of philosophical categories, and on the other, in the fact that aesthetic statements have traditionally presupposed theories of knowledge. The problematic of theories of knowledge returns directly in aesthetics, because how aesthetics interprets its objects depends on the concept of the object held by the theory of knowledge. This traditional dependency, however, is defined by the subject matter itself and is already contained in the terminology.”

Although this well describes the situation, it does not sufficiently explain it; the other philosophical disciplines, including the theory of knowledge and logic, are no less controversial.
and yet interest in them has not flagged to a similar extent. The unusual situation of aesthetics is discouraging. Croce introduced radical nominalism into aesthetic theory. Almost simultaneously, important thinking left behind the so-called fundamental problems of aesthetics and became immersed in specific formal and material problems, as is the case with Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, Benjamin’s critique of *Elective Affinities*, which developed into an emphatic treatise, and his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*. If the last-named work cunningly defends Croce’s nominalism, it at the same time takes into account a situation where consciousness no longer hopes that fundamental principles will lead to insight into the traditionally great questions of aesthetics, especially those of a metaphysical dimension, but instead seeks insight in spheres that formerly held the status of exempla. Philosophical aesthetics found itself confronted with the fatal alternative between dumb and trivial universality on the one hand and, on the other, arbitrary judgments usually derived from conventional opinions. Hegel’s program, that thought should not proceed from above but rather relinquish itself to the phenomena, was first brought within reach in aesthetics by a nominalism in opposition to which Hegel’s own aesthetics, given its classicist components, preserved far more abstract invariants than was coherent with dialectical method. This at the same time threw into question the possibility of aesthetic theory as a traditional theory. For the idea of the concrete, on which each and every artwork, indeed any experience of beauty, is fixed, prohibits — similarly as in the study of art — distancing itself from determinate phenomena in the way that philosophical consensus had so long and falsely supposed possible in the spheres of the theory of knowledge or ethics. A general theory of the aesthetically concrete would necessarily let slip what interested it in the object in the first place. The reason for the obsolescence of aesthetics is that it scarcely ever confronted itself with its object. By its very form, aesthetics seems sworn to a universality that culminates in inadequacy to the artworks and, complementarily, in transitory eternal values. The academic mistrust of aesthetics is founded in the academicism immanent to it. The motive for the lack of interest in aesthetic questions is primarily the institutionalized scientific, scholarly anxiety vis-à-vis what is uncertain and contested, not fear of provincialism and of how backward the formulation of issues is with respect to the nature of those issues. The synoptical, contemplative perspective that science expects of aesthetics has meanwhile become incompatible with progressive art, which — as in Kafka — has lost patience with any contemplative attitude. Aesthetics today therefore begins by diverging from what it treats, having become suspicious of the passive, possibly even culinary, pleasures of spectators. As its standard, contemplative aesthetics presupposes that taste by which the observer disposes over the works from a distance. Taste, on account of its subjectivistic prejudice, itself stands in need of theoretical reflection not only as to why it fails in the face of the most recent modernism but why it may long have been inadequate to advanced art. This critique was anticipated by Hegel’s demand that the work itself
take the place of the judgment of taste; yet in his own aesthetics the object did not extricate itself from the perspective—still matted together with taste—of the detached spectator. It was the system that enabled his thought to be fruitful even where it remained at all too great a distance from its objects. Hegel and Kant were the last who, to put it bluntly, were able to write major aesthetics without understanding anything about art. That was possible so long as art itself was oriented to encompassing norms that were not questioned in individual works and were liquified only in the work’s immanent problematic. True, there has probably scarcely ever been a work that was important in any regard that did not, by virtue of its own form, mediate these norms and thus virtually transform them. Yet these norms were not simply liquidated; something of them towered over and above the individual works. The great philosophical aesthetics stood in concordance with art to the extent that they conceptualized what was evidently universal in it; this was in accordance with a stage in which philosophy and other forms of spirit, such as art, had not yet been torn apart. Because the same spirit ruled in philosophy and art, philosophy was able to treat art in a substantial fashion without surrendering itself to the works. Certainly artworks regularly succumbed to the effort—motivated by the nonidentity of art with its universal determinations—to conceive them in their specificity: This resulted in speculative idealism’s most painfully mistaken judgments. Kant, who was not pledged to prove that a posteriori was the apriori, was precisely for this reason less fallible. Imprisoned by eighteenth-century art, which he would not have hesitated to call precritical—that is, preceding the full emancipation of the subject—he did not compromise himself to the same extent as Hegel by art-alien assertions. He even accorded more space to later radical modern possibilities than did Hegel, who confronted art so much more courageously. After them came the sensitive connoisseurs, who occupied the mediocre middle ground between the thing-itself as postulated by Hegel and the concept. They combined a culinary relation to art with an incapacity for philosophical construction. Georg Simmel was typical of such sensitivity, despite his decisive predilection for the aesthetically individual. The right medium for understanding art is either the unwavering asceticism of conceptualization, doggedly refusing to allow itself to be irritated by facts, or the unconscious consciousness in the midst of the work itself; art is never understood by the appreciative, snugly empathetic spectator; the capriciousness of such an attitude is from the beginning indifferent to what is essential to works, their binding force. Aesthetics was productive only so long as it undiminishedly respected the distance from the empirical and with windowless thoughts penetrated into the content of its other; or when, with a closeness bordering on embodiment, it judged the work from within, as sometimes occurs in the scattered remarks of individual artists, which are important not as the expression of a personality that is hardly authoritative with regard to the work, but because often, without recurring to the subject, they document something of the experiential force of the work. These reports are often constrained by
the naïveté that society insists on finding in art. Artists either stubbornly resist aesthetics with artisanal rancor, or the antidilettantes devise dilettantic theories that make do. If their comments are to convey anything to aesthetics, they require interpretation. Artisanal instruction that wants polemically to usurp the position of aesthetics ultimately develops into positivism, even when it includes sympathy with metaphysics. Advice on how best to compose a rondo is useless as soon as there are reasons—of which artisanal instruction is ignorant—why rondos can no longer be written. Its general rules are in need of philosophical development if they are to be more than a decoction of conventions. When they balk at this transition, they almost inevitably seek succor in a murky Weltanschauung. After the demise of idealistic systems, the difficulty of an aesthetics that would be more than a desperately reanimated branch of philosophy is that of bringing the artist's closeness to the phenomena into conjunction with a conceptual capacity free of any subordinating concept, free of all decreed judgments; committed to the medium of concepts, such an aesthetics would go beyond a mere phenomenology of artworks. On the other hand, the effort, under the pressure of the nominalistic situation, to make a transition to what has been called an empirical aesthetics, is in vain. If, for example, in compliance with the prescript of such scientization, one wanted to reach general aesthetic norms by abstracting from empirical descriptions and classifying them, the results would be incomparably meager when compared with the substantive and incisive categories of the speculative systems. Applied to current artistic practice, such distillates would be no more appropriate than artistic ideals ever were. All aesthetic questions terminate in those of the truth content of artworks: Is the spirit that a work objectively bears in its specific form true? For empiricism this is, as superstition, anathema. For it, artworks are bundles of indeterminate stimuli. What they are in themselves is beyond judgment; any claim to know is a projection. Only subjective reactions to artworks can be observed, measured, and generalized. As a result, the actual object of aesthetics escapes study. It is replaced by what is at bottom a preaesthetic sphere that has proved to be socially that of the culture industry. Hegel's achievement is not criticized in the name of a purportedly greater scientific acumen but is instead forgotten in favor of vulgar adaptation. That empiricism recoils from art—of which in general it has hardly ever taken notice (with the exception of the unique and truly free John Dewey) other than insofar as it attributes all knowledge that does not agree with its rules of the game to be poetry—can be explained by the fact that art constitutively dismisses these rules of the game, because art is an entity that is not identical with its empiria. What is essential to art is that which in it is not the case, that which is incommensurable with the empirical measure of all things. The compulsion to aesthetics is the need to think this empirical incommensurability. The objective difficulties in this are compounded subjectively by broad resistance. For most people, aesthetics is superfluous. It disturbs the weekend pleasures to which art has been consigned as the complement-to bourgeois routine. In spite of
far-reaching alienness to art, this subjective resistance helps give expression to something closely allied to art. For art allies itself with repressed and dominated nature in the progressively rationalized and integrated society. Yet industry makes even this resistance an institution and changes it into coin. It cultivates art as a natural reserve for irrationalism, from which thought is to be excluded. It thereby allies itself with the platitude—a bowdlerized theorem of aesthetics—that art must be a direct object of pleasure, whereas instead art at every point participates in concepts. This fundamentally confuses the ever problematic primacy of intuition in art with the enjoinder that art not be thought about because successful artists themselves supposedly never did so. The result of this mentality is a bloated concept of naïveté. In the domain of pure feeling—the phrase appears in the title of the aesthetics of a preeminent neo-Kantian—a taboo is placed on anything akin to logicality, in spite of the elements of stringency in the artwork, whose relation to extra-aesthetic logic and causality could be elucidated only by philosophical aesthetics. Feeling thus becomes its own opposite: It is reified. Art is actually the world once over, as like it as it is unlike it. In the managed world of the culture industry, aesthetic naïveté has changed its function. What once was praised of artworks, when they were poised on the pedestal of their classicality, as their abiding quality—that of noble simplicity—has become an exploitable means for attracting customers. The consumers, whose naïveté is confirmed and drilled into them, are to be dissuaded from entertaining stupid ideas about what has been packed into the pills they are obliged to swallow down. The simplicity of times past is translated into the stupidity of the culture consumer who, gratefully and with a metaphysically clear conscience, buys up the industry’s trash, which is in any case inescapable. As soon as naïveté is taken up as a point of view, it no longer exists. A genuine relation between art and consciousness’s experience of it would consist in education, which schools opposition to art as a consumer product as much as it allows the recipient a substantial idea of what an artwork is. Art today, even among those who produce it, is largely cut off from such education. The price art pays for this is the permanent temptation of the subartistic, even in the range of the most refined techniques. The naïveté of artists has degenerated into naïve pliancy vis-à-vis the culture industry. Naïveté was never the natural essence of the artist but rather the self-evidence with which he conducted himself in an imposed social situation, that is, it was an aspect of conformism. The unqualified acceptance of social forms was the real criterion of artistic naïveté. The justification of naïveté is bound up with the extent to which the subject assents to or resists these forms, the extent to which these forms can still lay claim to self-evidence. Ever since the surface of life, the immediacy it makes available to people, has become ideology, naïveté has reversed into its own opposite; it has become the reflex of reified consciousness to a reified world. Artistic production that refuses to relinquish the impulse against the ossification of life and is thus truly naïve, becomes what according to the game rules of conventional society is the
opposite of naïveté; admittedly, it has stored up in it as much naïveté as the comportment of art has of noncompliance with the reality principle, something of the childish and—according to social norms—the infantile. It is the opposite of established naïveté, and it is condemned. Hegel, and even more perspicaciously, Karl Gustav Jochmann, knew this. Yet they were compelled to understand it in the context of their classicism and so attributed the end of art to it. Art’s naïve and reflexive elements have, in truth, always been much more internal to each other than the longing that arose during the rise of industrial capitalism wanted to recognize. The history of art since Hegel has shown up what was mistaken in his premature eschatology of art. Its mistake was that it perpetuated the conventional ideal of naïveté. Even Mozart, who played the role of the divinely gifted, capering prodigy in the bourgeois household, was—as every page of his correspondence with his father documents—incomparably more reflexive than the popular profile of him lets on; reflexive, however, not in the sense of a freely hovering abstract intelligence but in the compositional material itself. Just how much the work of another household divinity of pure intuition—Raphael—has reflection as its objective condition is evident in the geometrical organization of his paintings. Art without reflection is the retrospective fantasy of a reflexive age. Theoretical considerations and scientific findings have at all times been amalgamated with art, often as its bellwether, and the most important artists were not those who hesitated. Well-known instances of this are Piero della Francesca’s discovery of aerial perspective and the aesthetic speculations of the Florentine Camerata, in which opera originated. The latter is paradigmatic of a form that, once it had become the darling of the public, was cloaked after the fact with the aura of naïveté, whereas it originated in theory, literally in an invention. Similarly, it was only the introduction of equal temperament in the seventeenth century that permitted modulation through the circle of fifths and, with it, Bach, who gratefully acknowledged this in the title of his great keyboard composition. Even in the nineteenth century, impressionist technique in painting was based on the rightly or wrongly interpreted scientific analysis of retinal processes. Of course the theoretical and reflexive elements in art seldom went untransformed. At times, art misunderstood the sciences to which it appealed, as is perhaps the case most recently with electronic music. Yet the productive impulse was little harmed by the rationality that was brought to bear on it. The physiological theorems of the impressionists were probably foils for the in part fascinated, in part socially critical experiences of the metropolis and the dynamic of their paintings. By means of the discovery of a dynamic immanent to the reified world, they wanted to resist reification, which was most palpable in metropolitan life. In the nineteenth century, natural scientific explanations functioned as the self-unconscious agent of art. The basis of this affinity between art and science was that the ratio to which the most progressive art of the epoch reacted was none other than the ratio of the natural sciences. Whereas in the history of art, scientific theories tend to wither away, without them artistic practices would
no more have developed than, inversely, these theorems can adequately explain such practices. This has consequences for reception: It is inadequate if it is less reflexive than the object it receives. Not knowing what one sees or hears bestows no privileged direct relation to works but instead makes their perception impossible. Consciousness is not a layer in a hierarchy built over perception; rather, all elements of aesthetic experience are reciprocal. No artwork consists in the superimposition of layers; that is exclusively the result of the calculation of the culture industry, that is, a result of reified consciousness. It can, for instance, be noted in extended, complex music that there is a constantly varying threshold between what is primarily perceived and what is determined by the reflexive perception of consciousness. The understanding of the meaning of a fleeting musical passage often depends on the intellectual comprehension of its function in a whole that is not present; the purportedly immediate experience itself depends on what goes beyond pure immediacy. The ideal perception of artworks would be that in which what is mediated becomes immediate; naïveté is the goal, not the origin.

