

Contemporary Approaches to Aesthetic Inquiry: Absolute Demands and Limited Possibilities

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It is demonstrable that human minds fly to antinomic positions and then struggle unceasingly to solve those antinomies. This dramatic tension incidentally informs the entire human praxis, and not only the reflexive and theoretical dimensions. Perhaps the most basic antinomical pattern is that we are drawn to seek and elaborate a single order of affairs, true forever, while at the same time and contrarily we are tempted to dismiss every attempt at ultimate and simple solutions as doomed beforehand. If the unquestionable and settled-for-once-and-all patterning of phenomena is our propensity, then we assume an integrated order of being wherein everything has its established place, and the individual mind is considered subordinate to the given hierarchy of elements, whether this positioning is accepted as through free will or necessity. If no general solutions seem possible to us, then we see no ordering principles in the phenomena and no self-evident authority can be acknowledged. In this framework the human being, too, appears different and opposed to the rest of the world; human existence along with other modes of being becomes problematic. And all rigorous and all-embracing doctrines become suspect.

If the first propensity looks for some kind of absolute order as the ultimate value, the second finds nothing more obnoxious than fixed axiological principles. The former tendency takes as its most characteristic model monotheistic religion and any kind of system building. The latter propensity appears most lucidly in the anarchist interpretation of the revolutionary attitude and its practical notion that life basically consists of the coming into being and the dissolution of patterns which do

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not repeat. For instance, consider in philosophy the classifying and unificational turn of mind contrasted with the improvisational, the critical, or skeptical mode of reflection. Or, in science, those practitioners who posit permanence and orderliness while others are primarily oriented toward an innovation and complication of what has before been assumed. Or, in art, those who try to establish strict rules, and others who are oriented toward the unruly expressions of individuality.

Please notice that I have instanced attitudes of submission, of quasi-religious subordination, even in domains that are basically creative. We can, furthermore, denote philosophies, and the methods that are derived from them, which lean to absolutist solutions; and even scientific methodologies which, particularly in periods of great public awe for scientific accomplishments, tend to become absolutized and to draw believers from far outside the laboratory or classroom by their explanatory or functional powers. Thus, philosophies can be turned into statements and conclusions inflected with a para-religious character; and scientific theories may be imbued with the authority of philosophical statements on the whole of reality. In such cases the nostalgia for a key to all the questions posed by the world, a *mathesis universalis*, is all too evident. When philosophical and scientific conceptions—the phenomenological, the hermeneutic, the Marxist, or existentialist, among others—are turned upon art, they may likewise exhibit this disposition, this claim to be the best and indeed only method with regard to all questions posed in the artistic (or aesthetic) field. And the more systematically and determinedly some kind of inquiry and approach is pressed, the more likely, on the whole, is a para-religious certainty to appear. If the presumptuous all-or-nothing claim is urged, each of these philosophical doctrines loses the chance to tolerate the meaningfulness of any other research strategy. The scientifically based methodologies utilized within the framework of philosophical foundations may also prove overreaching, especially when popular opinion endows them with exaggerated authority, as when a problem seems to call for eternal laws and exclusive truth. In this way the natural sciences, mathematics, or technology espouse a universal application they do not inherently possess. Similarly the ideological element of any praxis to which Marxism attributes a primary significance can become, instead of a means to knowledge, an

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obstacle to knowledge; thus the ideological element can be transformed into sheer instrumental propaganda if treated as an obsessive priority.

The generalizing methods of philosophies achieve a popularity for a period of time, which may be extended or brief, during which their proponents and even their opponents may regard them as the cognitive presuppositions for the epoch. The same effect is achieved by the more exact scientific methodologies as they find fame outside the scientific circle and are treated by some as omnipotent discoveries with powers to heal all other disciplines which may be ailing. The limping disciplines, generally classified among the humanities and discerned to be in trouble since the nineteenth century, are understandably envious of the seemingly invincible, favored scientific children of our time. For our era tends to worship quantifiable data and the principles and instruments for measuring and conceptualizing it. Thus semiotics and information theory, in hopes of acquiring the status of the sciences, have led aesthetic inquiry (to mention only one field) toward the currently popular scientism; but the limited cognitive scope of this methodology has not been recognized. Sociology of knowledge, however, forewarns us of the winds of fashion in cognitive paradigms. Where the inherent explanatory scope of a doctrine, system, or method is less than is believed according to the prevailing sociological patterns, a correction will eventually set in. And an important factor in overcoming the para-religious claims will be, precisely, the fundamental antinomical tendency of the human mind.

