Critical Composition Today

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Avant-garde Today
A Theoretical Model of Aesthetic Modernity

I. The Art System — II. The Separation of Work, Medium, and Reflection — III. The Medium of Art — IV. Classical Modernism — V. Avant-garde — VI. Post-Modernism — VII. Reflexive Modernism — VIII. *Gehalt*-Aesthetic Turn (*Gehalts-ästhetische Wende*) — XI. Naïve Modernism — X. Art Criticism — XI. Art Philosophy

Philosophy could ultimately see its remaining jurisdiction in the asking of questions in which nobody is interested—for example the question of the avant-garde today. This theme, largely ignored until its recent revival, was avoided with good reason: history had a good answer at the ready. It was obvious that the artistic avant-gardes, with all their theoretical and aesthetic claims, had been replaced by post-modernism. The art that has been considered in keeping with our times for the last three decades defines itself largely through the rejection of what was once avant-garde art.

When philosophy asks its questions, one naturally assumes that the obvious answers will be unacceptable. Philosophy would presumably notice that precisely this question, which is usually answered trivially and accordingly rendered harmless, generates a significantly blurred awareness of the problem, and will speculate that this is the first point sensed by the discursive community involved—inevitably beginning to polarize it into those who reject the question as uninteresting, and those who see it as exciting. And this polarization is occurring for a single reason: one expects a fundamental change in the circumstances of communication to result when one ceases to avoid such unwanted questions.

The philosophical question thus contains, beneath its shell of social disinterest, a provocative core; and philosophy finds its starting-point (which it had always considered questionable) as soon as it looks for it. Where, then, lies the disruptive potential in the question of avant-garde today? It addresses a situation of normative helplessness, the need for differentiation and decision, that accumulates beneath the dominant self-understanding of post-modernism in all society's zones of reflection and can no longer be relieved through the perspective of this world-view. The question of the avant-garde today is directed against the post-modern self-description of contemporary art, whose tendency is to make it increasingly impossible to distinguish between aesthetically successful and failed art. Its communicative barb lies in the old claim of the avant-garde to be *ahead* of all other art. Here it marks a normative difference that can neither be conceived nor communicated nowadays. The question of whether this lost

normative distinction needs to be replaced or not will divide the art scene as soon as one can anticipate, sense or recognize that the post-modern self-description of art is now at stake.

If, then, we assume that the question of avant-garde today is a philosophical one of latent relevance: what subsequent questions does it lead to, how can it be developed? First of all it will have to be clarified what the avant-garde once meant, whence it drew the strength of its convictions and why it was able to leave a profound caesura in the historiography of art. Secondly, this will increase the urgency of the question as to why the historical avant-garde has apparently lost its relevance. It is only in conjunction with these two preliminary questions that one would finally be able to formulate thirdly a thesis of what advanced art is today.

A philosophical question is not only one that motivates itself—that creates social interest where there is none—but must also be able to keep what it promises, namely: to provoke a controversial answer. Questions that are only posed in order to "keep the asking of questions open"—a popular topos of philosophical self-legitimation—simply maintain a philosophical activity that contents itself with statements of intention. A truly philosophical question involves a philosophical theory that can resolve the complex of questions raised by that unwanted question "in a single stroke." It would thus require a conceptual approach that could simultaneously and cogently answer the threefold question of the status of the avant-garde—that of its glorious past, its disastrous present and its possible future. Generally, in the case of the historical avant-garde, it is the claim of all modern art to be *new* that is at stake; the avant-garde simply took this aspect to an extreme. Behind the central question of the avant-garde today, therefore, lies the much further-reaching question of all contemporary art's self-understanding as something modern, new, and ultimately advanced.

I. The Art System

In order to answer those three sub-questions regarding the avant-garde in context, it is necessary to reconstruct a model of modern art. This cannot be a matter of rewriting the details of art history, but rather—and exclusively—a philosophical re-description of the great art-historical caesuras that are commonly accepted.

The first of these is the transition from the art of the Modern Age (*Neuzeit*) —which already described itself as "modern"—to classical modernism between 1850 and the first decade of the 20th century. This break is so momentous that one also refers to it as the beginning of aesthetic modernism.[1] This would have

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1   The fact that aesthetic modernity or "modernism" is a phenomenon that crosses genre boundaries

to be followed by rendering comprehensible the scarcely definable rejection, erosion or outdoing of that art through the historical avant-garde[2]; and finally the appearance of post-modern art, which in turn breaks with the traditions of both classical and avant-garde modernism, would have to be reconstructed and reinterpreted.[3] If it can be clarified how and why modern art's relationship with modernity itself has changed in the course of its history, then—this is the promise of this philosophical thought-experiment—one will also be able to answer the question as to the status of the avant-garde in art today.

The fundamental idea for this re-description of art history is the following: one can reconstruct the history of modern art as a history of its progressive differentiation.

A first step in this history of progressive differentiation had already been taken in the 15th century, when art in the royal courts of Italy came into the position of making decisions independently of the highest legislative authority, namely the Catholic Church, on account of the functional differentiation of society that was taking effect. This fundamental independence from religious and an-artistic (*kunstfremd*) aspects holding together the total medieval world-view corresponds to the formation of an autonomous social sub-system of art.[4] One can speak of progressive differentiation in general whenever differences come into the world that genuinely make a difference, i.e., have serious consequences. In this sense, the Renaissance introduced the distinction between art and non-art, even though one had already distinguished between art-related themes and all others in the Middle Ages. But this was a linguistic distinction without any "ontological" substance. The situation changes fundamentally once the difference between art and non-art comes to be anchored in a socio-structural difference between system and environment. One is still free to speak about art as one wishes; if one ignores this difference, however—which above all means communicating without regard for art's systemic autonomy—then this becomes apparent in the art system as a communicative inability to keep up with the times. The progressive differentiation of art thus relates to a trans-

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and can be observed—with certain delays—in all the arts, is emphasized by Clement Greenberg, "Modern und Postmodern" (1980), in *Die Essenz der Moderne*, ed. Karlheinz Lüdeking (Amsterdam/Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1997), p. 432. Hans Robert Jauss speaks in this context of the "now almost canonized beginning of our modernity" (see Jauss, "Der literarische Prozeß des Modernismus von Rousseau bis Adorno," in Ludwig v. Friedeburg/Jürgen Habermas [ed.], *Adorno Konferenz 1983* [Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1983], p. 99). See also Peter Bürger's "Schlußbetrachtung: Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Moderne" in *Prosa der Moderne* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 439-443.

2   On the concept of the avant-garde, see Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 44 f., note 4.

3   On the understanding of post-modernism, see Heinrich Klotz, *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Beck, 1999), pp. 57-149; also Dieter Lamping, *Moderne Lyrik: Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1991), pp. 112-117.

4   Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 257 ff.

formation of communicative forms that constitute the basis of artistic communication and—behind the backs of artists, art critics and art lovers—control it.

Alongside this claim of objectivity that is connected to the discussion of *progressive differentiation*, this concept signifies as well a gain in *degrees of freedom*, specifically of degrees of communicative freedom in the art system. We would wish to expand Luhmann's theory of art with this idea, which is the prerequisite for any philosophical conception of art history in terms of the avant-garde. We shall first of all give a brief outline of the main idea underlying this system-theoretical sociology of art, so that we can then incorporate into that sketch the idea that is to be developed here.

Like Luhmann, we assume that a system is formed through the crystallization of a guiding difference [*Leitdifferenz*] within a particular communicative domain such as economy, science, law, or indeed art, which is able to channel the entire flow of information in such a field. This means, for example, that with any statement, observation, judgment or question relating to the theme of art, the *distinction* as to whether something is beautiful or ugly suddenly comes into play. Naturally, this lingual distinction was also possible in the hierarchically-differentiated society of the Middle Ages, but these differences were integrated within a grand scholastic cosmos of differentiation, and so strongly connected that any judgment on art was simultaneously one on God, the world, nature, and history. The distinction between the beautiful and the ugly was thus made into a fixed part of a particular world-view, and was as such not freely available. It was only with the transition to a functional differentiation of society that these semantic differences gained autonomy, i.e., they could now be more precisely defined through specific, in our case art-specific *programs* that were not merely isolated parts of a world-view that was binding for the whole of society and could not be evaded. Through such programs, it became possible for the first time to specify this guiding difference autonomously, i.e., relatively independently of what was thought about the beautiful and the ugly outside of artistic communication or theology. Hence, this semantic difference was transformed into a *code* of communication, or to put it differently: a separation of coding and programming occurred.[5] This structural difference between code and prescribed coding is the secret motor of all system formation, as the system now contains a mechanism of differentiation that can generate structures autopoietically, that is to say by its own power. The fact that art can now design its own programs (which are no longer prescribed by theology), and through these put its two abstract code-values in concrete terms, is the real factor enabling the art system to close itself operatively and develop a boundary between system and environment, i.e., between art and non-art.

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5   Ibid., p. 309 and p. 376.

From the perspective of the system-theoretical theory of society, "modern society" already came about at the start of the Modern Age in the 15th century, as it was at that point that the structure of society began to change from a hierarchically-differentiated to a functionally-differentiated societal formation. The notion of modernity is therefore determined with the help of a concept of societal structure, and any alternative notion of modernity, which would no doubt lead to entirely different historical models, would face the difficult task of presenting a conceptual definition as well-founded as that offered by Luhmann's theory of society. If one takes this concept of modernity as the point of departure, one must also locate the starting point of modern art in the Renaissance, with the progressive differentiation of an autonomous art system. We are here dealing with an external differentiation of art, with its separation from extra-artistic determinants, through which the art system establishes its operative boundary between system and environment. In this constitutional phase of the art system (see figure 1. Theoretical Model), which extends from the Renaissance to Romanticism, this achievement of autonomy was established and consolidated in all the arts and their respective genres.

Those are the system-theoretical dictates we can fall back on indiscriminately. The question that points beyond Luhmann's system-theoretical sociology of art is what is actually established in the art-specific programs of the art system. My follow-up thesis is that it is the immanent relationship between work, medium and reflection that defines the grammar of artistic programs, and whose transformation in turn led to one of the most striking caesuras in the historiography of art.