Yet the flagging interest in aesthetics is not only predicated on aesthetics as a discipline but equally, and indeed more so, on its object. Insofar as aesthetics concerns itself primarily with the how rather than with the fact of art, it seems silently to imply the possibility of art. This position has become uncertain. Aesthetics can no longer take the fact of art for granted in the way that Kant’s theory of knowledge presupposed the mathematical natural sciences. Although traditional theory was in no way encumbered by such concerns, aesthetic theory cannot escape the reality that art that holds fast to its concept and refuses consumption becomes anti-art, and that art’s distress with itself following the real catastrophes and faced with the coming ones stands in moral disproportion to its continued existence. At its Hegelian zenith, philosophical aesthetics prognosticated the end of art. Although aesthetics later forgot this, art senses it all the more deeply. Even if art remained what it once was and can no longer remain, it would become something wholly different in the society that is emerging and by virtue of its changed function in that society. Artistic consciousness rightly mistrusts reflection that by its very topic and by the style expected of it disports itself as if a firm foundation existed, whereas it is retrospectively dubious that any such solid foundation ever existed; it was and was not already that ideology into which the contemporary cultural bustle, along with its art department, is clearly being transformed. The question of the possibility of art is so relevant that it has taken a form that mocks its putatively more radical formulation of whether and how art is even possible at all. The question has instead become that of the concrete possibility of art today. The uneasiness with art is not only that of a stagnating social consciousness vis-à-vis the modern. At every point this uneasiness extends to what is essential to art, to its most advanced works. Art, for its part, seeks refuge in its own negation, hoping to survive through its death. Thus contemporary theater turns against the status of being a plaything, a peep-show with glitter; against imitating the world even with sets strung with barbed
wire. The pure mimetic impulse—the happiness of producing the world once over—which animates art and has stood in age-old tension with its antimythological, enlightening component, has become unbearable under the system of total functional rationality. Art and happiness both arouse the suspicion of infantilism, although the anxiety that such infantilism inspires is itself regression, the misconstrual of the raison d'être of all rationality; for the movement of the principle of self-preservation, to the extent that it is not fetishized, leads by its own force to the desideratum of happiness; nothing stronger speaks for art. In the contemporary novel the impulses against the fiction of the constant presence of the narrator participate in art’s self-disgust. This has in large measure defined the history of narration since Proust, though the genre has been unable to shake off completely the rubric “fiction,” which stands at the head of the best-seller lists, however much aesthetic semblance has become social anathema. Music struggles to free itself of the element by which Benjamin, somewhat overgenerously, defined all art prior to the age of its technical reproducibility: aura, the sorcery that emanates from music, even if it were antimusic, whenever it commences to sound. Yet art does not labor on traits of this sort as it does on correctable residues of its past, for these traits seem inextricably grown together with art’s own concept. The more, however, art itself—in order not to barter away semblance for lies—is driven to reflect on its own presuppositions and when possible to absorb into its own form such reflection as if it were a counterpoison, the more skeptical it becomes toward the presumption of having self-consciousness imposed on it externally. Aesthetics is compelled to drag its concepts helplessly behind a situation of art in which art, indifferent to what becomes of it, seeks to undermine those concepts without which it can hardly be conceived. No theory, aesthetic theory included, can dispense with the element of universality. This tempts aesthetics to take the side of invariants of precisely the sort that emphatic modern art must attack. The mania of cultural studies for reducing the new to the ever-same, as for example the claim that surrealism is a form of mannerism, the lack of any sense for the historical situation of artistic phenomena as the index of their truth, corresponds to the tendency of philosophical aesthetics toward those abstract rules in which nothing is invariant other than that they are ever and again given the lie by spirit as it takes shape. What sets itself up as an eternal aesthetic norm is something that developed and is transient; the claim to imperishability has become obsolete. Even a university-certified schoolmaster would hesitate to apply to prose such as Kafka’s Metamorphosis or The Penal Colony, in which the secure aesthetic distance to the object is shockingly undermined, a sanctioned criterion such as that of disinterested satisfaction; anyone who has experienced the greatness of Kafka’s writing must sense how awkwardly inapplicable to it any talk of art is. The situation is no different in the case of a priori genres such as the tragic or comic in contemporary drama, however much contemporary works may be marbled by them in the way that the enormous apartment building in Kafka’s parable is marbled with medieval ruins.
Although Beckett's plays can no longer be taken for tragic or comic, they are not therefore, as would suit academic aesthetics, hybrids on the order of tragicomedy. On the contrary, Beckett's plays pass historical judgment over these categories as such, faithful to the historical innervation that there is no more laughing over the classics of comic theater except in a state of renewed barbarism. In accord with the tendency of modern art to make its own categories thematic through self-reflection, plays like Godot and Endgame—in the scene in which the protagonists decide to laugh—are more the tragic presentation of comedy's fate than they are comic; in the actors' forced laughter, the spectator's mirth vanishes. Early in the century already, Wedekind named a pièce à clef, whose target was the publisher of Simplicissimus, a "satire on satire." Academic philosophers adopt a false superiority when they survey the history of art to procure for themselves the satisfaction of nil admirari and, living in the domestic company of eternal values, derive from the ever-sameness of things the profit of separating out what is truly different and endangers the status quo, in order to dismiss it as a rehashing of the classics. This attitude is in league with a sociopsychologically and institutionally reactionary attitude. It is only in the process of critical self-consciousness that aesthetics is able once again to reach art, if it was ever capable of this in the first place.

