Spectral Anxieties of Postculture

Richard Appignanesi

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.¹

T W Adorno

Adorno made his gnomic pronouncement on art in 1969 at the mid-zenith of Conceptualism. In 2002, after some thirty years’ war of the neo-avant-gardes, Hal Foster could retort: ‘might “the end of art” be one more thing about art that is not “self-evident anymore”?²

Foster rightly links Adorno’s riddle on contemporary art to another he had posed in 1966 on the continued relevance of philosophy: ‘Philosophy, which once seemed absolute, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.’³ Art and philosophy both fall under the same post-Hegelian, and one should add post-Marxist, dubiety. Foster spells it out: ‘Just as philosophy missed its moment of realization, so the avant-garde missed its moment.’⁴ He wonders if this parallel guided Adorno’s twin riddles, and muses further,

if we might substitute ‘art’ where he writes ‘philosophy’. In this case, might art be granted the ambiguous stay of sentence that Adorno grants to philosophy – the possibility of ‘living on’?… If so, what might this ‘living on’ be in the present? Not the overt repetition of avant-garde devices that characterized much neo-avant-garde art of the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., monochrome painting, collages, readymade objects), and not the attenuated working-through of such strategies that characterized much neo-avant-garde art of the 1970s and 1980s either (e.g., institution critiques that are sometimes difficult to decipher even for initiates). Maybe this living-on is not a repeating so much as a making-new or simply a making-do with what-comes-after, a beginning again and/or elsewhere.⁵

The connection of art to philosophy in an all-too-likely joint fatality, or at best their consignment to endangered species status, seems to call for another substitution, that of ‘art history’ in place of ‘philosophy’, while yet remaining alerted to the fundamental reciprocities of philosophy and art history. Contemporary art in Adorno’s correlative equation with philosophy must surely involve a particular standing in past history and a pursuance of that history of and in art to its present coming-to-term. The question is, how far back in history? No earlier, say, than Hegel, when philosophy was first and irrevocably made history, and art was first and irrevocably discovered terminable. But that staging would have the rather odd consequence of originating the contemporary as an idea in the early nineteenth century at the dawn of art history. Perhaps in that moment back then will be found the true and unavoidable terminus a quo or ‘end-point from which’ an earliest possible occurrence of the contemporary is still trying to find its boundary in our time. Is this really asking, how far back in the future? Such is the unimaginable strain on credibility that the contemporary faces, which is its coming after what is apparently over, when the ‘what that is apparently over’ is apparently itself. Odd indeed, because coming after what is apparently over – is not that what we normally mean by the future?

I have no urge to make art one more malingering spook in an age already haunted by the anxiety of postculture. We have had our surfeit of ghosts, ever since Marx first manifested his ‘spectre of Communism’ troubling Europe in 1848 which in the full term of irony became a real one in 1989,
and a queue of others before and after that date of demise thereupon conjured themselves at the endless endgame séances of postmodernism.

The problem in its simpler reduced account seems to be, ‘what to do with all that history?’, and hence all the millennial flutter of ghosts that no one really believes in, signs of tedium, and in the end cynicism. The problem, keeping to the same principle, is that contemporary art does not like to think of itself as older than Marcel Duchamp, and more preferably still, no older than Andy Warhol. Warhol might as well be the Venerable Bede, so far as the oxymoron of contemporary art history stretches. Whether it is acknowledged or not, the pervasive contemporary attitude to history, generally, and not only in art, is that of cyberpunk, which as Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, a writer on science fiction, has remarked, frighteningly in my view, functions singularly on ‘a drastic reduction of the range of reference, and a willed ignorance about the imaginative life of thousands of earlier generations’.6 Cyberpunk at least honestly and with forthright utopian enthusiasm embraces technoscience arrogance, a mutagenic future already present in its essential lineaments, and all the rest of history is jettisoned on the scrapheap of pre-history, something that the more faint-hearted majority suspect is possibly true but only in the penumbra of bat-like flittings of anxiety accompanying their everyday concerns.

Gilles Deleuze has memorably commented on the crisis of representation that comes to peak in a new exacerbating phase of modernity after World War II. ‘The modern fact is that we do not believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us… The link between man and world is broken.’17 Deleuze proposed a second stage shift to the time-image in a cinema as a paradigm of that irreparably ‘broken link’ between humanity and world, an immobilised anxiety, or in jaded historical remembrance the Cold War with its peculiarly apprehensive sense of permanent impermanency. Contemporaneity seems to be the final station of this ‘broken link’ which the classic term ‘alienation’ no longer suffices to comprehend. Where is it? Contemporaneity is the somewhere unknown, as yet undemarcated, on the scale from extreme cyberpunk sci-fi conviction to the multitude panic of postculture, and so too for contemporary art in its coming-after, its living-on in a condition without precedent in history. Or does it have an unacknowledged precedent?