One can work on the assumption that these three basal components were firmly joined in the first art of the Modern Age. This was a legacy of the Middle Ages, when art still lacked any system-specific programs, its fundamental sense and form instead being dictated by the "quasi-program" of a religious worldview that provided a binding structure for the whole of society. With the formation of an autonomous art system in the Renaissance, this external system of dictates was internalized, thus gaining for the first time the status of a program in the true sense of the word: a program that could be written and overwritten by the art system itself according to the standards of its own developmental logic. This newly-acquired freedom in art was most evident in its ability to create a multitude of competing and successive artistic styles through its own power, independently of the evolutionary processes affecting society as a whole.

If we distinguish between different styles in medieval art, this is a backward projection of autonomous onto pre-autonomous art. It conceals the fact that these stylistic differences did not have their origin in art itself, but rather in extra-artistic reasons such as church politics, which codified the production of

Figure 1. Theoretical Model

Social history	0th modernity: tradition	1st modernity: industrial modernity			2nd modernity: reflexive modernization
Art history	Modern Age (Neuzeit) (Renaissance through Romanticism)	classical modernism	avant-garde	post-modernism	reflexive modernism
Phase of modernization	constitutional phase	phase of progressive differentiation			phase of reflection
Orientation of art	content-aesthetic (inhaltästhetisch)	material-aesthetic (materialästhetisch)			Gehalt-aesthetic (gehaltsästhetisch)
Gains in autonomy	system autonomy social autonomy of the art system; autonomy of the firmly-bonded components of work, medium and reflection	autonomy of the firmly-coupled components of work and reflection	autonomy of reflection	autonomy of the medium	autonomy of the work
Possibilities of negation	no negation of art possible within the art system; evolution takes place only through stylistic change	abstract negation of the art medium	abstract negation of the work of art	cancellation of the negation of the art medium	cancellation of the negation of the work of art work, medium & reflection are different components of art

W = work, M = medium, R = reflection
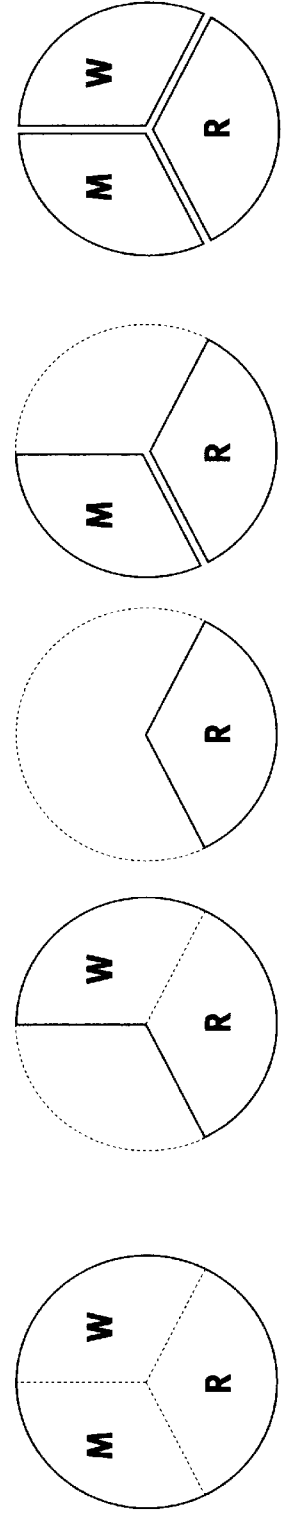
icons, masses, and sacred buildings with consideration for the respective local cultural and political context. The art history of the Modern Age can be traced as a history of style, but neither its backward projection onto the Middle Ages nor its forward projection onto aesthetic modernism does justice to the major breaks in art history. Or, to put it briefly: the great structural breaks in art are not subsumed within the stylistic ones.

Our task lies above all in developing an art-model that can also grasp those fundamental changes that have radically altered the circumstances of communication in the art system since the middle of the 19th century. These are processes of transformation whose dimensions keep them below the level of system formation at the start of the Modern Age—because they are not accompanied by changes of societal structure—but which extend noticeably beyond the motor force in the arts of the Modern Age, i.e., stylistic invention. As already stated, we are dealing with a gradual separation of the components of work, medium, and reflection at the programmatic level of art. It is here that the degrees of freedom increase as never before, and their gradual emergence in the world can be reconstructed.

The break between the art of the Modern Age and that of modernism had long been imminent. The growth of philosophical aesthetics as a new academic discipline in the middle of the 18th century was not least a reaction to the fact that the burden of complexity resulting from the fully-developed and now evident system autonomy in art became, for the first time, so great that the only way to cope with it was through a reflexive theory designed specifically for that purpose. And in this aesthetic tradition, it was Hegel who remarked, with great foresight, that art had exhausted all the possibilities of this form of development by the early 19th century, and that it would only be able to survive in a qualitatively entirely different form. The "end of art" proclaimed by Hegel was the end of the art system's constitutional phase; Hegel could not have predicted that it would be followed by a phase of progressive differentiation, i.e., aesthetic modernism.[6] Possibly other theories can offer different explanations for this; one can judge the scope and explicatory power of a philosophical theory, however, by whether it is able to bring such heterogeneous events that are so significant in the history of communication—such as the "beginning of aesthetics" with Baumgarten, the "beginning of aesthetic modernism" with Baudelaire, Hegel's "end of art," and Danto's echo thereof in the 20th century—into a shared context of meaning.

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6   See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Die Auflösung der romantischen Kunstform*, in *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II* (= *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14), ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), pp. 220 ff.

The joint communication of work, medium, and reflection would thus be the starting point for the art of the Modern Age, and it is in relation to *this*, I wish to argue, that genuinely modern art became progressively differentiated. In order to describe the inflexible basic grammar of this period in art, however, we must first address a number of preliminary considerations, above all regarding the now highly inflational concept of *medium*. The concept of the medium can be introduced system-theoretically via the distinction between medium and form, where the medium can be defined more precisely as a "loose coupling of elements" and form as a "fixed" or "tight coupling of elements."[7] Applied to the medium of art, this means that the observable forms in works of art are tight couplings that can be formed in the medium of art. The loose couplings that exist between the elements of this medium constitute, as it were, a delimited realm of possibilities for the production of works of art.

A further limitation is the fact that the media of art are always based on perceptual media—whether of a visual, acoustic or linguistic nature—in which perception is, so to speak, already prepared. The elements of the art medium are perceptual events that are subordinated to an additional ordering scheme, and this "artificial" *a priori* relation superimposed upon every act of perception turns the basal medium of perception into a medium of art. Or, to put it differently, the medium of art transforms the perceptual medium into a medium of aesthetic experience. Hence, the forms found in an artistic medium are always perceptible forms, and are always pre-programmed from the outset to have a particular affinity for one another. Owing to these aesthetic bonding forces, the separate forms generated can in turn join to establish a stable formal complex—that is, a work of art. It is precisely this quality of autopoietic perceptual organization that provides the work-character of an artifact that can be formed in the medium of art.

One could ask, once again, how the medium of art was traditionally constituted, which elements it comprised and in what manner these were loosely joined. In music, for example, one can understand notes (or the intervals between notes, to be precise) as its primary elements. In this respect, the medium of traditional music was the tonal system, which limited every musical work of art *a priori* to a preference for particular notes or intervals over others. The consequences of this concept of medium become clear if one considers how much was already determined through the assertion of and claim to such a medium: from the entire audible domain, pitched sounds were isolated, but unpitched sounds were excluded; these pitched sounds did not encompass a linear spectrum, but instead manifested themselves eventually as twelve differ-

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7   Concerning this terminology, see the chapter "Medium und Form" in Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (footnote 4), pp. 165 ff.

ent discrete values, and even these twelve semitones were not equally available in the concrete act of composition, but rather had to be treated selectively according to the key of the piece. This example alone should already show the first outlines of the basic idea, namely that the history of modern art could be reconstructed as a history of the dissolution of such basal loose couplings. New Music defined itself above all by rupturing the tonal system and finding a way to compose with all twelve tones, then by no longer accepting the semitone-step as the smallest possible interval and beginning to use micro-intervals and alternate tuning systems, extending to a musical negativism that replaced pitches with unpitched sounds and used these as musical elements — or even declared silence to be the true form of music.

Normally, works of art are not defined by only one parameter. Alongside tonality (in the strict sense), music also consists of rhythms or sound-qualities which, until the advent of New Music, gave compositions their *a priori* form. In analogy to the tonal system, traditional music was also characterized by a rhythmic system that organized musical time "prior to all experience": the mensural and later the metric system. Here too, New Music first of all suspended the medium by dissolving the rhythmic systems as a compositional program until, in the most extreme cases, "works" were created which, as with John Cage, dissolved the binding relationship between temporal order and specific musical materials. The elements of the musical medium were thus coupled loosely via several parameters at once, and with each parameter one can reconstruct a history of the dissolution of this traditionally prescribed compositional structure.

With the aid of this medium-theoretical approach, one can now analyze all traditional artistic genres, regardless of whether they are based on an acoustic, visual, or linguistic medium of perception. The analytical scheme is the same in each case: first it is a matter of determining the primary parameters of a traditional genre; then it is necessary to find the elements of each parameter and the characteristic loose couplings between these elements.