Although art, frightened by the traces left by aesthetics, mistrusts it as something that had fallen far behind its own development, it must at the same time secretly fear that an aesthetics that was no longer anachronistic would sever the threads of life, which are already stretched to the limit. Such an aesthetics, it is feared, would lay claim to deciding if and how art should survive after the fall of metaphysics, to which art owes its existence and content. The metaphysics of art has become the court of judgment that rules over art's continued existence. The absence of theological meaning, however modified, culminates in art as the crisis of its own meaning. The more ruthlessly artworks draw the consequences from the contemporary condition of consciousness, the more closely they themselves approximate meaninglessness. They thereby achieve a historically requisite truth, which, if art disowned it, would condemn art to doling out powerless consolation and to complicity with the status quo. At the same time, however, meaningless art has begun to forfeit its right to exist; in any case, there is no longer any art that has remained inviolable. To the question as to why it exists, art has no other response than what Goethe called the dregs of absurdity, which all art contains. This residue rises to the surface and denounces art. Just as it is rooted at least in part in fetishes, art, through its relentless progress, relapses back into fetishism and becomes a blind end in itself, revealing itself as untruth, a sort of collective delusion, as soon as its objective truth content, its meaning, begins to waver. If psychoanalysis followed its own principle to its culmination, it would—like all positivism—necessarily demand the end of art, just as it tends to analyze it away in the treatment of patients. If art is sanctioned exclusively as sublimation, as a means for the maintenance of psychic economy, its truth content is contravened and art lingers on only
as a pious deception. The truth of all artworks would, on the other hand, not exist without the fetishism that now verges on becoming art's untruth. The quality of artworks depends essentially on the degree of their fetishism, on the veneration that the process of production pays to what lays claim to being self-produced, to the seriousness that forgets the pleasure taken in it. Only through fetishism, the blinding of the artwork vis-à-vis the reality of which it is part, does the work transcend the spell of the reality principle as something spiritual.

From these perspectives, aesthetics proves to be not so much obsolete as necessary. Art does not stand in need of an aesthetics that will prescribe norms where it finds itself in difficulty, but rather of an aesthetics that will provide the capacity for reflection, which art on its own is hardly able to achieve. Words such as material, form, and formation, which flow all too easily from the pens of contemporary artists, ring trite; to cure contemporary language of this is one of the art-practical functions of aesthetics. Above all, however, aesthetics is demanded by the development of artworks. If they are not timelessly self-same, but rather become what they are because their own meaning is a process of becoming, they summon forth forms of spirit—commentary and critique, for example—through which this process is fulfilled. These forms remain weak, however, so long as they do not reach the truth content of the works. They only become capable of this by being honed to aesthetics. The truth content of an artwork requires philosophy. It is only in this truth content that philosophy converges with art or extinguishes itself in it.

The way toward this is defined by the reflected immanence of works, not by the external application of philosophems. The truth content of works must be rigorously distinguished from all philosophy that is pumped into them by authors or theorists; the difference between the two, it must be suspected, has for close to two hundred years been unbridgeable. On the other hand, aesthetics brusquely repudiates the claim of philology—however useful it may be in other contexts—that it assures the truth content of artworks. In the age of the irreconcilability of traditional aesthetics and contemporary art, the philosophical theory of art has no choice but, varying a maxim of Nietzsche's, by determinate negation to think the categories that are in decline as categories of transition. The elucidated and concrete dissolution of conventional aesthetic categories is the only remaining form that aesthetics can take; it at the same time sets free the transformed truth of these categories. If artists are compelled to permanent reflection, that reflection needs to be wrested free of its accidentalness so that it does not degenerate into arbitrary, amateurish auxiliary hypotheses, homemade rationalizations, or into arbitrary declarations of intentions framed by a Weltanschauung, without any justification from what is actually achieved. No one should any longer entrust himself naively to the technological parti pris of contemporary art; otherwise this art would consign itself totally to the substitution of the goal—that is, the work—by the means, the procedures by which it was produced. The propensity toward this harmonizes all too fundamentally with the general direction of society toward the apotheosis
of means, production for the sake of production, total employment and all that is part of it, because the goals themselves—the rational organization of humanity—are blocked. Whereas in philosophy, aesthetics fell out of fashion, the most advanced artists have sensed the need for it all the more strongly. It is clear that even Boulez is far from envisioning a normative aesthetics of the traditional sort but sees, rather, the necessity of a historicophilosophical theory of art. What he means by “orientation esthétique” could best be translated as the critical self awareness of the artist. If, as Hegel thought, the hour of naïve art is past, art must embody reflection and take it to the point where it no longer remains external and foreign to it; this would be the role of aesthetics today. Boulez’s central point is that he had been puzzled by the current opinion of avant-garde artists, who believe that annotated instructions for the employment of technical procedures already amount to an artwork; on the contrary, the only criterion—according to Boulez—is what the artist does, not how and with whatever advanced means he intended to make it. Boulez, too, realizes, with regard to the contemporary artistic process, that insight into the historical situation—through which the antithetical relation to tradition is mediated—converges with binding implications for production. The dogmatic separation of craft and aesthetics, which Schoenberg decreed out of a then justified critique of a praxis-alien aesthetics, a separation that was self-evident to the artists of his generation as well as to those of the Bauhaus, is disavowed by Boulez in the name of craft and métier. Even Schoenberg’s Theory of Harmony was only able to maintain this separation because he limited himself in this book to means that had long not been his own; had he discussed those he would have been irresistibly compelled to undertake aesthetic reflection, given that he lacked didactically communicable rules for the new craft. Such reflection responds to the fatal aging of the modern as a result of the tensionlessness of the totally technical artwork. This tensionlessness can hardly be dealt with in an exclusively inner-technical fashion, even though in technical criticism something of the supratechnical constantly registers. That significant contemporary art is a matter of indifference in a society that tolerates it, marks art itself as something indifferent that in spite of all its effort might equally well be something else or nothing at all. What currently passes for technical criteria in no way facilitates judgment on the level of artistic achievement and most often relegated it to the obsolete category of taste. As Boulez points out, many works, of which the question as to their value no longer makes sense, are beholden solely to their abstract opposition to the culture industry, not to their content or the capacity to realize it. The critical decision they elude could only be the responsibility of an aesthetics that proves itself equal to the most advanced developments to the same extent that it matches and supersedes the latter with its power of reflection. This aesthetics is obliged to renounce the concept of taste, in which the claim of art to truth is in danger of coming to a miserable end. The guilt lies with previous aesthetics that, by virtue of taking its starting point in the subjective judgment of taste, peremptorily deprived art of its
claim to truth. Hegel, who took this claim seriously and emphasized art's opposition to pleasurable or useful play, was for this reason the enemy of taste, without however being able to break through its contingency in the concrete analyses of his Aesthetics. It is to Kant's credit that he recognized the aporia of aesthetic objectivity and the judgment of taste. He did indeed carry out an aesthetic analysis of the judgment of taste in terms of its elements, but he conceived them at the same time as latent, a conceptually objective elements. In so doing he pointed up the nominalistic threat to every emphatic theory—a threat that cannot be dismissed by any act of will—and at the same time perceived the elements in which theory goes beyond itself. By virtue of the intellective movement of his object, a movement that effectively closed its eyes to the object, Kant brought into thought the deepest impulses of an art that only developed in the one hundred fifty years after his death: an art that probed after its objectivity openly, without protection of any kind. What needs to be carried through is what in the theories of Kant and Hegel awaits redemption through second reflection. Terminating the tradition of philosophical aesthetics must amount to giving it its due.