The philosophical and scientific schools which search for *mathesis universalis* generally also produce, often in response to outside criticism, more tempered judgments. These often point in the direction of future schism within the doctrine or acute controversy among the adherents of the method in question. The temperate or skeptical break with the para-religiosity; the orthodox hold to their attitude.

As we consider the waxing and waning status of the various philosophies and their methods, and the often more shortlived popularity of various scientific research methodologies raised to the broader cognitive sphere, two questions arise. Beyond the transient popularity of the trends, what claim to permanence can they make? And second, shall such claims be honored as equally valid; is each permanent method and research approach similarly penetrative; does each encompass a similar range of matter with equal precision?

These questions about the pertinacity of method bear on art as on any other domain of reality. I shall next attempt to answer the questions with reference to some central philosophical and exact scientific trends of today. When that consideration has been completed, I shall inquire into a subsequent problem, whether any of the methods utilized today has an appropriately special role in view of the rapid, far-reaching changes that

art recently has undergone and continues to undergo. This is a question somewhat different from observing which methods have in our time come into being. There is no need to doubt that, because semiotic and cybernetic methods of research have emerged recently and gained widespread support, they correspond to compelling possibilities and needs of our time. But does their timeliness annul the arguments for other methods, and in particular for general philosophical methods? Indeed do not these newest research methodologies apply only to selected aesthetic problems, though they may prove most fertile in their given dimension?

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When a method of inquiry is *philosophical*—when it is integrated with a coherent system or viewpoint, which need not be a closed system, and is based on definite ontological and/or anthropological premises—then that method of inquiry should be applicable to all phenomena, and we may speak of its characteristic approach. It has a self-confirming nature. If the assumptions are accepted, the research statements and methods must be valid. The broad applicability of the method demonstrated with apt exemplifications is taken as proof of the premises in reality. Such acceptance is as necessary for philosophically based inquiries into art and aesthetic phenomena as it is in other fields. Indeed the persuasive coursing of the aesthetic field in confirmation of premises and research strategies only enhances the quasi-religious, universalizing status of trends. Each philosophy, each method associated with the philosophy, suggests if it does not state that the true character of art may be penetrated, if not solely then primarily, by the characteristic cognitive, clarifying, and interpretive procedures of that philosophy. These, then, constitute the problems I am exploring.

The *hermeneutic* premises and method may be taken first. Suppose I say that every text, whether written or oral (and the notion of text may be extended to iconic matter, indeed to every objectified product of the human spirit), holds a concealed meaning which may be discovered by an effort of empathy and may be revealed by exegetic interpretation. Suppose I say further that the intellectual efforts of the interpreter-expert are potentially adequate to communicate such values to the layperson. I shall then have claimed that all works of art will be pertinent to the hermeneutic method of inquiry. Each is regarded as expressive of a reality of spirit which may be deciphered and explained to the general public by the mediating philosopher, although the spirit objectified by the artist and bearing on a given historical context is quite particular and

conveyed within a distinct tradition of art. Hermeneutics can be practiced in diverse fashions—it has curates of discipline who avow an exegesis before the authority of the text which virtually precludes interpretation, and it has advocates of virtual irreverence whose creativity of interpretation tends to push exegesis to the side. Hermeneutics may take up Holy Scriptures. It may turn to lay texts. It may operate on behalf of a church institution. It may ignore church writings entirely. It may peruse the spirit of the times, and thus obliquely the history of culture. Or it may disregard temporality and refer to permanent structures of spirit more deeply founded than the historical. Taking any of these standpoints, the hermeneutist may regard the work of art as a religious ritual, a philosophical vehicle, or a convention. And though hermeneutics started as a key to the authority of the past, it has today come to study even the present. Its procedures indeed suggest, in view of their assumptions, no reason why hermeneutists should not update the approach to apply it to modernist, obscure texts which call for an enlightening procedure.