The poem thus becomes an art form primarily through meter and metaphor, gaining its aesthetic content through these factors.[8] The basic metric unit in poetry is the syllable, which can appear either as stressed or unstressed, rising or falling. The loose couplings between these elements are in turn realized through a metric system that regulates the alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables according to a particular pattern, and thus lends the poem its concrete metric verse form (in the sense of a tight coupling). In a less vivid, but analogous fashion, the metaphorical parameter could also be recon-

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8   Dieter Lamping, in *Moderne Lyrik* (see footnote 3), works with this sort of distinction when he describes the innovations in the lyric on the one hand in terms of the "new lyrical language" (Chapter II), and on the other hand as "revolution of means" in terms of free/traditional verse forms (Chapter III).

structed; here too, the sentence is once again prepared as a basal semantic unit (the elements) by a particular expectation-system of "transmission" (the loose couplings), so that in this medium the respective concrete forms of poetic language are expressed (i.e., can be realized as tight couplings). In painting, lines and colors forming surfaces are in turn the basic elements of a picture, which were traditionally connected flexibly through the principle of representation, and even more narrowly through the representational system of central perspective. The representation of color surfaces, for example, was long governed by the "principle of local colors" (Lokalfarbenprinzip), which dictated a realistic transfer of the natural colors to the painted image. This too can be understood as a loose coupling of color elements in the medium of the tableau. The concept of medium becomes particularly clear in architecture, as one speaks here of building components such as walls, doors, windows, pillars, gables, roofs and the like, and for a long time it went without saying that these architectural elements had to be joined to form a façade that lent the building a "face." Even this anthropomorphic shaping principle is a loose coupling that was once constitutive for the medium of architecture.

It should be foreseeable that one can also apply this media-theoretical parametric analysis to the remaining forms of art such as sculpture, the novel, or art photography. The decisive gain through the media-theoretical approach lies in the fact that it provides a theoretical tool for analyzing art *across genre boundaries*. The concept of medium allows us to make the various arts comparable with one another and to uncover those structures that have reorganized themselves—to the same extent in all genres—under the modernizing pressure of society.

This theory of media can facilitate the rehabilitation of art philosophy, which has long since forfeited its object of examination—"art"—and become entangled in constant rear-guard action since the appearance of its last great work, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Its gradual loss of jurisdiction became most apparent in the fact that it was—and is still being—replaced and superseded by a multitude of genre-specific art theories. On the one hand, the specialization of those theories always enables them to know better what is going on in their disciplines, and on the other hand, there had been no tenable theoretical model in the period between Adorno and Luhmann allowing a fundamental re-conception of the unity of the arts without any tacit metaphysical or historico-philosophical background assumptions.[9] The system-theoretical theory of media, however, gives art philosophy back its theme.

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9   It is only with Luhmann that we once more find a claim to unity such as previously only formulated by in art philosophy until Adorno: "It had been our intention from the outset to treat art as a unified theme, i.e., to disregard the differences resulting from the varying media of its sensory or imaginary realization." (Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* [footnote 4], p. 499)

We can thus assume that a comparable situation existed in all genres in the art of the Modern Age: each work realized itself as the compact form of a genre-specific art medium that can be re-described across several parameters as a loose coupling of its own respective elements. In addition, these medium-constituted works were in turn interpreted as a reduplication of the real world.[10] This highly abstract reconstruction of the modern arts allows us to retrace the fracture in art historiography left by classical modernism. What unifies cubism in visual art, free atonality in music and free verse in poetry is that upon their first appearance they produced works no longer pre-programmed by any medium —and which had, in this sense, *freed* themselves from tradition. Pictures were no longer contained within central perspective, music abandoned the tonal system and poetry lost its binding metric forms—and yet they were nonetheless all intended to be perceived as *art*. That means: these works put the medium that traditionally constituted them out of action.

These works of art in classical modernism thus become self-programmed and self-reflexive works that organize the process of aesthetic experience purely through themselves. Independently of the expectations otherwise prepared in the media of art, the work can now, with the aid of its own forms, create expectations in its recipients as to which form will appear next, which form might be compatible with the previous ones and which might not. The art of classical modernism takes art out of its respective artistic medium and renders its work-character visible: the internal aesthetic binding-forces of its forms as perceptible within it.

It is important to remember that the discovery of forms in classical modernism was still bound strongly to predetermined programs of interpretation postulating an *a priori* connection between art and the world. Nonetheless, it is in precisely this shape that art, at the start of the 20th century, gains a new level of autonomy that is now able to develop on the basis of the existing system autonomy: the autonomy of the reflexively-coupled work of art (see figure 1. Theoretical Model). It is this classical-modernist "work autonomy" that breaks with all previously familiar forms of seeing and hearing and demands an entirely new aesthetic attitude of the recipient.

What makes it extremely difficult to understand such historical caesuras as classical modernism is the fact that this progressive differentiation does not simply occur in reality, which need thus only be described correctly, but rather within an autonomous social system. As an observer, one must therefore begin by taking up a hypothetical position within this system in order adequately to re-describe such processes of separation. Once it has attained its autonomy, the

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10 The idea that the function of art must have something to do with a "reduplication of reality" (*Realitätsverdoppelung*) can be found in Luhmann (ibid. p. 229).

art system can only change through its own force; it can no longer react directly to external changes in society, be they revolutions, great technical inventions, wars, or global economic crises. In a word, the possibilities of self-transformation are restricted by the negational possibilities available within a system; and it is precisely these that change in the history of art. Throughout the entire Modern Age, there was only one adequate means of self-transformation: stylistic change. Art could renew itself by negating an old style with the aid of a new one. The works of classical modernism, however, negated not only the established styles of their time, but rather medium-constituted art as such, thus introducing a previously unavailable possibility of negation into the art system. From that point on, it was possible to produce art that negated the medium of art. The art system thus attained a new level of freedom that can be understood retrospectively as the separation of medium and work.

Classical modernism becomes a turning-point in art history for the reason that it brings about a change in many of art's decisive factors at once. The progressive differentiation of art taking place here firstly constitutes a separation of work and medium, secondly corresponds to an introduction of negation of medium into the art system, and thirdly simultaneously reveals itself as a gain in autonomy, namely the autonomy of the classical modernist work of art in relation to the art system. In a context where such descriptions are required that at once demand a redefinition of all descriptive factors, one can say that philosophy, and art philosophy in particular, is still necessary.

Despite this separation of work and medium, the art of classical modernism remains tied to aesthetic tradition: for these self-organizing works of art are still traditional in their dependence on a background philosophy that translated the formal language evident in the works into a particular expression of reality. Here too, one is dealing with an artistic program that prepares its reception in a particular fashion and organizes the relation between art and the world in advance. As neither the work nor its reflection are still anchored in a medium that reproduces the unquestioned truths of art, the works of classical modernism are now "commentary-dependent."[11]

It can therefore be said that classical modernism did not yet truly free the autonomous work of art; rather, this commentary-dependent unity of work and reflection attains autonomy in relation to the medium of art (see Figure 1. Theoretical Model). This internally-reflected, self-creating, monadic work is the

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11   The term "commentary-dependence" was coined by Arnold Gehlen and explained as follows with reference to cubist art: "The inner pictorial rationality of cubism was extraordinarily great, but it was based on high-minded and obscure theories developed by the artists about the nature of perception, extending to the very definition of their vocabulary and to the non-lingual elements of the picture surface, and which were not at all appreciable to the mere viewer. ... Their meaning, which could no longer be ascertained from the picture itself, established itself alongside the picture as a commentary, as art literature and, as we all know, also as art chatter." (Arnold Gehlen, Zeit-Bilder [Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1960], pp. 53 f.)

epitome of the classical modernist work of art; it seeks direct access to the order of the world from within itself, without any mediation of medium.

V. Avant-garde

The historical avant-garde rebelled against this *a priori* understanding of art; its true achievement lies precisely in questioning and rendering contingent the ordering context between the work and the world that had been considered natural and necessary for centuries. As stated above, autonomous art can only perform such a radical rejection of its own tradition by its own power and with its own artistic resources. It was thus necessary to find a possibility within the art system itself to dissolve the connection between the work and its world-related interpretation, i.e., between work and reflection, that was still constitutive for classical modernism. The baffling strategy adopted by the avant-garde was to produce works that, in the classical modern sense, are none; works with no perceptible combinations of forms that limit and explain one another.[12] The art-historical meaning of object art (*Objektkunst*) was that here, for the first time, objects entered the arena of artistic communication whose comprehensibility was ensured neither by an artistic medium nor a self-explaining work; instead, these artifacts could be explained only in relation to a reflection upon art. Avant-garde art is a form of art whose aspects of *medium* and *artwork* are so to speak cut off; it is reduced alone to its reflexive component.[13] By implying a polemical negation of the work-character, it becomes object art; in so far as it becomes dependent on a reflection of the concept that declares such objects as art, it becomes conceptual art. Object art and conceptual art are thus two manifestations of the historical avant-garde, or two sides of its theoretical description.

As we have already found in the case of classical modernism, the avant-garde to the same extent becomes a decisive art-historical caesura, in that it causes a multitude of fundamental conceptual shifts. First of all, a further form of negation becomes available within the art system: the negation of the work of art. Through the inclusion of anti-works, the avant-garde finally also achieves a

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12 "The decomposition of the traditional conception of the unified artwork can be demonstrated formally to be a common characteristic of Modernism. Coherence and self-sufficiency were consciously questioned or intentionally shattered. In the discovery of ever newer, and for the work-concept ever more irritating forms or experiences of decomposition/denial of the sensible unity of the artwork, the different epochs of Modernism mutually outbid each other." Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 19.

13 One example among many of such a classical avant-garde approach was Daniel Knorr's contribution to the 2005 Venice Biennale, *European Influenza*. The "object" of art was the empty, unrenovated Romanian exhibition pavilion, and the "concept" lay in discussing the politically suggestive theme of "European influenza" with particular reference to Romania beforehand, and subsequently compiling the respective texts as a reader—which visitors could then read.

separation of work and reflection, thus further developing the concept of artistic autonomy. This can extend to the point that it can symbolically renounce art itself—a renunciation that nevertheless symbolizes art (one can imagine this extreme case as a situation in which the entire "circle of the arts" remains empty and even the reflexive segment is removed [see Figure 1. Theoretical Model]). All of this indicates that alongside the autonomy of system and work, art now also gains autonomy of reflection; conceptual art is simply a particularly clear example of this.