The dilemma of aesthetics appears immanently in the fact that it can be constituted neither from above nor from below, neither from concepts nor from conceptual experience. The only possibility for aesthetics beyond this miserable alternative is the philosophical insight that fact and concept are not polar opposites but mediated reciprocally in one another. This must be appropriated by aesthetics, for art again stands in need of aesthetics now that criticism has shown itself to be so disoriented by false and arbitrary judgments that it fails vis-à-vis art. Yet if aesthetics is to amount neither to art-alien prescriptions nor to the inconsequential classification of what it happens upon, then it is only conceivable as dialectical aesthetics; dialectical method is not unsuitably defined as the refusal to rest content with the diremption of the deductive and inductive that dominates rigid, indurative thought, and this is expressly rejected by the earliest formulations of dialectics in German idealism, those of Fichte. Aesthetics must no more lag behind art than behind philosophy. Although it abounds in the most important insights, Hegel's aesthetics no more satisfied the concept of dialectics in his main works than did other material parts of the system. This is not easy to correct. Aesthetic dialectics is not to presuppose a metaphysics of spirit, which in Hegel as in Fichte was to guarantee that the individual, with which induction begins, and the universal, which provides the basis for deduction, are one. What was volatilized in emphatic philosophy cannot be revived by aesthetics, itself a philosophical discipline. Kant's theory is more apposite to the contemporary situation, for his aesthetics attempts to bind together consciousness of what is necessary with consciousness that what is necessary is itself blocked from consciousness. It follows its course, in effect, blindly. His aesthetics feels its way in the dark and yet is led by a compulsion toward what it seeks. This is the puzzle in which all aesthetic efforts today are bound up: Aesthetics, not entirely helpless, seeks to untangle the
knot. For art is, or at any rate was until the most recent developments, under the
impress of its semblance, what metaphysics, which is without semblance, always
wanted to be. When Schelling declared art the organon of philosophy he involun-
tarily admitted what great idealistic speculation either passed over in silence or
denied in the interest of its self-preservation. Correspondingly, Schelling did not,
as is well known, carry through the thesis of identity as relentlessly as did Hegel.
The aesthetic contours of Hegel’s philosophy, that of a gigantic “as if,” were then
recognized by Kierkegaard and could be demonstrated in detail in his Logic.16 Art
is that—for the most part material—existent that is determined as spirit in pre-
cisely the fashion that idealism simply asserted extra-aesthetic reality to be. Expe-
rience is obscured by the naïve cliché that depicts the artist as an idealist or, de-
pending on taste, as a fool in the service of the purportedly absolute reason of his
work. Artworks are, in terms of their own constitution, objective as well as—and
not only because they have their genesis in spiritual processes—spiritual; other-
wise they would be in principle indistinguishable from eating and drinking. The
contemporary debates originating in Soviet aesthetics, which insist that the claim
to the primacy of the law of form as the primacy of the spiritual is an idealistic
view of social reality, are groundless. Only as spirit is art the opposite of empirical
reality, which becomes the determinate negation of the existing world order. Art
is to be dialectically construed insofar as spirit inheres in it, without art’s possess-
ing it or giving surety of it as something absolute. However much they seem to be
entities, artworks are crystallizations of the process between spirit and its other.
This implies the difference from Hegel’s aesthetics. There the objectivity of the
artwork is the truth of spirit: It is spirit that has gone over into its own otherness
and become identical with itself. For Hegel, spirit is one with totality, also with
the totality in art. After the collapse of the general thesis of Idealism, however,
spirit is strictly one aspect of artworks; granted, it is that aspect that makes the
artifact art, yet it is not in any way present without what is opposed to it. Spirit
no more devours its opposite than history has known pure artworks that have
achieved the identity of spirit and nonspirit. Constitutively, the spirit of artworks
is not pure. Those works that seem to embody such identity are not the most
important. What in artworks opposes spirit is, however, on no account what is
natural in their materials and objects; they constitute merely a limiting value in art-
works. They bear what is opposed to them in themselves; their materials are his-
torically and socially preformed as are their procedures, and their heterogeneous
element is that in them that resists their unity and is needed by its unity for it to be
more than a Pyrrhic victory over the unresisting. In this, aesthetic reflection is
unanimous with the history of art, which irresistibly moved the dissonant into the
center of the work until finally its difference from consonance was destroyed. Art
thereby participates in the suffering that, by virtue of the unity of its process, finds
its way to language rather than disappearing. It is because it recognizes this and
allies art with the consciousness of need that Hegel’s aesthetics, in spite of its har-
monistic elements and its faith in the sensual appearance of the idea, is distin-

guished from merely formal aesthetics. He who was first to envision the end of art

named the most compelling reason for its continuation: the continuation of needs,
mute in themselves, that await the expression that artworks fulfill by proxy. How-

ever, if the element of spirit is immanent to artworks, this implies that this element
is not identical with the spirit that produces them, not even with the collective

spirit of the epoch. The determination of the spirit in artworks is the highest task

of aesthetics; for this reason it is all the more pressing that aesthetics not let phi-

losophy prescribe to it that category of spirit. Common sense, inclined to equate
the spirit of artworks with what their makers infuse into them, must rapidly

enough discover that artworks are so coconstructed by the opposition of the artis-
tic material, by their own postulates, by historically contemporary models and

procedures that are elemental to a spirit that may be called—in a condensed fash-

ion that deviates from Hegel—objective, that their reduction to subjective spirit
becomes absurd. This sets the question of the spirit of artworks at a distance from
their genesis. The dynamic relation of material and labor, as Hegel developed it in
the dialectic of the master and the slave, is pregnant reproduced in art. If that
chapter of the Phenomenology historically conjures up feudalism, art itself, its
mere existence, bears an archaic quality. The reflection on this is inseparable from
reflection on art's right to continue to exist. Today the neotragodytes are more
aware of this than is the naivety of an unperturbed cultural consciousness.

Aesthetic theory, wary of a priori construction and cautious of an increasing ab-