In contrast, *phenomenology* assumes a cognitive subject matter consisting of intentional entities. To the primary entities are added secondary ones which, taken altogether, comprise compound structures having complex relationships. It is assumed that these entities are available to intellectual insight, and one may determine what is objective in the entity and what is interjected by the observer during the prereflective and the strictly cognitive actions. These premises make it possible to describe how the values are constituted, what is their content and their form, the procedure in going from the grasp of them in direct apprehension to the evaluative judgment, and so on. The writings of Ingarden, Hartmann, and Mikel Dufrenne in this way direct us to certain conclusions for the aesthetic domain, providing an ontology, a basic distinction between the work of art and aesthetic object, a description of the multilayered structures of the latter, specific constitutive traits of the aesthetic experience, procedures for recognizing the work of art and the aesthetic object, and last an approach to aesthetic value and the assessment of that value. Merely to compile this listing of the topics specified by phenomenology is enough, however, to demonstrate that, just as with hermeneutics, the inquiry into art crucially depends on the method and the related philosophy that are adopted. The cluster of arguments covers an entire aesthetic reality. If you “ticket” yourself to travel through a particular terrain, and you choose one transportation company rather than another, you will get the kind of journey you have opted for. This is no surprise and indeed every ambitious and amply constructed philosophy wants no less. The point is that each philosophical ticketing office regards its itinerary and equipment to be superior, and often exclusively so.

Surely this is as much the assumption of the *existentialist* and the

Marxist strategies as of those described above. For if class struggle is the true and even sole key to the history of culture, how can the artist's act and its product, the work of art, or the reception of this product be considered apart from class ideology and class struggle? When we have accepted that social reality determines the cognitive perimeters of an epoch, we shall have to accept the contention that works of art are specific historical documents genetically, structurally, and functionally. In this dimension we shall regard the realist's transmutation of the world into art as a supreme achievement. If, however, the existentialist tells us that man builds his social existence in a void which always intimates his extinction, that he is bracketed between a past which defies retention and a future which must continually be remade by heroic assertion, that a work of art may at best be a record of that assertion—a testimony of the impulse to transcend annihilation or to gain an authenticity of self against the arbitrary facticity of a human condition which nowhere lends us comfort—we must, given the premises, assent.

The problem is not that each philosophical doctrine has its own ontology or anthropology and its methods of investigation. The problem is rather that each philosophical school takes its justification from specific and relatively distinct observations and generalizations based on a quite significant sampling of reality. Nonetheless, enough "osmotic exchange" takes place between even the most sealed of these systems of thought to insure a more or less ongoing adjustment among the schools. The imperious claims which each may make occur within a relatively lubricious context, assuring a certain timely coordination among the distribution of the claims.

Thus far we can establish that each of the cited philosophical methods penetrates in depth a significant aspect of aesthetic phenomena and, furthermore, that this penetration occurs not despite but precisely because of the fact that the particular ontology, epistemology, or anthropology requires the student to advance specific questions and not other questions. The investigators of the several schools deal with only definite and focused problems. This is also just what happens when they deal with general philosophical problems. Their hoped-for extension to encompass all of reality must be greeted with skepticism and tolerance. We may be grateful, however, for their intentionality with regard to questions they have ascertained to be significant. They may conceptualize known aspects of subject matter in new ways; or they may discover aspects that were substantially neglected or unknown.

This latter aspect merits our closest attention. It is this side of methodological particularity which is most likely to preserve the approach past its peak of popularity and authority and to define its genuine contributions. *Hermeneutics*, for example: what preserves it for the future of systematic inquiry? *Hermeneutics* stresses the difficulty in understanding the products of a human spirit that differs from our own.

Indirectly, it brings out the interdependence between the structure of a given work of art and the frequently alien traits of the chief motifs of human spirit in a distant era. The problem of dominant spiritual structures in history does not seem of much interest to me in its hermeneutic theorization, inasmuch as the treatment stems from Hegel and classical German philosophy. Moreover, the idea of *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte* [art history and the history of ideas] has been developed and modified by Marxists on the one hand and by the iconological approach on the other. What keeps the hermeneutic approach relevant? The problem of understanding works of art through the act of empathy has not been solved to this day. The strategy still seems necessary; no efforts to reduce inquiry procedures to sheer explanatory clarification have produced positive results. Hermeneutics has accordingly persisted. It has become associated with the trend of the humanities founded on the *Verstehen* approach in research, and despite sharp attacks from many sides it has endured.