This gives us a first, rough answer to our question of what the avant-garde once was, historically speaking, and whence it was able to draw its force of effect: we are dealing with a further step in the progressive differentiation of the art system. The entire approach of reconstructing art history as a history of autonomization is intended to render appreciable both the supposed "end of art" and the "end of art history"—in both its truth and its illusion.[14] This end of historiography has equally become historical; nonetheless, it cannot be overlooked that the avant-garde did indeed bring something in art to its conclusion. Our thesis here would be that the historico-philosophical model of progress by which one was able to describe, and naturally also idealize, the process of progressive differentiation for almost 150 years reached its (provisional) limits at the start of the 1970s. As we have seen, the two great phases of progressive differentiation were able to occur only through two fundamental negations in the art system that were by their very nature two extreme steps of abstraction: first an art abstracted from its medium-character, next an art abstracted from its work-character. This meant that one was able to trace a straight line of progressive abstraction through art history, and this line was always, strictly speaking, a radical abstraction of familiar residues of tradition. It was thus in the nature of art to disappoint all the expectations of its audience, and in this sense the art from classical modernism until the avant-garde follows Rimbaud's maxim: "One must be absolutely modern." The "end of art" subsequently proclaimed for the second time by Danto was this time an end of the avant-garde.[15]

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14 For Arthur C. Danto's retrospective interpretation of his own thesis of the "end of art," see the instructive introduction in *After the End of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 3-18. Regarding the "end of art history," see Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte. Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren* (Munich: Beck, 1995), pp. 121ff.

15 According to our model, it is Danto who proves to be the real theorist of the avant-garde, as he recognized and described avant-garde art's move towards reflexivity. On the one hand, he was the first to draw the radical conclusion from the "transfiguration of the commonplace" to object art, i.e., that with two perceptually identical objects, it is possible for one to be art while the other is not, i.e., that the work is not a criterion for art. One can indeed speak here of a dissolution of the work category. On the other hand, this loss of avant-garde art's primary aesthetic experience means that it now becomes conceptual. Danto spoke here of the "philosophical disenfranchisement of art," meaning that in the avant-garde only philosophical reflection can present an event as art, and that the degree of success attributed to a work by the art system now only depends on the quality of this presentation.

One direct consequence of this spiral of abstraction is that the ideal of the new can only be realized through an uncompromising progress in the material. This progress, however, reaches an end in relation to any predefined genre at some point, as demonstrated vividly by the "last pictures" (*letzte Bilder*).[16] If one intends nonetheless to follow this logic of the historical avant-garde, one must specialize in the constant exploration of new forms of material, i.e., the inclusion of new elements of reality in art, even though they most likely do not hold the potential to develop a "new medium" of art—not even through continued use and long-term cultural molding. Ultimately, the everyday objects displayed in the museum are simply not (or cannot be) joined loosely in the way that pitches, colors, geometric figures, syllables or words can. Rather, the lack of natural referential contexts in aesthetic experience must be balanced through intellectual concepts that reflexively define the manner in which this art is to be perceived as a context of sense or nonsense. Honey, fat or felt remain materials, and do not in themselves constitute any artistic medium; it was only in the light of Beuys' artist- aesthetic and its interpretation by curators and critics that they become—or are declared to be—art.

VI. Post-modernism

The experiences of post-modernism made it seem necessary to bid farewell to the entire model of progress that had so far determined art historiography. The consistent tendency that could be discerned amid the stream of innovations in the arts from the middle of the 19th century onwards was a series of accumulating abstractions that forced art to maintain a state of constant material progress.

Post-modern art seemingly made it impossible to continue this narrative of the art system, as its historical achievement lay in the removal of the taboo concerning tradition. The re-use of the traditional formal repertoire—i.e., of old art styles in the context of advanced art—undermined the old, previously well-functioning historico-philosophical model and initially suggested, for lack of alternative descriptions, the conclusion of the *end* of art. What had ended was not art, however, but merely this linear form of historiography. Yet strictly speaking, even post-modernism remained bound to that form of progressivist logic; it was simply realizing it in reverse.

These historico-philosophical difficulties became obvious at the start of the 1970s, leading to a general suspicion towards any theories of history, and finding its most potent metaphor in the talk of the "end of the grand narratives." The philosophical discourse of modernity has to this day not moved beyond that dead point, which indicates that we are still caught within post-modernism's

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16 Editor's note: see, for example, the paintings of Ad Reinhardt.

horizon of self-understanding. The thought experiment projected here correspondingly seeks a possible way of crossing this horizon. It is important not simply to take leave of the philosophy of history, but rather to replace its traditional model with a new one. The historico-philosophical model that legitimated itself directly within the historical avant-garde and its ideal of material progress was that of a never-ending *de-confinement* (*Entgrenzung*) of the arts, i.e., a breaking down of its delimitations; the opposing model, which could provide an answer to the question of the avant-garde today, would be that of a finite *progressive differentiation* (*Ausdifferenzierung*) of art.

Let us remind ourselves of the meaning of that metaphor of de-confinement with the aid of our theory of media. Media are delimited according to the manner and number of their elements and relationships between them. One can then say that the historical avant-garde has pursued a strategy of de-confinement, as it constantly seeks to increase the number of medium-elements, i.e., the material reservoir of art. If the tonal system long set the limits of Western music at scales typically consisting of seven notes, the subsequent use of all 12 semitones in free atonal music clearly constituted a de-confinement of the medium "music." As soon as such expansions are realized with non-coupled material, i.e., with elements between which no loose couplings establish themselves for the recipients, this results in a conceptual expansion of the art media through their anti-media, for example when noises or chance events are included in the medium of music. The historical avant-garde thus defines itself not only through the production of anti-works, but also through the exploration and incorporation of anti-media into the art system. It is not foreseeable that this option of innovation through renewal of material could ever exhaust itself within the art system; in *this* sense we are indeed dealing with an "infinite" de-confinement of art—it is questionable, however, whether this will still be a tenable criterion for advanced art in the future.

Neither this possibility of art nor the fundamental meaning of it is to be questioned or even disputed here; we are interested solely in its art-philosophical interpretation. From the perspective of the avant-garde, any post-modern art that re-uses old, "exhausted" media is reactionary. Unlike the avant-garde, post-modernism cannot conceive of its own historicity at all—hence its helpless resort to the formula of the "end of art." One could say, however, that post-modernism's historical achievement lies in its removal of the taboo concerning medium-usages. Terminologically speaking, this amounts to a cancellation of the negation of the old media of art (see Figure 1. Theoretical Model). As already discussed, the paradigmatic negation of the art-medium results in classical modernism. If, however, one characterizes trivially as a reactionary regression the counter-movement via post-modernism which succeeded that initial negation, and fails to take it seriously as a significant turn in art history, then one must view this first negation of the medium merely as a de-confinement (*Entgrenzung*) of art. If one takes the post-modern negation of this negation seri-

ously, then one encounters not merely a de-confinement, but rather a progressive *differentiation* of art: the introduction of a difference between medium and work, that is to say the introduction of a new degree of freedom into the communicative system that is art.

It is important to note that this re-inclusion of the medium of art during post-modernism was subject to one proviso: it had to be identifiable *as* genuinely post-modern art and accordingly set itself apart from "traditional" art, which had worked *with* rather than *against* its medium. What was required was therefore a detached, and in this sense a flippant and ironic use of media. The best means for this was to emphasize this resort to tradition as such, i.e., to make the use of old artistic forms recognizable as quotation. Past artistic styles thus became identifiable *as styles*, and as the style quoted was released from its previous function—namely the constitution of a work—it was also possible to incorporate many different styles within the same work. The style quoted was thus a prerequisite for the style of "polystylism," that aesthetic pluralism which became the true trademark of post-modernism. By appropriating traditions in this detached manner, post-modernism even succeeded in outdoing the historical avant-garde and being "absolutely modern." This was its option for radically setting itself apart from all pre-existing supposedly advanced and modern art. Thus even post-modernism managed to find an art-historically relevant way of negating art within the art system—only in a material-aesthetically reversed fashion.

One could be tempted into to thinking that the rehabilitation of the artistic medium automatically rehabilitates the work of art, but this theoretically quite natural conclusion is only partly true. Certainly the removal of the artistic medium's taboos leads once more to artifacts that no longer present themselves as anti-works, but the work-character of post-modern art is of a special nature: it is the open, not the closed works of art that are clearly favored in the art system.[17] The open work is the logical consequence of the particularly ironic and playful re-appropriation of old media with their genres and styles experienced by art in post-modernism.[18] The listener simply cannot gain access to a polystylistic composition in the same automatic fashion as to a classical or classical- modern composition with its pre-programmed or self-programming

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17 "An open work of art takes on the task of providing us with a depiction of discontinuity: it does not tell us about it, but rather *is* it." (Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* [Harvard, 1989]) This work-concept flows into post-modernism's self-description, even through Eco developed it with reference to the literature of classical modernism, in which "openness" is a surface phenomenon, whereas the works are designed to achieve self-organization and accordingly the "self-closure" of their meaning-context at the experiential level.