Living-on benefits from a trace memory of the Nachleben, the after-life extension of classical Greek sculpture that J J Winckelmann eulogised as the true modern renascence of art in the mid-eighteenth century at the archaeologistic foundations of art history. Living-on was for subsequent neoclassicist artists a genuine contemporary state of art and, what’s more, its future programme. Winckelmann imposed a stricture. In his estimation the ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’ of Greek art can be imitated but not copied, which effectually means the opposite of what it says: the art of the Greeks is in fact inimitable. This view might also be considered a retrospective surmising of art which anticipates Hegel’s notorious foreclosure. Can we say of contemporary art that like the neoclassicist model it sets out from the strictly inimitable originality of an unrivalled predecessor and in this sense ‘lives on’? The comparison seems absurd. And yet, is not inimitability the spectral anxiety haunting postcultural contemporary art? It is indeed, if inimitability is understood in its currently familiar transmutation, the aesthetic of ‘the unrepresentable’.

Neoclassicism is now dismissed as an art historical aberration repellent to contemporary taste. Something else more profound than fashion has determined its expulsion, something that makes it currently unviewable, an embarrassment to the present that must go overlooked. What is that? Neoclassicism was not just a classicistic exaltation of history painting and sculpture, an untimely imposition on architecture, dragged out beyond its moment in Enlightenment modernity and well into the industrial era. It was self-conscious of ‘living on’ as the progressive end of art history and could thereby legitimately claim to represent modernity. Note well that I say modernity, not
modernism, and in this neoclassicism is embarrassingly like contemporary art which in its mode also seeks directly to claim itself truly contemporaneous in bypassing the cul-de-sac of failed modernism.

What is it like to grope for evidences on the blind side of history? I sit in the pitch-dark of Sadler’s Wells Theatre, on the evening of 18 February 2008, and with ballpoint pen and hand-sized pad I try to draw the rapidly flowing movements of the Pina Bausch ensemble of dancers as they perform the Café Müller piece, to Henry Purcell’s music, and Igor Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring. I end up with sixteen pages of scribbled figures, which perhaps with frequent practice in the dark might gain clearer agency of delineation, and yet even so in this one trial have conveyed a graphic sense of the dancers’ movements from the lighted stage to the blind tracings of my hand across a page. I give these sightless caprices the title of Stéphane Mallarmé’s articles in Crayonné au Théâtre (sketched at the theatre).

My crayonings are trials to lasso evidence, the figural equivalent of what Adorno declared was his ‘paratactical’ approach in writing Aesthetic Theory (1970), fugal loops rather than a straight line of argument. A start requiring fluent persistence, time after time.
I might follow another instruction. Not to take your eyes off the artwork. Maintain an undistracted gaze on it, while all the rest is subdued to pitch black. Art is that small lighted space, a hole, understood not as an enlightening positive but a counter-intuitional negative of the dark subsuming immanence of history against which no exception should ever show. Art does not ever ‘show up’ against history. For, if it did, it would suffer the fate of ‘three on a match’, a saying attributed to the night-time trenches of World War I, which warned that a third man to light his cigarette on the same match gave the enemy sniper opportunity to take aim and shoot him. The anxieties of theory doom this third man of art to show up, but who meanwhile lives on, negative to expectation.
I am one of a growing number discontented with theoretical solutions. Or should I say irresolutions? I tire of circumnavigating the tautologies of theory that always return to the same point. ‘Whither art?‘ ‘What now for art practice?’ Only to arrive at the prognosis of art ‘living on’ in deferral. Living on is not even a proper after-life but a state of nowhen, an intransmissible contemporaneity. The question should be turned around to ask ‘what is theory itself still living on, if not from an interest drawn on art’s account?’ An interest made practicable by theoretical dis-interest. What do I mean? Let me put it another way.

What is it to ‘like art’? The question is naïve, until it becomes a disquieting one of specialism. The ideologies of art theory fall into unconscious, that is to say bad faith, hostility to art by their erudite obscurations which succeed in their extreme dis-likeness to art, another way of saying, a self-corrective disinterestedness unique to theory but denied to art. No artist conceives of a work dissociable from critical reflection. That is not my point. It is not ‘theory’ as such that I impugn but something else ulterior, the unavowed syndrome, a condition of being in denial. Theory is a dissemblance of that condition and cannot therefore possess the ascendancy of dialectical negation such as it wishes for itself. The condition might be termed ‘art historical’ to which theory is annexed. But that is an unenlightening remark on the effect without knowing the cause. There is at best an uneasiness, let us even say a dis-ease, felt of trading perilously on a dwindling stock of the aesthetic noumenon, that elusive pure ‘thing in itself’ of art, compacted across millennia of art history. And it is this which is felt, rather than understood, threatened by absorption into a final vacuous state of the image whereafter art will become simply nominal in usage. I had noted that
Deleuze spoke of a second stage time-image in post-World War II cinema. That was a genial idea in the 1980s; but things have since rapidly moved on to a third stage shift in the image. Meaning what? No one knows what this ‘third stage’ is, and yet its presence is neurotically evidenced. Jacques Rancière has more recently wrestled with the protean ‘image regime’, at times seeming to gain the advantage over its true form, only in the end to yield to a commonsense platitude from which he is constrained to begin. ‘The fate of the image,’ as he says, ‘is the fate of this logical, paradoxical intertwining between the operations of art, the modes of circulation of imagery, and the critical discourse that refers the operations of the one and the forms of the other to their hidden truth.’