To understand a work of art in this hermeneutic-*Verstehen* sense is, ultimately, to grasp its meaning at a level behind the presumed or explicit intentions of the author or the explicit (or implicit) logic of the available work. This approach is most often practiced on older works of art, thereby creating a distinctive antinomy for the student. For the procedures of empathy must strive to reconstruct as nearly as possible the distant spiritual structure beneath the givens of the work; and yet the act of understanding practiced by the student cannot become a pure reconstruction process, for it is apparent that *homo additus est homini*. For this reason a modern hermeneutics, say that of Gadamer or Ricoeur, is critical of the original conceptions associated with Dilthey. Seeking other ways, modern hermeneutics denies that the expert hermeneutist may be credited with having a congeniality for the intentions of the studied texts or an empathy with the author's intentions and the circumstances enveloping the making of the work. Rather, say the modern hermeneutists, one can simply interpret the record and the "opening onto the world" which a text implies. A "concurrence of horizons" can be sought between the text and its subsequent reader. We must recognize that a change is thereby injected into the hermeneutic interpretation; it is allowed a process of clarification in addition to the act of empathy. Does this get rid of the distinctive antinomy we noted between the requirement of adequate reconstruction and the impossibility of that demand? Surely not. If the text is exclusively the expression of a delimited spiritual world, it should be grasped on that premise. But if it is approached as a set of "open" meanings without particular limitations, there will occur inevitable disparities between the original understanding preserved by the text, however ambiguously, and later understandings which have very different premises.

What preserves *phenomenology* for our time and later? Phenomenol-

ogy discloses the structure of our cognitive acts with regard to artistic (and aesthetic) objects. Analyzing our cognitive procedures, it describes the complex structures of the precise objects which engage the intentionality constituting the human consciousness. The phenomenological procedure scrutinizes everything that has been taken for granted in the everyday or scientifically developed discourse as a subject matter *out* of the range of investigation—be it in approaching social background, or psychological dimension, or hypothetical construct (e.g., the art object considered as an imitation of reality), or whatever—and regards that subject matter as a complex of phenomena apart from any preconceived meanings which may adhere customarily to those given structures. Husserl, as is well known, speaks of *epoché*, that is, extricating the cognized object from the structures that conventionally convey it. Phenomenology then probes the ontological-material, ontological-formal, and axiological aspects of the objects under study. It “gleans insights” from them. In other words, it intuitively seeks the phenomenal objectification of our cognitive acts directed toward art objects. This eidetic method of inquiry (as it is called) in effect defies definition. It pursues a direct, unmediated apprehension of the objective world in all its aspects, strata, conditionality, time and space determinants. Because it insists on getting down to objectification, it discovers unnoticed traits, and relationships among traits, and new contexts which supply the concrete, the freshly apprehended product of consciousness. Phenomenological analysis of this kind requires long philosophical practice and training; its achievements are the noblesse oblige of this discipline and are, I believe, best seen in the skillful and exemplary descriptions by Roman Ingarden. Less central to the accomplishment of phenomenologists is the subtle semantic analysis of employed terms or of the reception of works of art in the sociocultural long view. Other philosophical approaches share this ground (e.g., the linguistic-analytical method, the sociological method, and Marxist aesthetics) and appear to develop more authority on this ground than does phenomenology.

Existentialism proves itself by intensively dwelling on the creative act and created artefact as a conquest of human spirit over brute existence or nothingness. Existentialism reminds us that we live in a universe lacking any meaning, where every creative effort creates more human space, where every act of creative freedom is an ephemeral but challenging affirmation of the species in the face of its bare conditionality. This philosophy particularly marks the creative decision as a fundamental choice, either a lapse into passivity and conformity to sheer existence or an heroic rebellion constituting a meaningful project against the existential void. Hermeneutics deals primarily with creative personality within the boundaries of suprapersonal expression of a given spirit; existentialism differs by stressing the ontological implications for every one of us. We are brought before the human value-imprinted *Dasein* which lives

against the *Sein* of the universal and wholly neutral being. Existentialism presents the artist and other creative individuals as most fully expressing this fundamental status: the creative person through an heroic project can most ardently practice freedom in a permanent struggle with the bare condition of being.