18 The role of irony as post-modernism's defining characteristic is emphasized by Heinrich Klotz, for example, in *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert* (footnote 3), p. 128: "The strategies of Moores and Venturis are thus intended to give the historicizing form a far-reaching effect by undermining it though irony—because a fundamental generic characteristic has been shattered at the same time: the 'seriousness of the architecture.'"

organizational structure. The former feeds off the abrupt changes of style that has come to be expected by the observer only through the meta-concept of post-modern art. The rehabilitation of the old media immediately changes the reception conditions affecting the newest works of art: for the layperson, they can now be experienced aesthetically and understood once more. For the connoisseur, however, such art plays with tradition, it makes its set pieces recognizable as quotations, for example by demystifying a figurative painting with an ironic caption underneath, or—unsurpassably—turning the entire picture upside-down (as with the painter Georg Baselitz). It is this twofold interpretative capacity that forms the basis for the "double encoding" diagnosed in post-modern art from an early point.[19]

The negation of the medium through the art of classical modernism was not simply an art-historical peculiarity that could be undone again by post-modernism; rather, this double negation was the ruse of a no longer controllable autonomous communicative system seeking to extricate itself from the quagmire of its tradition with the aid of its own works. With historical hindsight, it served to free the still reflexively-coupled work of art from the medium of art. It revealed the possibility for each work of art to exist, be experienced and interpreted without being anchored in a specific artistic medium. If this negation was subsequently negated in post-modernism, this can be interpreted in precisely three ways: firstly, drawing on the self-understanding of aesthetic modernism and its model of de-confinement (i.e., of classical and avant-garde modernism), one can view this renewed use by art of its medium, which is always also a use of the traditional formal repertoire, as a conservative regression that falls back behind the current point in art history. Secondly, one can adopt the post-modern perspective and view this move as a successful neutralization of that first negation, as if classical modernism had in this manner simply left its own stylistic trace in art history—a scandalous move in its own time, but irrelevant for the art of the present. Thirdly—and this is our view—one can see this twofold negation as an immanent mechanism of progressive differentiation in which the first negation served to dissolve the historically-established bond between work and medium, whereas the second retracts the accompanying statement that art must always negate its medium if it is to be considered modern. This provides an explicatory model that neither disputes the historical sense of the first negation in a post-modernist fashion nor rejects the second negation in a modernist fashion, but instead sees a process of progressive differentiation in this peculiar double step: one step forwards, one step back. Its historical sense lies in the separation of work and medium, the gaining of a new degree of freedom in the art system in the fact that this connection is neither

19 On the concept of double encoding see Leslie A. Fiedler, *Überquert die Grenze, schließt den Graben! Über die Postmoderne*, in Wolfgang Welsch (ed.), *Wege aus der Moderne. Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion* (Weinheim: VCH, Acta Humaniora, 1988), pp. 57-74.

necessary (as in the Modern Age) nor *impossible* (as in aesthetic modernism) for art, but rather contingent, i.e., subject to free choice and in this sense *possible*-—for an art in the age of reflexive modernism.

VII. Reflexive Modernism

This re-description of post-modernism brings us into contact with the present horizon of contemporary art. All further theses point beyond it; that is to say, the descriptive model of modern art history developed here becomes normative. This applies especially to the claim that post-modern art, which sees itself as the telos and end of art history, can be overcome through a further step of progressive differentiation.

It is an immanent possibility of this entire thought-model that, in analogy to the post-modern re-inclusion of the artistic medium, there can still be a re-inclusion of the work of art in the art system. The negation of the work by the avant-garde would be cancelled out through a further negation (see Figure 1. Theoretical Model). After the avant-garde posited artistic reflection as autonomous and post-modernism introduced the autonomy of the artistic medium, the work itself would finally also be released from all a priori ties to the medium and reflexive component of art, and could for the first time be *successfully* communicated within the art system as an autonomous (i.e., entirely unbound) work of art. That is to say, the innovative move that could take us beyond post-modernism's understanding of art would consist in a rehabilitation—carried out openly within the art system—of the work of art as an autonomous, self-organizing "combination of forms."[20] The ensuing works would be more binding than the open, ambivalent, self-deconstructive works of post-modernism, as their use of their medium would no longer be broken through irony, but rather functional once more. This next step within this process of progressive differentiation would, however, also take us one step outside it: one would leave post-modernism and reach a reflexive phase of modernism, or simply: *reflexive modernism*.

The concept of reflexive modernism stems from a socio-theoretical field of discourse: "'Reflexive modernization' is intended to mean: the self-transformation of industrial society ... that is to say a dissolution and replacement of first modernity by a second modernity, whose contours and principles must be

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20 It is Luhmann who states, in *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (footnote 4), pp. 271, 349, and 351, that works of art are to be understood as "combinations of forms"—albeit without making this idea more concrete, on the one hand, i.e., showing how the forms in a work of art "combine," and on the other hand without reflecting upon the normative status of this statement. On both points, see Harry Lehmann, *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst. Ästhetik nach Luhmann* (Munich: Fink, 2006), especially pp. 29-50.

discovered and shaped." [21] The theoretical model developed here constitutes an attempt to elucidate this epoch-concept for the art of modernism; in New Music and architecture in particular, it is already flowing diffusely into the patterns of self-description. [22] In both cases, the history of society and that of art, we are dealing with "a three-step model of social change—from tradition through (simple) modernity to reflexive modernity" [23] (see Figure 1. Theoretical Model). The decisive parallel arises through the same logic of progress that encoded art and society to equal degrees in industrial modernity. This logic, defined by the ideals of scientific and technical progress, economic growth, or indeed the prospering of the welfare state, simultaneously internalized the first aesthetic modernity as it took for its guiding orientation the material progress of art. If it is stated that: "In the course of reflexive modernization a new form of capitalism ensues, a new form of work, a new form of global order, a new form of society ..." [24]—then we can follow it up by saying: and a new form of art.

Using the present model, it is relatively easy to show how reflexive modernity constitutes not simply a socio-historical, but in fact also a far-reaching art-historical caesura. Aesthetic modernism's logic of outdoing exhausted itself after retracting its two great abstractions, namely of the medium and the work. In each individual art, the ladder of material progress has been ascended to the final rung and descended to the first again—and both the upward and the downward motion followed the avant-garde's imperative of being absolutely *ahead* of all other movements at the respective moment in history. What is far more difficult is lending this new epoch-concept a positive meaning for *art*. The strongest reason for speaking here of a reflexive modernism is that the problems resulting from that successful progressive differentiation can only be intercepted by means of a forced reflexivity in the art system.

With the entire model developed here, it is important to keep in mind the status of the arguments. Without doubt there are and have always been a sufficient number of artists (in fact they probably constitute the majority) that never abandoned the work category in their art and continued to paint pictures,

21 Ulrich Beck, "Das Zeitalter der Nebenfolgen und die Politisierung der Moderne," in Ulrich Beck/ Anthony Giddens/Scott Lash: *Reflexive Modernisierung. Eine Kontroverse* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 27.

22 Concerning this see Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, "Neue Musik am Beginn der Zweiten Moderne," in *Postmoderne. Eine Bilanz*, Sonderheft Merkur 9/10 (1998), pp. 864-875; Mahnkopf, "Thesen zur Zweiten Moderne," in *Musik & Ästhetik* 36 (2005), pp. 81-91; Ulrich Schwarz (ed.), *Neue Deutsche Architektur. Eine Reflexive Moderne* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002); Heinrich Klotz, "3. Teil: Zweite Moderne," in Klotz, *Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert* (footnote 3), pp. 153-91; Klotz (ed.), *Zweite Moderne* (Munich: Beck, 1996).

23 Scott Lash, "Reflexivität und ihre Doppelungen. Struktur, Ästhetik und Gemeinschaft," in Beck et al., *Reflexive Modernisierung* (footnote 21), p. 200.

24 Ulrich Beck/Wolfgang Bonss/Christoph Lau, "Theorie reflexiver Modernisierung—Fragestellungen, Hypothesen, Forschungsprogramme," in Ulrich Beck/Wolfgang Bonss (ed.), *Modernisierung der Moderne* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), p. 13.

write poems or compose piano concertos entirely traditionally. These were not the ones who made art history in the last century, however, and they should certainly not be rehabilitated now as the true, unjustly forgotten avant-garde. Indeed all conceivable art forms have long coexisted in the art system—but they were not and are not favored equally. Our reconstructive model offers an explanation for this peculiarity: artists such as Schönberg, Picasso and Joyce; Cage and Warhol; Schnittke, Baselitz and Charles Moore did not simply create new styles—their innovations were so timely that they enabled the greatest possible gain in immanent freedom and autonomy in the art system; this is why they were so infinitely superior to all those artists who continued to work traditionally, as the established canon states. And in this sense, they rightfully mark the fundamental caesuras in art history with their works. They were able to make history because they advanced the progressive differentiation of the art system in every way that was possible at their respective historical moment.

This process of progressive differentiation has so far consisted of three steps: in classical modernism through an exclusion of the medium, in the historical avant-garde through a further exclusion of the work, in post-modernism through a re-inclusion of the tabooed media and—this is how we can continue this historical sequence—through a re-inclusion of the systematically-excluded work in the system of the arts. It is only now, as a way of gaining the greatest possible distance from the aging post-modernism, that work-oriented artistic activity would take on a further system-logical meaning once more. One can assume here that the corresponding works have long been created, but are neither perceived nor communicated in this art-sociological dimension, and therefore hardly unsettle the dominant post-modern self-understanding of the art system. If the theory developed here is able to comprehend art history in a manner that is close to reality, then precisely this reversion to the work of art is a likely move, as it once more follows the imperative of aesthetic modernism: to outdo the predominant art of the present. The secret point of reference in this concept of modernism, however, was always the art system; in relation to system-immanent artistic communication it was always important to set oneself apart from the structures of expectation already established in the system as radically as possible. The greatest possible scandal always lay in introducing a specific negation of the system into the art system, and precisely this was ultimately honored as the progress that is vital to art history.

The first answer to our central question of the avant-garde today is thus: at the present historical moment, avant-garde is a work-centered art that reverts to the old media—if this is recognized, interpreted and communicated in the art system as a step into reflexive modernism, and does not lead art directly into a pre-modern self-understanding.