Here again we have the famous triple alliance – what art ‘does’ and its involvement in the ineluctable interfacing of ‘commodities and discourse’. He astutely reconnoitres a third-stage contemporary desire for the unrepresentable in art, after Deleuze, after Lyotard, and rightly condemns it as the ‘fallacious equation between anti-representative art and art of the unrepresentable’ which ‘places a whole regime of art under the sign of holy terror’. He is credible too in his summing up: ‘In order to assert an unrepresentability in art that is commensurate with an unthinkable event, the latter must itself have been rendered entirely thinkable, entirely necessary according to thought. The logic of the unrepresentable can only be sustained by a hyperbole that ends up destroying it.’

Rancière names terror at a judicious remove from Paul Virilio’s sawn-off blast of hysteria that riddles the page with CAPS and italic fonts.

So, whether we like it or not, art is now part of the TERRORIST SCENE.
And unless we come to terms with this tragic fact, we cannot make sense of the ‘crisis of contemporary art’, the extravagance of a so-called ‘freedom of expression’ that is no longer anything more than the freeing up of the terror attack not only on propriety but on value, on all the ethical or aesthetic values that, until now, gave the art scene its significance.¹¹

Virilio shouts uncircumspectly what others might wince even to think secretly. It all comes spewing out, in a mode of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s confessional volubility, against the ‘capitalist realism’ of Warhol and company ‘succeeding socialist realism before disappearing in turn into the current ART BRUT of immediacy, that panic-driven tele-reality that prolongs the customary obscurity’, 9/11 and an ‘ART OF TERROR… a kind of panic inflicted on the whole world, the cathode screen standing in for the “frontline” of the old “battlefield”… the ‘transpolitical blurring between the terrorist attack and the accident…’ and so on.¹² Virilio allows the last word to the novelist Hermann Broch, Viennese magister and writer’s writer: ‘A world that blows itself up won’t let us paint its portrait anymore.’

And whereas Virilio declaims, Rancière insinuates with a whisper. Poles apart, yet nevertheless how strange it is, that serendipity should discover them both agreeing to a citation from Broch. ‘What can be grasped as right is the sentence – that is, what is given as always preceded by another sentence, preceded by its own power: the power of phrased chaos, of Flaubert’s mixing of atoms, of Mallarmé’s arabesque, of the original “whispering” the idea for which Godard borrowed from Hermann Broch.’¹³ Rancière here offers us his ‘sentence-image’ to fill the third stage vacuum, and idea developed from his meditation on Jean-Luc Godard’s video work for TV, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* of 1988–1998.

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My dance-image has the merit of being in the dark of what the lines could not possibly see themselves doing. Dance is a cybernetic form of writing which conscripts not only the hand to its control but the whole-body system. Making and being join together rhythmically in one figure, a configuration that can stand ideally for art, because it is not necessarily mimetic of anything but its own volitional embodiment. Making and being. I see them defamiliarised in a theoretical settlement. Are not making and being the age-old apparent oppositions of autonomy and heteronomy? Making and being are two orders of the same thing, not different identitarian meanings, not opposites but apposites. I am willing to venture that everything theoretically staked on the interminable debate splitting art into the irreconcilable domains of autonomy and heteronomy comes down to a confusion about making and being. Dance is their time of reconciliation that permits us a moment of seeing them brought to a standstill in ekstasis, from the Greek ek (out) and stasis (standing), ‘standing forth’ in the image. Ekstasis also meant ‘being out of one’s senses’, displaced, or wrenched out of time. This wrenching of the image into ecstatic ‘time-being’ is what stands forth.

The image is normally thought of spatially rather than temporally. Walter Benjamin instead took the dialectical view that images attain to legibility in time:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a
constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image of the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.14

Is Benjamin’s dialectical time-image any longer applicable to the digital regime of virtual ‘real time’ and its levelling of history to a steady state of contemporaneity? Or is the ‘flash’ he speaks of only the brief ignition in the dark that signs the third man’s doom? Benjamin’s proposal was already philosophy’s last flare in the trenches of his own era. It has now passed to Adorno’s melancholic afterword that philosophy ‘lives on because the moment to realize it was missed’.

3 T W Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans, E B Ashton, Continuum, New York, p 3
4 Foster, op cit, p 13
Richard Appignanesi has a doctorate in Classical Art History, is former Executive Editor of Third Text, and was co-founder director of two publishing companies, Originating Editor of the Icon Introducing series and the Metro Media Manga Shakespeare series. Appignanesi is also a novelist, having published the Italia Perversa trilogy (1985) and Yukio Mishima’s Report to the Emperor (2003). See: Richard Appignanesi, Wikipedia for further details.