Marxism? Its preservation depends upon its reflection on all possible interchanges between art and history: it particularly concerns itself with genetic and functional interchanges between the art structure and its sociohistorical contexts. The formation of the art structure is considered; the influence of the art phenomena on historical contexts is investigated. This focus results in particular emphasis on ideology and ideological conflicts, on class structures and the specific interfaces of these with cultural phenomena and cultural politics. Nonetheless, the ultimate concern of this philosophical method is not with art objects as documentations of historical processes but with the *status* of art—the possible invariants of art from its origins until today, and its perhaps pending demise, as possibly the most cheering evidence of the human journey toward freedom. Because art in the Marxist specification functions most outstandingly as a realm of freedom within history, I consider its problems from this methodological perspective to be chiefly two: first, the alienation which continually encroaches on the expression and enjoyment of aesthetic values (with a special stress on the particular kind of alienation of the political revolutionary artist who gives up his own specific realm of values to embrace more immediately communicative kinds of struggle against alienating forces beyond the world of art; and second, the recurrent impulses toward disalienation, together with art itself, as the ideal for historical disalienation.

Looking back over these methods of aesthetic inquiry derived from philosophies, we can see that what they have contributed that is centrally their own has eventually been absorbed into the broad intellectual process that has continued from the nineteenth century until the present. The osmotic contacts have not, however, diminished the fact that the key emphases have been developed and refined within the philosophical circles that encouraged them. Moreover, only within these frameworks of thought do these strategies make maximum contributions. It is equally clear that the differing philosophical systems and their methods are not closed to one another. They do advance “all or nothing” ambitions; they seldom cease proclaiming their superiorities as systems, and perhaps they refuse any validity to differing systems. But the doctrines do have points of contact and they may enter into polemics with one another and even at times seek to assimilate the contributions of another school. Assimilation of one philosophy’s method by another method is an ill-fated idea; the historians have examined enough instances to know this well. No better proof is needed to confirm, as I have argued, that the integrity of each philosophy (whether systematic or “open”) and of its

method is the greatest asset of that philosophy; an encouragement of eclecticism, on the the other hand, must be the ruin of a philosophy's contribution.

No such considerations of integrity need inhibit the linking of a philosophical method to a methodology provided by exact science. Eclecticism is not necessarily the outcome. Philosophical approaches should gladly compete to make the application of their various premises and conclusions attractive and fruitful to scientific strategies. And in turn, the worth of differing philosophies will in part be signaled by their capacity to make use of exact sciences which will amplify their normal inquiries and help to verify their assumptions. The philosophic stratagems tend to become trivialized as they gain popularity; eventually the philosophy itself becomes diluted, and its acclaim (if not altogether its claims) fades. However, this turn of events can lead in turn to a positive revision of the tenets of the philosophy—and never more so than when some who have remained faithful exponents of the doctrine, reaching back to its still vital fundamentals, again become creative in their strategy and employ current researches to broaden and correct the approach as a whole.

This process has occurred notably with Marxism. Central to Marxist method has been the study of the class equivalent (as Plekhanov put it) in works of art; another key tenet has been the alienated status of art. These concerns could, however, become thunderous clichés, and methodologists have become convinced that Marxist philosophy must offer more developed explanations and analysis of unclarified and imprecise categories, among them ideology and alienation. In this endeavor scientific procedures might be called in, especially from disciplines close to this philosophical approach, for example, history, sociology, psychosociology, and anthropology. With these instruments, unsettled questions could be pushed further—for example, determination of cases where the ideological component of the creative or the receptive processes is a positive contribution to the art structure and on the other hand where it is distracting; or the distinction between cases where alienation is endemic and affects art indifferently with all other social phenomena, and cases of strict alienation of art alone, which might prove a distinctive strand of characteristics of alienation.