Work-oriented art permits artists once more to take up the greatest possible distance to the art system within the art system, though this option is only now—as an explicit counter-program to the post-modern system condition of

contemporary art—beginning to promise success. After clearly being out of favor in the periods of avant-garde and post-modernism, the autonomous work of art is now in the position of functioning within their social system as the criterion of selection for successful art, rather than simply flashing up on the reflexive screens of the art system as a trivial event (as in the repeated proclamations in recent years of a renaissance of painting that in fact never took place). The helplessness in the face of the end of art and the arbitrariness of its current continuation must be great enough for the following realization to establish itself in the art system: the choice of an old medium, and the reversion to perfection of craft that is automatically accompanied by a work-orientation in art, are not necessarily a sign of naïveté and lack of reflection on the artist's part, but rather their response to precisely that problematic situation.[25]

VIII. Gehalt-Aesthetic Turn (Gehaltsästhetische Wende)

One can generally describe art in its constitutional phase, in which medium, work and reflection were tightly coupled elements of artistic communication, as a representational art. Owing to this *a priori* relationship between the work of art and its medium, it was always possible to experience paintings, pieces of music or poems as something meaningful, and in so far as it could be taken for granted that this perceptible unity of meaning was embedded completely within a predefined communicative horizon, these works reflected "of their own accord" upon what they represented in relation to the world. In the Modern Age, therefore, works of art functioned as signs and had a content-aesthetic (*inhaltästhetisch*) orientation.[26]

Art loses this representational function in its phase of progressive differentiation—or at least, the more advanced movements no longer have an representational character for their confused audience, their effect tending instead towards an a-presentation: in one manner or other, the world is revealed in its non-representability, and works of art correspondingly change into non-refer-

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25 A prime example of such system-relevant work-orientation is the current rehabilitation of figurative painting in the visual arts through the Leipzig School. For a long time, the tableau (*Tafelbild*) had been all but forced out of the current art scene by newer media such as photography, video art, and installation art. If at all, painting was only able to make an impact in a canonic modern style such as Expressionism, which bore its modernism like a trademark. The return of representational painting with realist tendencies today—without any subversion or irony—marks a true break. The mere fact that this "stylistic break" with aesthetic modernism is being carried out by a "school" indicates that the logic of outdoing familiar from the historical avant-garde is coming into play once again. This development began in Leipzig firstly because the craft of painting had survived under the shadow of socialist realism, and secondly because in the East—isolated from the material logic of the Western art system—an original interest in reality had been preserved in art. Together these two elements—profession and sense of reality—form the evolutionary attractor for a renaissance of representational painting in visual art.

26 See Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (footnote 4), p. 272.

ential signs. This is expressed most plausibly in the tendency towards abstraction—of reality.

The explanation for this fundamental difference would then be that the art of the Modern Age was able to function representationally precisely because it came about as a joint communication between the components of artwork, medium, and reflection. By contrast, the art of aesthetic modernism was far less world-oriented, as it was determined primarily by a system-immanent logic of progressive differentiation. Focusing on its own gains in autonomy in this manner led to a non-representational self-understanding in art that was in turn the deciding precondition for taking precisely *those* aesthetic innovations into the canon of modern art history which enforced this ban on images most creatively and radically. This imperative, however, is not derived from any Hegelian idea of art that develops in the course of history, but was rather due to the mechanical spirit of a social system that awarded a bonus to immanent gains of autonomy. If art theories today show an anti-hermeneutical impetus, they are thus taking the immanent logic of the historical avant-garde to its natural conclusion—but not beyond it.[27]

The question is now: what happens once the great spaces of free play in the art system have been explored, those spaces that open sooner or later through the separation of work, medium and reflection in each specific genre? One consequence, as mentioned above, is an increased concentration on the new and multiple media; this does not enable the heroic days of the avant-garde to continue, however, but only to be imitated. As soon as this recipe for success becomes familiar through habit, it is highly probably that in the self-description of the individual art scenes, an explicit rehabilitation of the work of art and its old media would come about: a position that understands how to exploit one last time—in the material itself—the logic of outdoing that was prevalent in aesthetic modernism, and in this sense remains faithfully devoted to the old spirit of the historical avant-garde. For another thing, this situation creates the likelihood of a paradigm shift that can be referred as a *Gehalt-aesthetic turn*.[28]

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27 The most obvious example would be Niklas Luhmann, for whom the meaning of contemporary art was to "observe the unobservable world" (*Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, p. 288), and the negativist aesthetic of Christoph Menke, whose central thesis is that "aesthetic experience cannot be described as successful understanding." (*Die Souveränität der Kunst. Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida* [Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991²], S. 129) In both cases, art's world-relation is removed through the ascription of an apresentational connection to the world: as paradoxical observation and a radically negative aesthetic experience.

28 The German concept of "*Gehalt*" cannot be precisely translated into English. The *Gehalt* of an artwork is not the traditional pre-existent "content," but rather must be experienced and developed by the recipient through the process of interpretation. Whereas content (*Inhalt*) and form are only weakly mediated antithesis, such that the content can so to speak be poured into the form, the difference between *Gehalt* and form in a modern artwork is infinitely mediated. The *Gehalt* of the artwork is so to speak that "content" (*Inhalt*) which can first be experienced through the formal combinatoriality of the artwork and then must be interpreted to the world through words.

This turning towards *Gehalt* implies a turning away from material. The metaphor of material may be plausible enough as long as the "material orientation" in art remains unquestioned, but as soon as it becomes more fragile, questions arise demanding a more explicit definition of terms. What, then, does "aesthetic material" mean? How, when and why did such an orientation come about in modern art? The system-theoretical theory of media can in turn answer some of these questions.

It was the suspension of artistic media directed against five centuries of art history that released, in classical modernism, that "material logic" which determines the whole of aesthetic modernism in its self-understanding to this day. The systematic dissolution of the loose, medium-constitutive couplings transformed the elements of art kept thus far within a relational context into unconnected aesthetic *material*: into pitches, durations, colors, lines, syllables, words and sentences—for which one first of all found a different, new way of forming contexts. One searched for basal relations between the elements of painting, music, or language that were not yet culturally preformed and loaded with a historical semantic content. Following the example of the natural sciences and inspired by the progress in knowledge there, advanced artists performed material experiments to clarify the nature of their art in its material aspects. Pointillism, for example, constructed its pictures from unmixed spots of color in order to imitate the process of perception in as "true to life" a fashion as possible. Cubism followed the laws of Gestalt psychology, which stated that a figure comes about in the "eye of the beholder." In general, one could say that classical modernism saw the birth of a very specific type of work in which the disappearance of traditional representational systems was compensated for through the "natural systems" of human perceptual organization.

The price of such an non-medium (*amedial*) art is high, however; this incredibly strained formal language means that one can hardly create large-scale works any longer, as was shown perhaps most clearly through the example of free atonality in music; and cubism equally exhausted itself quickly in its motives and themes. In both cases, the purely self-organizing powers of human perception are too weak to be able to make far-reaching compositional decisions—it was precisely for this "reason" that the old media of art evolved during the Modern Age. They are media in which an aesthetic experience becomes *probable*. Accordingly, to return to the example of free atonal music, composers

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A *Gehalt-aesthetic* turn is most apparent in contemporary architecture, which already describes itself as a "reflexive modernism." On the occasion of the exhibition *New German Architecture: a Reflexive Modernity*, shown in Berlin in 2002, Ulrich Schwarz stated that it is "definitely no longer possible to establish merely through the form, whether the style of a building is 'progressive' or 'regressive.' The modernity of architecture can truly no longer be determined stylistically, formally or with regard to the internal structuring. Today architecture can and must be modern in a societal sense—or it is not modern at all." (Ulrich Schwarz, *Neue Deutsche Architektur—Eine Ausstellung*, in *Neue Deutsche Architektur* [footnote 22], p. 16)

sought on the one hand to follow texts or write miniatures like Webern; on the other hand, this phase was overcome relatively quickly by seeking a foothold in a rational technical frame of reference: the twelve-tone technique. This enabled New Music to complete the transition to the avant-garde, where the organization of the aesthetic material was achieved through a system no longer founded on human perception, but rather on abstract criteria.

While traditional art had extrapolated the basic principles of aesthetic experience and exploited them to form the old media of art, the avant-garde consciously removed itself from them and became conceptual.[29] The avant-garde examines the material of the individual arts under the laboratory conditions of an an-aesthetic theory that also reflects upon and re-determines the concept of art in one or other fashion. And when, in post-modernism, the old representational systems start being cited once more, then the old media are not used any longer as media of formal invention as in the past, but rather as playing material prefabricated by art history. In this media-theoretical sense, one can therefore say that the whole of aesthetic modernism—each time in its own way—followed a material logic.

At the point, then, when the internal progressive differentiation of the art system has run its course and the material orientation of aesthetic modernism has suffered a structural loss of plausibility, one finds an aesthetic communication becoming probable that neither represents nor a-presents the world, but rather one in which art reveals the world in the state it has reached.[30]

On the one hand, this function of art can then be projected back onto art history, in so far as one does not understand the most innovative stylistic inventions of the Modern Age as mere acts of representation, but rather precisely as such anticipations of a new perspective on the changing world.[31] And of course the great material-oriented stylistic breaks of aesthetic modernism can in this sense be interpreted "*Gehalt*-aesthetically." The avant-garde in particular always understood its aesthetic revolution as being a world revolution at the same time.[32] Beuys did not make art history through his social romanticism, however, but rather because he had discovered and unlocked a degree of

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29 Adorno already "heard" that the avant-garde in New Music can hardly be aesthetically experienced any more, at the most only sensed, when he said with reference to Cage, Stockhausen and Boulez: "My productive imagination does not follow [these works] in the same fashion; I could not compose along while listening to them, as I still could with the string trio by Webern, by no means the simplest of pieces." (Theodor W. Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," in *Musikalische Schriften I-III* [= *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16] [Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997], p. 494)

30 For the determination of art's social function, this meant that it fulfils itself—going through the process of aesthetic experience—in a "provocation of new self-descriptions by society." (See "Die gesellschaftliche Funktion der Kunst," in Lehmann, *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst* [footnote 20], pp. 81-85)

31 On the backwards projection of this functional determination in art history see ibid., pp. 120-122.

32 On the political utopia of pop art and minimalism, which called for a "paradise now," see Danto, *After the End of Art* (see footnote 13), p. 15.

freedom frozen within the art system at the right moment; and this anarchistic freedom in art then matched the anarchic atmosphere of change in the 1960s. That proverbial "reconciliation of art and life" did not become the guiding idea of avant-garde because it was realized by it more than at other times, but rather because it was an ideal whose power of conviction came from the fact that avant-garde art, as a reflexive art, was structurally out of touch with the world. The history of all art could thus—at second glance—be read as a latent history of aesthetic world-discovery that took place, especially in the last century, primarily as a history of progressive differentiation in the art system, however, and therefore manifested itself in material-aesthetic criteria.