stractness, has as its arena the experience of the aesthetic object. The artwork is
not to be known simply externally but demands of theory that, at whatever level of
abstraction, it be understood. Philosophically the concept of understanding and
categories such as empathy have been compromised by Dilthey and his followers.
If one sets aside such theorems and insists on an understanding of artworks that
would be knowledge determined strictly through their objectivity, difficulties
amass. In advance it must be admitted that, if knowledge is anywhere achieved in
layers, this is so in aesthetics. Any fixation of the starting point of this layering in
experience would be arbitrary. It reaches back far behind aesthetic sublimation,
where it is indivisible from lived perception. Experience remains related to such
perception, while at the same time it only becomes what it is by distancing itself
from immediacy, into which it stands permanently in danger of sinking back, as
happens to those excluded from education who use the present rather than the past
tense when narrating the events of a film or play; yet, without any trace of such
immediacy, artistic experience is no less in vain than when it capitulates to imme-
diacy. In Alexandrian fashion it circumvents the claim to an immediacy of exis-
tence that is registered by every artwork, whether it wants to or not. Pre-artistic
experience of the aesthetic is indeed false, in that it identifies and counteridentifies
with artworks as in empirical life and, if possible, even to a heightened degree,
and thus precisely by way of a comportment that subjectivism holds to be the
instrument of aesthetic experience. By approaching the artwork aconceptually, this comportment remains trapped within the radius of taste, and its relation to the work is no less oblique than if it misused art to illustrate philosophical positions. The malleable, readily identifying sensibility collapses when faced with the severity of the artwork; yet obdurate thought cheats itself of the element of receptivity, without which it is no longer thought. Preartistic experience requires projection, yet aesthetic experience—precisely by virtue of the a priori primacy of subjectivity in it—is a countermovement to the subject. It demands something on the order of the self-denial of the observer, his capacity to address or recognize what aesthetic objects themselves enunciate and what they conceal. Aesthetic experience first of all places the observer at a distance from the object. This resonates in the idea of disinterested observation. Philistines are those whose relation to artworks is ruled by whether and to what degree they can, for example, put themselves in the place of the actors as they come forth; this is what all parts of the culture industry are based on and they foster it insistently in their customers. The more artistic experience possesses its objects and the closer it approaches them in a certain sense, the farther it is at the same time shifted away from them; artistic enthusiasm is art-alien. It is thus that aesthetic experience, as Schopenhauer knew, breaks through the spell of obstinate self-preservation; it is the model of a stage of consciousness in which the I no longer has its happiness in its interests, or, ultimately, in its reproduction.—That, however, to follow the course of action in a novel or a drama and note the various motivations, or adequately to recognize the thematic content of a painting, does not amount to understanding the works is as obvious as that they cannot be understood apart from such aspects. There are exact scholarly descriptions of artworks, even analyses—thematic analyses of music, for example—that miss everything essential. A second layer of understanding is that of the intention of the work, that which the work itself states and what traditional aesthetics calls its idea, an example of which would be the guiltiness of subjective morality in Ibsen's Wild Duck. The intention of the work is, however, not equivalent with its content, and thus its understanding remains provisional. The question remains at this level of understanding whether the intention is realized in the structure of the work; whether the form carries out the play of forces, the antagonisms, that objectively govern the work over and beyond its intention. Moreover, the understanding of the intention does not yet grasp the truth content of the work. For this reason the understanding of works is essentially a process, one apart from all biographical accidentalness and in no way comparable to that ominous lived experience [Erlebnis] that is supposed to deliver up all secrets with a wave of the magic wand and indeed provide a doorway into the object. Understanding has as its idea that one become conscious of the artwork's content by way of the full experience [Erfahrung] of it. This concerns the work's relation to its material, to its appearance and intention, as much as it concerns its own truth or falseness in terms of the artworks' specific logic, which instructs as
to the differentiation between what is true and false in them. Artworks are understood only when their experience is brought to the level of distinguishing between true and not true or, as a preliminary stage, between correct and incorrect. Critique is not externally added into aesthetic experience but, rather, is immanent to it. The comprehension of an artwork as a complexion of truth brings the work into relation with its untruth, for there is no artwork that does not participate in the untruth external to it, that of the historical moment. Aesthetics that does not move within the perspective of truth fails its task; usually it is culinary. Because the element of truth is essential to artworks, they participate in knowledge, and this defines the only legitimate relation to them. Consigning them to irrationality profanes what is important in them under the pretext of what is putatively ultimate. The knowledge of artworks is guided by their own cognitive constitution: They are the form of knowledge that is not knowledge of an object. This paradox is also the paradox of artistic experience. Its medium is the obviousness of the incomprehensible. This is the comportment of artists; it is the objective reason back of their often apocryphal and helpless theories. The task of a philosophy of art is not so much to explain away the element of incomprehensibility, which speculative philosophy has almost invariably sought to do, but rather to understand the incomprehensibility itself. This incomprehensibility persists as the character of art, and it alone protects the philosophy of art from doing violence to art. The question of comprehensibility becomes urgent to the extreme in the face of the contemporary production of art. For the category of comprehensibility, if it is not to be situated in the subject and thus condemned to relativity, postulates something objectively comprehensible in the artwork. If the artwork assumes the expression of incomprehensibility and in its name destroys its own internal comprehensibility, the traditional hierarchy of comprehension collapses. Its place is taken by reflection on art's enigmatic character. Yet, it is precisely the so-called literature of the absurd—a pastiche concept tacked onto such heterogeneous material that it now serves only the misunderstanding of facile agreement—that proves that understanding, meaning, and content are not equivalents. The absence of meaning becomes intention, though not always with the same consequence. A play like Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, for instance, though it insists that common sense accede in the metamorphosis of people into rhinos, permits the clear inference of what used to be called the idea of an artwork in its internal opposition to sheepish, standardized consciousness, to which the well-functioning I is more successfully adapted than one who has not completely kept up with dominant instrumental rationality. The intention of radical absurdity may have originated in art's need to translate the condition of metaphysical meaninglessness into a language of art that would cast meaning aside; thus it was, perhaps, a polemical act against Sartre, whose works firmly and subjectively posit this metaphysical experience. In Beckett the negative metaphysical content affects the content along with the form. The work does not, however, thereby become something simply incomprehensible; the well-founded refusal of
its author to offer explanations for so-called symbols is faithful to an aesthetic tradition that has elsewhere been dismissed. A relation, not identity, operates between the negativity of the metaphysical content and the eclipsing of the aesthetic content. The metaphysical negation no longer permits an aesthetic form that would itself produce metaphysical affirmation; and yet this negation is nevertheless able to become aesthetic content and determine the form.

The concept of artistic experience, a concept into which aesthetics is transformed and which by its desideratum of understanding is incompatible with positivism, nevertheless in no way coincides with the currently popular concept of work-immanent analysis. Yet work-immanent analysis, which is self-evident to artistic experience and its hostility to philology, unquestionably marks decisive progress in scholarship. Various branches of art scholarship, such as the academic study of music, only awoke from their pharisaical lethargy when they caught up with this method rather than busy themselves with everything except what concerns the structure of artworks. But in its adaptation by scholarship work-immanent analysis, by virtue of which scholarship hoped to cure itself of its alienness to art, has in turn taken on a positivist character that it wants to go beyond. The strictness with which it concentrates on its object facilitates the disowning of everything in the artwork that—a fact to the second power—is not present, not simply the given facts of the matter. Even motivic-thematic musical analyses, though an improvement on glib commentaries, often suffer from the superstition that analyzing the work into basic materials and their transformations leads to the understanding of what, uncomprehended and correlative to the asceticism of the method, is gladly chalked up to a faulty irrationality. The work-immanent approach is indeed not all that removed from mindless craft, although its diagnoses are for the most part immanently correctable because they suffer from insufficient technical insight. Philosophical aesthetics, closely allied with the idea of work-immanent analysis, has its focal point where work-immanent analysis never arrives. Second reflection must push the complex of facts that work-immanent analysis establishes, and in which it has its limit, beyond itself and penetrate to the truth content by means of emphatic critique. Work-immanent analysis is in itself narrow-minded, and this is surely because it wants to knock the wind out of social reflection on art. That art on the one hand confronts society autonomously, and, on the other hand, is itself social, defines the law of its experience. Whoever experiences only the material aspect of art and puffs this up into an aesthetics is philistine, yet whoever perceives art exclusively as art and ensconces this as its prerogative deprives himself of its content. For the content of art cannot simply be art, unless it is to be reduced to an indifferent tautology. Contemplation that limits itself to the artwork fails it. Its inner construction requires, in however mediated a fashion, what is itself not art.

Experience alone is in no position to legislate aesthetically because a boundary is prescribed to it by the philosophy of history. If experience crosses this limit it degenerates into empathic appreciation. Many artworks of the past, and among them
the most renowned, are no longer to be experienced in any immediate fashion and are failed by the fiction of such immediacy. If it is true that the rhythm of history is accelerating geometrically, then even artworks that do not reside in the distant past are being pulled into this process. They bear a stubborn semblance of spontaneous accessibility, which must be destroyed to permit their comprehension. Artworks are archaic when they can no longer be experienced. This boundary is not fixed, nor is it simply continuous; rather, it is fragmentary and dynamic and can be liquefied by correspondance. The archaic is appropriated as the experience of what is not experiential. The boundary of experientiality, however, requires that the starting point of any such appropriation be the modern. It alone throws light on the past, whereas academic custom for the most part limits itself to the past, rebounds from it, and at the same time, by violating the distance, transgresses the irretrievable. Ultimately, however, even in the most extreme refusal of society, art is essentially social and not understood when this essence is misunderstood.