On the other hand, it is only now, after its achievement of immanent autonomy, that the art system can directly realize this world-discovery as its true social function. Art will only become sufficiently free to consider its own meaning once it has found a way to negate post-modernism through works of art. *Whether* this happens, and above all *how* it happens, will depend—as always—on the concrete historical conditions.

IX. Naïve Modernism

If work, medium, and reflection are autonomous components of artistic communication, then everything depends on the concrete relationship they form. It is decisive whether work, medium, and reflection are communicated as *autonomous* components of art or not—and this by no means goes without saying.

Using our model, it is easy to see the two alternatives: either the three segments retain their character as separate components of artistic communication or they merge once more to form a unified whole, i.e., a naïve attitude of expectation in the art system that is structurally identical to the pre-modern understanding of art during the Modern Age (see Figure 1. Theoretical Model). If the material-aesthetic orientation in contemporary art loses ever more of its power, then precisely that latter scenario will become likely: then this choice, which was naturally always available—and which in former times could easily be summarized as the distinction between entertaining and serious art, the progressive and the reactionary, art and kitsch—becomes considerably more critical.

In this sense, contemporary modernism is Janus-faced: if it can bear its own progressive differentiation, it becomes the art of a reflexive modernism; if it is not able to cope with its self-created internal complexity, it is drawn into a *naïve modernism*.

There are already a number of trends today pointing to a counter-modernism of this kind.[33] The art of the present is either devoted to a direct political

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33 Ulrich Beck's theory of reflexive modernization also conceives of the possibility that a "counter-modernity" could develop at any time within modernity. He defines it as: "a produced, producible

function—for example in the many documentary videos at the last Documenta—or it is marketed as a lifestyle segment, as is increasingly prevalent at the major art fairs. One could certainly raise the objection that this has always been the case; the point, however, is that the professional attitude to this phenomenon is starting to change and is gradually infiltrating the self-description of the art system. It is therefore entirely conceivable that post-modernism in art will be succeeded not by a reflexive, but rather a naïve modernism.

But what determines whether such trends come to define the structure? What are the conditions for the possibility of a naïve modernism? One can examine this question from two sides: firstly, naïve modernism can generally be understood as the result of cultural post-modernism reaching its limits. Secondly, one can grasp it from the perspective of an overcome aesthetic post-modernism, i.e., above all in relation to the rehabilitated work of art and the situation in the art system that results from its accompanying gains in autonomy.

Regarding the first point: the possibility of a naïve modernism is a direct consequence of post-modernism itself. Its achievement lies in showing that all normative difference can essentially be deconstructed. This has resulted in a normative vacuum in society that is beginning to fill up with every conceivable form of traditionalism. Such an unquestionability (*Fraglosigkeit*) created merely by falling back on the tradition—for example a re-moralization of society using the simple distinction between good and evil—leads to a naïve self-image of society that will affect the art it produces.

If the ultimate questions are blocked about the sense and purpose of art, about its truth and its social basis; if there are communicational templates that exclude the use of collective singulars (*Kollektivsingularen*) and declare as unproductive statements about "art" as such or "the medium" of art; if the history of art is not reconstructed because one doubts the meaningfulness of "grand narratives"—then the construction of a general perspective and therefore critique itself becomes impossible.

This structural blocking of critique leads art directly into naïve modernism, as it is the dominant self-description in the art system that determines what is selected and favored as new, advanced, and modern. If the art system loses its self-critical powers because critique itself has lost its conceptual tools, all sorts of secondary, non-artistic (*kunstfremden*) criteria begin to affect it. Art comes into a mode of operation in which, for lack of art-immanent criteria, parasitic

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unquestionability. More precisely: the erasure, disposal of the question into which modernity decays. Counter-modernity absorbs, demonizes, sweeps away the questions thrown up, served up and polished up by modernity." (Ulrich Beck, *Das Zeitalter der Nebenfolgen und die Politisierung der Moderne*, in Beck et al., *Reflexive Modernisierung* [footnote 20], p. 59) Our distinction between reflexive and naïve modernity puts the two "reflexive forms of reaction" that are conceivable in a second modernity in concrete terms for art: "reflexive pluralism" and "reflexive fundamentalism." (Beck et al., *Theorie reflexiver Modernisierung* [footnote 23], pp. 48 f.)

criteria fill this functional gap every more strongly and in which that artwork can succeed, which is justified by the most secondary criteria. The new in art is then no longer created, and newness—as the final criterion of modernism—is accordingly simulated. As long the material logic still applies in the art system, one will then encounter such peculiar phenomena as a "simulated avant-garde": an art that imitates blindly (for the world) the strategies of negative deviation from expectations.

Here I would speak in general of a second-order heteronomy, an external determination through self-determination in modern art.[34] It is a state of proverbial "self-incurred mental immaturity" (Kant), as the autonomy of art as a social system is by no means infringed upon by external forces such as religion, law, or politics. Rather, this free space becomes the site of exchange relationships between the protagonists that produce their own opaque market, where anything and everything is traded and has its price, yet is lacking one thing: the "eigenvalue" of *modern* art. The art system adopts a mode of operation in which it attempts—like an advertising agency—to calculate the effectiveness of the aesthetic expectations that the system generates in relationship to its public.

As mentioned above, post-modernism remains connected to aesthetic modernism in its material logic through its ironic break with the avant-garde. The standard reference to post-modern arbitrariness is therefore ultimately misleading, especially if one considers the attitude of mind that is beginning to succeed it. Post-modern art definitely has hard criteria of aesthetic selection, such as the plurality of points of view, the entanglement of the arts, the inclusion of traditional media and genres, the double encoding of works, their structural openness—which generally leads to a strategy of employing a noncommittal formal language, emphasizing the ambivalence of the decisions made, and thus rendering oneself unobservable and also unassailable. It is only once these criteria are also eroded—because they have become all too transparent—that a state of radical contingency will be reached. Today's art can react to such a "new opacity" reflexively or naïvely, though the latter way of coping with complexity is the more likely one for now—quite simply because the notional and institutional preconditions for a reflexive modernization of the art scene are still missing.

Regarding the second point: the possibility that modern art could become *naïve* in a very specific sense, rather than simply reacting traditionalistically or conventionally to the current situation, is intimately connected with the fact that after post-modernism, art also normalizes its relationship with the work-character—that is to say: realistic novels are being written once more, representa-

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34 We are dealing here with a typical case of "second-order problems," of which Ulrich Beck says that "they stem ... from the institutional system of industrial modernity itself" (*Das Zeitalter der Nebenfolgen und die Politisierung der Moderne* [footnote 32], p. 88). For more on this deficient mode of the art system see Lehmann, *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst* (footnote 20), pp. 244-269.

tional pictures are being painted or classical forms are being used in poetry—and *in this way* achieves "official" success in the art system.

For as soon as one is dealing once more with works no longer containing the message that they are not works, art can essentially also come to terms with a pre-modern content-aesthetic (*Inhaltsästhetik*). The works would be read once more as signs representing the world as it is. The *Gehalt*-aesthetic turn would have failed content-aesthetically, so to speak. The material-aesthetic orientation of aesthetic modernism had so far always ruled out such a "relapse," as it was through this orientation that the internal hierarchy of values in the art system followed a logic of outdoing that went beyond all content or substance and honored any gain in spaces of free play as advanced art. If even the barriers of ironic self-detachment disappear, however, an attitude to reception without underlying motivation and an understanding of the work without double meanings suddenly becomes possible. If there is a lack of any resistant art criticism with regard to such works, this aesthetic stance will also become apparent in a corresponding self-description of art. Its maxim will be something like this: "art is whatever pleases you, and you are the one to decide what pleases you!" If this attitude were to become dominant, aesthetic modernism would corrode its own concept and become naïve.

X. Art Criticism

In contemporary modernism, then, the question of the avant-garde today would on the one hand pose itself anew, and on the other hand lead to a *Gehalt*-aesthetic answer. The normative difference between advanced art, as capable of taking on art-historical relevance, and all other art, which is not, would now flare up far more strongly in the concrete work and its interpretations. Concrete artistic observation, analysis of formal language, the crystallization of aesthetic experience in the work and the discovery of its interferences with the lingual conceptions of the world that generate new self-descriptions of society would be more important than ever. It is precisely here that we can pinpoint the difference between a content-aesthetic (*inhaltsästhetisch*) and a *Gehalt*-aesthetic orientation: it is not a matter of representing a self-description of society that has already been socially accepted, but rather the presentation of an experiential pattern inscribed upon the work of art that is taken up by the individual on a trial basis, and in some cases provokes a new self-understanding in society.

The fact that modern society needs to regenerate its self-description in the first place is a consequence of the evolutionary pressure to which it is subject today. There is now a constant need for new descriptions, as the old self-images lose their problem-focus as soon as the problems of society change. Advanced art offers experiential patterns through which a new problem-induced and

socially relevant form of world-perception can crystallize. If today's art recognizes this function as its eigenvalue and integrates it into its system-internal self-image, it would be tantamount to a *Gehalt*-aesthetic turn in the art system: a departure from the material orientation extending all the way into post-modernism in favor of a *Gehalt* orientation in a now reflexive aesthetic modernism. All this would arise from the fact that gains in autonomy *per se* are now less important than the most fitting use of autonomy.

Let us then assume that the new in contemporary art is its new aesthetic *Gehalt*, and that this is precisely what must be explored and communicated outwards in the art system. Then such a *Gehalt*-aesthetic orientation of the art system would pose entirely different challenges for its self-reflexivity. Following the immanent progressive differentiation, the field of possibilities has greatly expanded: one can expect not only works, media, and reflections in art, but also their specific negations. Art can be produced as an open work, a closed work or an anti-work; it can take advantage of both old and new media or avoid any predefined medium, and it can—but need not—be based on a system-immanent concept (including all hybrid variants). With reference to these seemingly unlimited possibilities, we are faced anew with the question of the aesthetic purpose, except that now it cannot at all be answered with the aid of material categories. Just as one can observe this in the appearance of modern cities, where a deconstructivist museum building stands *simultaneously* beside a post-modern government building and a classical modern office block, and the formal language of the buildings is derived entirely from their function in the urban context, the achievements of aesthetic modernism in all other arts too will most likely become simultaneously available, and the shape of the respective "works" will be determined by their concrete content. The question is simply what sense of direction this abandonment of the material-aesthetic orientation will take on.

At this point of bifurcation in history, our model indicates an indeterminate point in reality where the future is uncertain: art after post-modernism differs from it either through a heightened reflexivity or through naïveté.

What path will be taken by contemporary art in this situation depends primarily and concretely on what role is played by art criticism in the art system. In the current situation, it functions as a form of service, by no means as an autonomous, constitutive component of modern art. The art critics, regardless of whether they specialize in music, literature, theater, film, or architecture, are in professional terms usually anchored in non-artistic (*kunstfremden*) sub-systems, primarily as journalists in the mass media or as teaching staff at universities. In the feature section of a newspaper or a program on culture, art criticism is looked after more or less well, but is ultimately always in conflict with its real function: to inform, i.e., report on what is new in the art scenes, as well as a recommendation as to whether or not those new features are worthy of attention. It is only in exceptional cases that there is room for a deeper analysis

of the works, for their essayistic integration into an aesthetic discourse. For academics, on the other hand, art criticism must remain a secondary occupation that is carried out when the opportunity arises. Art criticism thus finds itself peculiarly lacking a place in society, and thus is vulnerable to commissioned criticism from the art system itself. The career of the art critic has so far been a fortuitous one that—in comparison to artists, but also cultural managers—is normalized through neither scholarships, prizes, nor study trips, nor a corresponding training or a professional perspective within the art system. Yet if artistic reflection is genuinely a constitutive element of all modern art, if it has become by nature conceptual and commentary-dependent, then this would also have to affect the "institution of art." At present, art criticism of such a kind is still lacking any economic or idea-political basis. Art criticism is a luxury that one must be able to afford. The necessary separation of powers between the legislative, executive and judicative levels is missing from the art system: between firstly the artists, who embody the legislative power of art through their works, secondly those who act as advocates of the medium—the gallery owners, museum directors, curators, lectors, festival directors and cultural managers, who "carry out" art within the social space of society, and thirdly an art criticism that would pass aesthetic judgments on the "constitution of modernity" by reflecting upon art in its relationship to the world. Measured by contemporary art's high standards of autonomy and its aesthetic, this means: there is no such thing as autonomous art criticism.

The most urgent task of any contemporary art criticism is to preserve aesthetic modernism's gains in autonomy through and beyond the epochal break that is already separating Western society from the unquestioned assumptions of its dissolving industrial modernity. This would first of all mean keeping the constitutive elements of art divergent. Only an art that continues to have the immanent freedoms of fully-differentiated aesthetic modernity can fulfill its function of world-discovery in a society that is radically open to the future. The aesthetic means must be as multi-faceted as art history has made them. In the boundless ocean of a contemporary art so saturated with possibilities, art criticism must identify those neuralgic points at which the truly relevant schemata of social experience are being surprisingly reinterpreted.

It is above all if, at the closure of post-modernism, there is an increased presence of art in old media such as the tableau, the novel or the piano concerto, that art develops a different self-understanding in two respects. Firstly, it is precisely the old media that guarantee to a far higher degree the return of communicability in contemporary art, and secondly because these works also demand a different form of reception in order for their aesthetic *Gehalt* to be released at all. For this highly experimental observation of art —which must have sufficient time and space to combine its aesthetic experiences with the most advanced analyses of its time—art criticism must become an equal third power in the communicative household of the art system.

The deciding factor is that every emphatic aesthetic experience generates itself only from the tension between medium and work. It is in the fissures of incongruence, the points where the concrete work of art run counter to the expectations created by its medium, that the perceptibly new in art is born; this quality no longer heeds the art system's material progress and logic of out-doing, but instead seeks direct contact with reality once more. This constitutive gap in contemporary art can only be kept open through an aesthetic reflection that genuinely engages with the self-organizational process of each respective work, that asks what technical problem an artist is seeking to overcome time and again in his work, and what life-worldly experiential content it renders communicable or experienceable, whether consciously or unconsciously, in this intra-aesthetic effort. In this sense, the art criticism of reflexive modernism would always also be a "redemptive critique."

Preserving the achievements of aesthetic modernism would also mean not bridging the fissure between art's other components with generalized expecta-tions, i.e., leaving open the difference between medium and reflection or work and reflection. Today one can no more assume that an old medium stands for an old world-view than that a new medium stands for a new perception of the world. Nor do open works symbolize an open society and the self-referentially closed ones a totalitarian societal system. The relationship between the forms of both the media and the works and their respectively sedimented aesthetic *Gehalt* must be conceived of in radically contingent terms, and would in each case have to be determined concretely in an emphatic interpretation. It is *this* awareness of contingency that defines the constitution of a reflexive modernism in art. Where work, medium and reflection remain components of artistic com-munication that can be freely joined and are not short-circuited in communi-cative terms, art attains the necessary freedom to conceive the experiential image of a society in evolutionary flux.

Above all else, the end of the large-scale progressive differentiation of the art system holds one chance: to release the work of art and free the recipient from the art system. Artists and art lovers alike can distance themselves once more from the programs of observation created in the art system. This enables a liberation of the subject of aesthetic experience from the system-immanent logic of outdoing that has driven the art system forward in the last 150 years. It would definitely constitute a gain if the art lover did not, in order to experience and understand the most advanced contemporary art, first have to know which negation a work was employing to distance itself from other art.

The points of bifurcation in history are marked by an accumulation of philosophical questions. In its transition to a reflexive modernity, art philosophy too regains ground it had thought lost. Four questions would become important in this context:

Firstly, the theoretical model of aesthetic modernism developed here would need to be put into concrete art-historical terms. The project consists in indicating the respective steps of progressive differentiation in aesthetic modernism as evident in its canonic works, irrespective of genre. One would thus place several horizontal cuts throughout the history of aesthetic modernism, so that the epochal caesuras between classical modernism, avant-garde and post-modernism could become not only appreciable, but at once also perceptible in completely contrasting arts. The forms of poems, pictures, and pieces of music are certainly comparable at the level of this ideal-typical reconstruction.

Secondly, this theory of aesthetic modernism must synchronize and combine art history with social history, which has only been touched upon here. The sociological theory of reflexive modernization provides the corresponding frame of reference.

Thirdly, this theory of art requires not only a point of connection to social theory, but also to epistemology. As mentioned above, grand narratives are out of place in the self-descriptive horizon of post-modernism. One response to that would be: "Only the (ideal-typical) distinction between different, differently modern societies can enable an 'editing' of modernity."[35] If, then, the socio-theoretical prognoses on reflexive modernization are correct, one requires a completely different set of tools for conceptual orientation in order to gauge the risks of first modernity. What is required are therefore general models in order to set up future scenarios of autopoietic processes with their own histories, whether these are discourses, intimate relationships, functional systems, or societies. It is a very general concept to describe such self-organizational processes using the three-phase model employed here: the respective process defines its limits in a constitutional process, then realizes and develops the possibilities and degrees of freedom available in this free space, before finally moving to a phase of reflection in which, due to self-produced "side effects," it encounters internal contradictions, conflicts, and problems that either trigger a self-transformation or lead to the self-destruction of this historical entity.[36]

Fourthly, art philosophy is faced with the task of drawing the categorical conclusions from the increasingly apparent socio-structural rupture in art and

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35 Beck, *Das Zeitalter der Nebenfolgen und die Politisierung der Moderne* (see footnote 32), p. 65.

36 See Harry Lehmann, *Ästhetische Erfahrung. Ein deutscher Diskurs* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2006) (forthcoming), part 1, where this three-phase model for the reconstruction of discourses is developed.

society. The most important aesthetic categories that would have to be re-conceptualized in a reflexive modernism are the two central "eigenvalues of perception": the beautiful and the new.[37] The art of the Modern Age (*Neuzeit*) was "fine art"[38] and always took beauty as the highest value in art. The art of aesthetic modernism, on the other hand, adopted the new as its guiding idea, was "absolutely modern" in a material-aesthetic sense, and relegated beauty to a secondary value until it ultimately dispensed entirely with beauty as a positive value and, in the avant-garde, became a "no longer fine art."[39] One would suppose that after a *Gehalt*-aesthetic turn, art will rely less on the distinction between the beautiful and the new than on their union. The basic structure of any aesthetic experience lies in the tension between the beautiful and the new, and it is precisely in its enduring this polarity that art can most vividly uncover the aesthetic *Gehalt* of a world that is open to the future. In so far as the concept of the "new" formed the guiding idea of aesthetic modernism, however, and this highest value became manifest in its purest form in the avant-garde, the "avant-garde" itself becomes a key concept for a reflexive modernization of aesthetic modernism. It is therefore by posing the question of the "avant-garde today" that the art of the present questions itself most profoundly.

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37 See ibid., part 2, where the attempt is made to develop a basal concept of aesthetic experience from the tension between these complementary eigenvalues of perception.

38 Translator's note: the German equivalent of "fine art," *schöne Kunst*, literally means "beautiful art."

39 Helmut Lachenmann recognized a connection between the beautiful and the new like no other, in observing on the one hand that the avant-garde cannot dispense with its own concept of beauty on pain of downfall, and on the other hand in his defining beauty as the "refusal of habit"; see "Zum Problem des musikalisch Schönen heute," in Lachenmann, *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1996), pp.104-110. This sweeping "solution," however, which simply defines the radically new as beauty, does justice to neither the commonplace nor the traditional ideals of beauty, which have a far more stable perceptual basis than mere "habit."