Artistic experience thereby forfeits its prerogatives. Guilt for this is borne by a delusory process that takes place between the categories. Artistic experience is brought of its own accord into movement by the contradiction that the constitutive immanence of the aesthetic sphere is at the same time the ideology that undermines it. Aesthetic experience must overstep itself. It traverses its antithetical extremes rather than settling peacefully into a spurious median between them. It neither renounces philosophical motifs, which it transforms rather than drawing conclusions from them, nor does it exorcise from itself the social element. One is no more equal to a Beethoven symphony without comprehending its so-called purely musical course than if one is unable to perceive in it the echo of the French Revolution; how these two aspects are mediated in the phenomenon belongs to the obstinate and equally unavoidable themes of philosophical aesthetics. Not experience alone but only thought that is fully saturated with experience is equal to the phenomenon. It is not for aesthetics to adapt itself conceptually to aesthetic phenomena. Consciousness of the antagonism between interior and exterior is requisite to the experience of art. The description of aesthetic experiences, theory and judgment, is insufficient. What is required is experience of works rather than thoughts simply applied to the matter, yet no artwork adequately presents itself as immediately given; none is to be understood strictly on its own terms. All works are formed in themselves according to their own logic and consistency as much as they are elements in the context of spirit and society. The two aspects are not to be neatly separated, as is the scientific habit. True consciousness of the external world participates in the work's immanent coherence; the spiritual and social standpoint of an artwork can only be discerned on the basis of its internal crystallization. There is nothing artistically true whose truth is not legitimated in an overarching context; and there is no artwork whose consciousness is true that does not prove itself in terms of aesthetic quality. The kitsch of the Soviet bloc says something about the untruth of the political claim that social truth has been achieved.
there. If the model of aesthetic understanding is a comportment that moves im-
manently within the artwork, and if understanding is damaged as soon as con-
sciousness exits this sphere, then consciousness must in return remain constantly
mobile both internally and externally to the work, in spite of the opposition to
which this mobility of thought exposes itself. To whoever remains strictly internal,
art will not open its eyes, and whoever remains strictly external distorts art-
works by a lack of affinity. Yet aesthetics becomes more than a rhapsodic back
and forth between the two standpoints by developing their reciprocal mediation in
the artwork itself.

As soon as the artwork is considered from an external vantage, bourgeois con-
sciousness tends to become suspicious of alienness to art, even though in its own
relation to artworks bourgeois consciousness tends to disport itself externally to
them. The suspicion must be kept in mind that artistic experience as a whole is in
no way as immediate as the official art religion would have it. Every experience of
an artwork depends on its ambience, its function, and, literally and figuratively, its
locus. Overzealous naivety that refuses to admit this distorts what it considers so
holy. In fact, every artwork, even the hermetic work, reaches beyond its monado-
logical boundaries by its formal language. Each work, if it is to be experienced,
requires thought, however rudimentary it may be, and because this thought does
not permit itself to be checked, each work ultimately requires philosophy as the
thinking comportment that does not stop short in obedience to the prescriptions
stipulated by the division of labor. By virtue of the universality of thought, every
reflection demanded by the artwork is also an external reflection; its fruitfulness is
determined according to what it illuminates interior to the work. Inherent to the
idea of aesthetics is the intention of freeing art, through theory, from its indura-
tion, which it suffers as a result of the inescapable division of labor. Understand-
ing artworks is not χωρίς from their explanation; not from their genetic explana-
tion but from that of their complexion and content, though this is not to say that
explanation and understanding are identical. Understanding has as much need of
the nonexplanatory level of the spontaneous fulfillment of the work as it does
of the explanatory level; understanding goes beyond the art understanding of
connoisseurs. Explanation ineluctably involves the tracing back of the new and
the unknown to the known, even if what is best in the work struggles against it.
Without such reduction, which violates the works, they could not survive. Their
essence, what is uncomprehended in them, requires acts of identification and
comprehension; it is thereby falsified as something familiar and old. To this extent
the life of artworks is ultimately contradictory. Aesthetics must become conscious
of this paradox and it must not act as if its opposition to tradition could dispense
with rational means. Aesthetics moves within the medium of universal concepts
even in the face of the radically nominalist situation of art and in spite of the utopia
of the particular that aesthetics prizes along with art. This is not only the difficulty
of aesthetics but also its fundamentum in re. If, in the experience of the real, it is
the universal that is mediated, in art it is the particular that is mediated; just as nonaesthetic knowledge, in its Kantian formulation, poses the question of the possibility of universal judgment, the question posed by every artwork is how, under the domination of the universal, a particular is in any way possible. This binds aesthetics—however little its method can amount to subsumption by the abstract concept—to concepts, though admittedly to those whose telos is the particular. If anywhere, Hegel’s theory of the movement of the concept has its legitimacy in aesthetics; it is concerned with the dynamic relation of the universal and the particular, which does not impute the universal to the particular externally but seeks it rather in the force fields of the particular itself. The universal is the stumbling block of art: By becoming what it is, art cannot be what it wants to become. Individuation, which is art’s own law, has its boundaries set by the universal. Art leads beyond, and yet not beyond; the world it reflects remains what it is because it is merely reflected by art. Even dada, as the deictic gesture into which the word is transformed in the effort to shake off its conceptuality, was as universal as the childishly reiterated demonstrative word that dadaism took as its motto. Whereas art dreams the absolutely monadological, it is both happily and unhappily suffused with the universal. Art must contract to the geometrical point of the absolute τόδε τι and go beyond it. This imposed the objective limit to expressionism; art would have been compelled to go beyond it even if the artists had been less accommodating: They regressed behind expressionism. Whenever artworks on their way toward concretion polemically eliminate the universal, whether as a genre, a type, an idiom, or a formula, the excluded is maintained in them through its negation; this state of affairs is constitutive of the modern.

Insight into the life of the universal in the midst of aesthetic particularization, however, drives universality beyond the semblance of that static being-in-itself that bears the primary responsibility for the sterility of aesthetic theory. The critique of invariants does not aim at their exclusion but, rather, conceives them in their own variability. Aesthetics is not involved with its object as with a primordial phenomenon. Because phenomenology and its successors oppose conceptual procedures that move from the top down as well as those that move up from below, they are important to aesthetics, which shares in this opposition. As a phenomenology of art, phenomenology would like to develop art neither by deducing it from its philosophical concept nor by rising to it through comparative abstraction; rather, phenomenology wants to say what art is. The essence it discerns is, for phenomenology, art’s origin and at the same time the criterion of art’s truth and falsehood. But what phenomenology has conjured up in art as with a wave of the magic wand, remains extremely superficial and relatively fruitless when confronted with actual artworks. Whoever wants something more must engage a level of content that is incompatible with the phenomenological commandment of pure essentiality. The phenomenology of art comes to grief on the presupposition of the possibility of being without presupposition. Art mocks efforts to reduce it to
pure essentiality. It is not what it was fated to have been from time immemorial but rather what it has become. It is no more fruitful to pursue the question of the individual origin of artworks in the face of their objectivity, which subsumes the work's subjective elements, than it is to search out art's own origin. It is not an accident but rather its law that art wrested itself free. Art never completely fulfilled the determinations of its pure concept as it acquired them and indeed struggled against them; according to Valéry, the purest artworks are on no account the highest. If art were reduced to fundamental elements of artistic comportment, such as the instinct for imitation, the need for expression, or magical imagery, the results would be arbitrary and derivative. These elements play their part; they merge with art and survive in it; but not one of them is the whole of it. Aesthetics is not obliged to set off on the hopeless quest for the primal archetype of art, rather it must think such phenomena in historical constellations. No isolated particular category fully conceives the idea of art. It is a syndrome that is dynamic in itself. Highly mediated in itself, art stands in need of thinking mediation; this alone, and not the phenomenologist's purportedly originary intuition, leads to art's concrete concept.

Hegel's central aesthetic principle, that beauty is the sensuous semblance of the idea, presupposes the concept of the idea as the concept of absolute spirit. Only if the all-encompassing claim of absolute spirit is honored, only if philosophy is able to reduce the idea of the absolute to the concept, would Hegel's aesthetic principle be compelling. In a historical phase in which the view of reality as the fulfillment of reason amounts to bloody farce, Hegel's theory—in spite of the wealth of genuine insight that it unlocked—is reduced to a meager form of consolation. If his conception of philosophy carried out a fortunate mediation of history with truth, the truth of the philosophy itself is not to be isolated from the misfortune of history. Certainly Hegel's critique of Kant holds good. Beauty that is to be more than symmetrically trimmed shrubbery is no mere formula reducible to subjective functions of intuition; rather, beauty's fundament is to be sought in the object. But Hegel's effort to do this was vitiated because it unjustly postulated the meta-aesthetical identity of subject and object in the whole. It is no accidental failing on the part of individual thinkers but rather predicated on an objective aporia that today philosophical interpretations of literary works—especially when, as in Heidegger, poetic language is mythologically exalted—fail to penetrate the construction of the works to be interpreted and instead prefer to work them up as the arena for philosophical theses: Applied philosophy, a priori fatal, reads out of works that it has invested with an air of concretion nothing but its own theses. If aesthetic objectivity, in which the category of the beautiful is itself only one element, remains canonical for all convincing reflection, it no longer devolves upon a preestablished conceptual structure anterior to aesthetics and begins to hover, as incontestable as it is precarious. The locus of aesthetics has become exclusively the analysis of contexts, in the experience of which the force of philosophical
speculation is drawn in without depending on any fixed starting positions. The aesthetic theories of philosophical speculation are not to be conserved as cultural monuments, but neither are they to be discarded, and least of all in favor of the putative immediacy of artistic experience: Implicitly lodged in artistic experience is the consciousness of art, that is, philosophy, with which the naïve consideration of works imagines it has disposed. Art does not exist as the putative lived experience of the subject who encounters it as a tabula rasa but only within an already developed language of art. Lived experiences are indispensable, but they are no final court of aesthetic knowledge. Precisely those elements of art that cannot be taken immediately in possession and are not reducible to the subject require consciousness and therefore philosophy. It inheres in all aesthetic experience to the extent that it is not barbarically alien to art. Art awaits its own explanation. It is achieved methodically through the confrontation of historical categories and elements of aesthetic theory with artistic experience, which correct one another reciprocally.

Hegel's aesthetics gives a true account of what needs to be accomplished. The deductive system, however, prevents that dedication to objects that is systematically postulated. Hegel's work places thought under an obligation, even though his own answers are no longer binding. If the most powerful aesthetics—Kant's and Hegel's—were the fruits of systematic thinking, the collapse of these systems has thrown them into confusion without, however, destroying them. Aesthetics does not proceed with the continuity of scientific thinking. The particular aesthetics of the various philosophies cannot be reduced to a common formulation as their truth; rather their truth is to be sought in their conflict. To do so, it is necessary to renounce the erudite illusion that an aesthetician inherits problems from others and is now supposed to go calmly to work on them. If the idea of objectivity remains the canon of all convincing aesthetic reflection, then its locus is the contradiction of each and every aesthetic object in itself, as well as that of philosophical ideas in their mutual relation. That aesthetics, in its desire to be more than chatter, wants to find its way out into the open, entirely exposed, imposes on it the sacrifice of each and every security that it has borrowed from the sciences; no one expressed this necessity with greater candor than the pragmatist John Dewey. Because aesthetics is not supposed to judge art from an external and superior vantage point, but rather to help its internal propensities to theoretical consciousness, it cannot settle into a zone of security to which every artwork that has in any way succeeded gives the lie. Artworks, right up to those of the highest level, know the lesson taught to the bungler whose fingers stumble on the piano keys or who sketches carelessly: The openness of artworks—their critical relation to the previously established, on which their quality depends—implies the possibility of complete failure, and aesthetics alienates itself from its object the moment that by its own form it deceives on this score. That no artist knows with certainty whether anything will come of what he does, his happiness and his anxiety, which are totally foreign to the contemporary self-understanding of science, subjectively
registers something objective: the vulnerability of all art. The insight that perfect artworks scarcely exist brings into view the vanishing point of this vulnerability. Aesthetics must unite this open vulnerability of its object with that object’s claim to objectivity as well as with aesthetics’ own claim to objectivity. If aesthetics is terrorized by the scientific ideal it recoils from this paradox; yet this paradox is aesthetics’ vital element. The relation between determinacy and openness in aesthetics is perhaps clarified by the fact that the ways available to experience and thought that lead into artworks are infinitely many, yet they converge in truth content. This is obvious to artistic praxis, and theory should follow it much more closely than it has. Thus at a rehearsal the first violinist of a string quartet told a musician who was helping out, though himself not actively playing, to contribute whatever critique and suggestions occurred to him; each of these remarks, to the extent that they were just, directed the progress of the work ultimately to the same point, to the correct performance. Even contradictory approaches are legitimate, such as those that concern the form and those that concern the relatively tangible thematic levels. Right up to the present, all transformations of aesthetic comportment, as transformations of the comportment of the subject, involved changes in the representational dimension; in every instance new layers emerged, were discovered by art and adapted to it, while others perished. Until that period when representational painting declined, even in cubism still, the work could be approached from the representational side as well as from that of pure form. Aby Warburg’s studies and those of his school are evidence of this. Motif studies, such as Benjamin’s on Baudelaire, are able under certain conditions to be more productive aesthetically, that is, with regard to specifically formal questions, than the official formal analysis that seems to have a closer relation to art. Formal analysis had, and indeed still has, much to recommend it over dogmatic historicism. However, by extracting and thus isolating the concept of form from its dialectic with its other, it in turn tends toward petrification. At the opposite extreme, Hegel too did not escape the danger of such ossification. What even his sworn enemy Kierkegaard so admired him for, the accent he put on content [Inhalt] vis-à-vis form, did not merely announce opposition to empty and indifferent play, that is, the relation of art to truth, which was his preeminent concern. Rather, at the same time it revealed an overestimation of the thematic content of artworks regardless of their dialectic with form. As a result, an art-alien and philistine element entered Hegel’s aesthetics, which manifests its fatal character in the aesthetics of dialectical materialism, which in this regard had no more misgivings about Hegel than did Marx. Granted, pre-Hegelian and even Kant’s aesthetics had no emphatic concept of the artwork and relegated it to the level of a sublimated means of pleasure. Still, Kant’s emphasis on the work’s formal constituents, through which the work becomes art in the first place, does more honor to the truth content of art than Hegel does, who directly intended this but never developed it out of art itself. The elements of form, which are those of sublimation, are—compared to Hegel—still bound by
the eighteenth century at the same time that they are more progressive and modern; formalism, which is justly attributed to Kant, two hundred years later became the virulent password of anti-intellectual reaction. All the same, a weakness is unmistakable in the fundamental approach of Kant's aesthetics, apart from the controversy between formal and so-called content aesthetics. This weakness concerns the relation of his approach to the specific contents of the critique of aesthetic judgment. Parallel to his theory of knowledge, Kant seeks to establish—as if it were obvious—the subjective-transcendental foundation for what he called, in eighteenth-century fashion, the "feeling of the beautiful." According to the Critique of Pure Reason, however, the artifacts would be constituta and thus fall within the sphere of objects, a sphere situated external to the transcendental problematic. In this sphere, according to Kant, the theory of art was already potentially a theory of objects and at the same time a historical theory. The relation of subjectivity to art is not, as Kant has it, that of a form of reaction to artworks; rather, that relation is in the first place the element of art's own objectivity, through which art objects are distinguished from other things. The subject inheres in their form and content [Gehalt] and only secondarily, and in a radically contingent fashion, insofar as people respond to them. Admittedly, art points back to a condition in which there was no fixed dichotomy between the object and reaction to it; this was responsible for mistaking forms of reaction that are themselves the correlative of reified objectification as a priori. If it is maintained that, just as in the life process of society, production rather than reception is primary in art and in aesthetics, this implies the critique of traditional, naive aesthetic subjectivism. Recourse is not to be had to lived experience, creative individuality, and the like; rather, art is to be conceived in accord with the objectively developing lawfulness of production. This is all the more to be insisted upon because the problematic—defined by Hegel—of the affects released by the artwork has been hugely magnified by their manipulation. The subjective contexts of reception are frequently turned, according to the will of the culture industry, against the object that is being reacted to. Yet artworks respond to this by withdrawing even more into their own structure and thus contribute to the contingency of the work's effects, whereas in other historical periods there existed, if not harmony, then at least a certain proportion between the work and the response it received. Artistic experience accordingly demands a comprehending rather than an emotional relation to the works; the subject inheres in them and in their movement as one of their elements; when the subject encounters them from an external perspective and refuses to obey their discipline, it is alien to art and becomes the legitimate object of sociology. Aesthetics today should go beyond the controversy between Kant and Hegel and not simply level it. Kant's concept of what is pleasing according to its form is retrograde with regard to aesthetic experience and cannot be restored. Hegel's theory of content [Inhalt] is too crude. Music certainly has a determinate content—what transpires in it—and yet it nevertheless mocks the idea of content endorsed by
Hegel. His subjectivism is so total, his idea of spirit so all-pervasive, that the differentiation of spirit from its other, and thus the determination of that other, does not come into play in his aesthetics. Because for him everything proves to be subject, what is specific to the subject—the spirit as an element of artworks—atrophies and capitulates to the thematic element, exempt from the dialectic. He is not to be spared the reproach that in his *Aesthetics*, in spite of magnificent insights, he became caught up in the philosophy of reflection against which he struggled. Contrary to his own thinking, he followed the primitive notion that content or material is formed or "worked over" by the aesthetic subject; in any case he liked to play off primitive notions against reflection by way of reflection. It is precisely in the artwork that, in Hegel's terms, content and material must always already be subject. It is only by way of this subjectivity that the work becomes something objective, that is, other. For the subject is in itself objectively mediated; by virtue of its artistic figuration its own—latent—objective content [*Gehalt*] emerges. No other idea of the content [*Inhalt*] of art holds good; official Marxist aesthetics no more understood the dialectic than it understood aesthetics. Form is mediated in-itself through content—not however in such a fashion that form confronts what is simply heterogeneous to it—and content is mediated by form; while mediated the two must be distinguished, but the immanent content [*Inhalt*] of artworks, their material and its movement, is fundamentally distinct from content [*Inhalt*] as something detachable, such as a plot in a play or the subject of a painting, which Hegel in all innocence equated with content [*Inhalt*]. Hegel, like Kant, lagged behind the aesthetic phenomena: Hegel missed what is specifically aesthetic, and Kant missed its depth and richness. The content [*Inhalt*] of a picture is not simply what it portrays but rather all the elements of color, structures, and relations it contains; the content of music is, for instance, as Schoenberg put it, the history of a theme. The object portrayed may also count as an element of content; in literature, the action or the narrated story may also count; content, however, is no less what all of this undergoes in the work, that whereby it is organized and whereby it is transformed. Form and content are not to be confused, but they should be freed from their rigid antithesis, which is insufficient to both extremes. Bruno Liebruck's insight that Hegel's politics and philosophy of right inhere more in the *Logic* than in the lectures and writings devoted to these material disciplines holds true also for Hegel's aesthetics: It has yet to be raised to an undiminished dialectic. At the beginning of the second part, Hegel's *Logic* shows that the categories of reflection had their own origin and development and yet were all the same valid as such; in the same spirit Nietzsche in the *Twilight of the Idols* dismantled the myth that nothing that develops is able to be true. Aesthetics must make this insight its own. What sets itself up in aesthetics as an eternal norm is, in that it became what it is, transitory and obsolete by virtue of its own claim to immortality. By contrast, however, the contemporary exigencies and norms that issue from the dynamic of history are not accidental and arbitrary
but, by virtue of their historical content [Gehalt], objective; what is ephemeral in aesthetics is what is fixed, its skeleton. Aesthetics is under no obligation to deduce the objectivity of its historical content [Gehalt] in historicizing fashion, as being the inevitable result of the course of history; rather, this objectivity is to be grasped according to the form of that historical content. It is not, as the trivial paradigm would have it, that aesthetics moves and is transformed in history: History is immanent to the truth content of aesthetics. For this reason it is the task of the historicophilosophical analysis of the situation to bring to light in a rigorous fashion what was formerly held to be the apriori of aesthetics. The slogans that were distilled out of the situation are more objective than the general norms according to which, as is philosophical custom, they are to justify themselves; certainly it needs to be shown that the truth content of great aesthetic manifestos and similar documents has taken the place once held by philosophical aesthetics. The aesthetics that is needed today would be the self-consciousness of the truth content of what is radically temporal. This clearly demands, as the counterpoint to the analysis of the situation, that traditional aesthetic categories be confronted with this analysis; it is exclusively this confrontation that brings the artistic movement and the movement of the concept into relation.

That today a general methodology cannot, as is customary, preface the effort of reconceiving aesthetics, is itself of a part with methodology. The guilt for this is borne by the relation between the aesthetic object and aesthetic thought. The insistence on method cannot be stringently met by opposing another method to the one already approved. So long as the work is not entered—in keeping with Goethe’s maxim—as a chapel would be entered, all the talk about objectivity in matters of aesthetics, whether it be the objectivity of artistic content or that of its knowledge, remains pure assertion. The chattering, automated objection that insists that claims to objectivity are only subjective opinions, or that the aesthetic content in which aesthetics that aims at objectivity terminates is nothing but projection, can be met fully only by the proof of objective artistic content in artworks themselves. The fulfillment of this proof legitimates method at the same time that it precludes its supposition. If aesthetic objectivity were presupposed as the abstract universal principle of the fulfillment of the method, without support from any system, it would be at a disadvantage; the truth of this objectivity is constituted by what comes later, in the process of its development, not by what is simply posited. The process has nothing but the development of truth to oppose as a principle to the insufficiency of the principle. Certainly the fulfillment of aesthetic objectivity requires critical reflection on principles. This protects it from irresponsible conjecture. Spirit that understands artworks, however, wards off its hubris through the strength of objectivated spirit, which artworks actually already are in themselves. What spirit requires of subjective spirit is that spirit’s own spontaneity. The knowledge of art means to render objectified spirit once again fluid through the medium of reflection. Aesthetics must, however, take care not to be-
lieve that it achieves its affinity to art by—as if with a pass of a magic wand and excluding conceptual detours—enunciating what art is. The mediatedness of thought is qualitatively different from that of artworks. What is mediated in art, that through which the artwork becomes something other than its mere factuality, must be mediated a second time by reflection: through the medium of the concept. This succeeds, however, not through the distancing of the concept from the artistic detail, but by thought’s turn toward it. When, just before the close of the first movement of Beethoven’s sonata *Les Adieux*, an evanescently fleeting association summons up in the course of three measures the sound of trotting horses, the swiftly vanishing passage, the sound of disappearance, which confounds any effort to pin it down anywhere in the context of the phrase, says more of the hope of return than would any general reflection on the essence of the fleetingly enduring sound. Only a philosophy that could grasp such micrological figures in its innermost construction of the aesthetic whole would make good on what it promises. For this, however, aesthetics must itself be internally developed, mediated thought. If aesthetics, nevertheless, wanted to conjure up the secret of art with primal words, it would receive for its trouble nullities, tautologies, or at best formal characteristics from which that very essence evaporates that is usurped by linguistic style and the “care” for origins. Philosophy is not as lucky as Oedipus, who irrevocably answered the puzzle posed to him, even if the hero’s luck proved delusional. Because the enigmaticalness of art is articulated only in the constellation of each particular work, by virtue of its technical procedures, concepts are not only the difficulty inherent in their decipherment but also their chance for decipherment. According to its own essence, in its particularization, art is more than simply its particularity; it is mediated even in its immediacy, and to this extent it bears an elective affinity with concepts. Common sense justly demands that aesthetics not envelop itself in a self-enclosing nominalism devoted strictly to the particular analyses of artworks, however indispensable the latter may be. Whereas it must not let its freedom to singularity atrophy, second reflection—whose hour, in aesthetics, has indeed come—moves in a medium removed from artworks. Without some trace of resignation in the face of its diminished ideal, aesthetics would become the victim of the chimera of concreteness that is the concreteness of art—and even there is not beyond suspicion—but is in no way the concreteness of theory. As a protest against abstracting and classifying procedures, aesthetics all the same requires abstractions and indeed has as its object the classificatory genres. Art’s genres, however repressive they became, are not simply *flatus vocis*, even though the opposition to universal conceptuality is fundamental to art. Every artwork, even if it presents itself as a work of perfect harmony, is in itself the nexus of a problem. As such it participates in history and thus oversteps its own uniqueness. In the problem nexus of each and every artwork, what is external to the monad, and that whereby it is constituted, is sedimented in it. It is in the dimension of history that the individual aesthetic object and its concept communicate.
History is inherent to aesthetic theory. Its categories are radically historical; this endows its development with an element of coercion that, given its illusory aspect, stands in need of criticism yet nevertheless has enough force to break the hold of an aesthetic relativism that inevitably portrays art as an arbitrary juxtaposition of artworks. However dubious it is from the perspective of the theory of knowledge to say of an artwork, or indeed of art as a whole, that it is "necessary"—no artwork must unconditionally exist—their relation to each other is nevertheless mutually conditioning, and this is evident in their internal composition. The construction of such problem nexuses leads to what art has yet to become and that in which aesthetics would ultimately have its object. The concrete historical situation of art registers concrete demands. Aesthetics begins with reflection on them; only through them does a perspective open on what art is. For art and artworks are exclusively what they are able to become. In that no artwork is capable of resolving its immanent tension fully, and in that history ultimately attacks even the idea of such resolution, aesthetic theory cannot rest content with the interpretation of given artworks and their concept. By turning toward their truth content, aesthetics is compelled—as philosophy—beyond the works. The consciousness of the truth of artworks is, precisely as philosophical truth, in accord with the apparently most ephemeral form of aesthetic reflection, the manifesto. The principle of method here is that light should be cast on all art from the vantage point of the most recent artworks, rather than the reverse, following the custom of historicism and philology, which, bourgeois at heart, prefers that nothing ever change. If Valéry's thesis is true that the best in the new corresponds to an old need, then the most authentic works are critiques of past works. Aesthetics becomes normative by articulating such criticism. This, however, has retroactive force, and from it alone is it possible to expect what general aesthetics offered merely as a hope and a sham.