In sum, the work of the Marxist art theoretician is not to attempt maximum extension of the approach through incorporating the methods of other doctrines; rather it is to deepen and authenticate its own assumptions by reflection on its own past methods and use of new scientific resources. If these remarks apply to the Marxist method, they are equally relevant to the other philosophical schools I have touched upon. And a conclusion to be drawn is that no single philosophical school will explain and solve all aspects of aesthetic reality. Each of the methods treated above has deserved its fame because it has an integrated

methodology and has brought its competence to bear on the appropriate aspects of reality. Fame likewise derives from the particular intellectual potential of a given doctrine. It has been remarked that a doctrine is to be defined by the space it leaves vacant as much as by the space it occupies (Althusser has developed this theory in his interpretive idea of *les absences*). Incidentally, the Marxist thesis that only so much may be achieved by even the boldest thought the enveloping sociohistorical context will allow must be applied with equal force to Marxism itself.

Without the possibility of an all-embracing, unified analytic structure, the aesthetic domain, then, must be conceived from the viewpoint of practitioners of the various methods and assumed as a multifaceted matter for study. If we look more closely, from the meta-aesthetic standpoint, at the particular character of the aesthetic domain, we can best grasp the question of this subject matter of inquiry where we see it within the larger sociocultural processes, in its character as well as in its range, and not only within the European terrain and tradition. This subject matter, which we can provisionally term the "aesthetic reality," was shaped in history and was somewhat variously described to fit the anticipations of various world views, doctrines, or general or exact methods; however, the modifications do not result in a situation where each concerned party holds a totally different conception of subject matter excluding common characteristics. At most, a limited selection is made from a widely accepted range of traits. Certain elements are given emphasis, or a special meaning is extended to the range of the traits. But the distinguishing aesthetic boundaries are more or less agreed upon. The peculiarity of the integral structure of any work of art basically affirms the "aesthetic reality," and the methods applied to this concrete object of examination have been productive in enriching our understanding of the content and function of artistic structures.

That is my view; some may not agree. Objectors will say that each philosophy and philosophically grounded method describes the object of aesthetic inquiry with sharp differences and that even where the terms of description may be identical, the reference intended by the different schools may often be to incommensurable entities, categories, and conceptions. Who can ignore the implications of this criticism? It brings us before the irreducible problem of our entire inquiry. One cannot apply an unconditionally descriptive, value-free approach to the topic of aesthetic inquiry or to any topic, not even when the aim of the procedure is a general methodological agreement. And yet we do want to arrive at a common structure of reference, held together and checked by a sphere of aesthetic reality to which the differing methodological approaches may extend recognition and trust. Quite possibly the tension and contradictions of having to affirm the two premises of procedures cannot be reconciled. Again we are faced with the competitiveness of the various philosophies of method; they cannot all be equal, and some do seem

more adequate. The Marxist assumptions I prefer, for example, for their competence in dealing with the coherence and continuity of sociohistorical data, as well as with the history of aesthetic thought, and for characterizing a pattern from that data. Because of such benefits we will choose a philosophical vantage point which competes with others. And nowhere does the Marxist advantage become more clear than when we consider the aesthetic domain as a subject matter to some degree common to historically diversified aesthetic standpoints. The reason is clear: when we have historical perspective, we avoid an arbitrary division of aesthetic reality between what we, and perhaps we alone, deem proper to it (*aesthetica Dei*) and what we would turn out (*aesthetica diaboli*). Other points of view than our own must be admitted, at least at a certain juncture, when the requirements of the integrity of our premises assert a need for decisions and development of the argument.

Perhaps it is every philosophy's wish to assert a world view consonant with its integral research interests and with criteria pertinent to the thinker's strategy and the general theoretical paradigms of the era. How can one prove, to perhaps only temporary opponents, that one's intellectual commitments, having both personal and epochal bases, are cognitively preferable? One can prove it by showing how the results of relevant, exact science studies generally verify one's premises. One can also prove it by drawing attention to the fertility and the productivity of the questions one asks. Do one's questions start inquiries in new fields or dimensions of procedure or subject matter which had been ignored? Finally, one can prove the superiority of methodology on grounds of the significance for culture and civilization of issues highlighted by the approach.

For each of the above reasons Marxist philosophy seems to show a demonstrable advantage. (I am assuming, of course, a practice of the philosophy which is in touch with its fundamental perceptions and conceptual strategies, and rejects temptations of hagiography and the lure to do publicity work for any funding or controlling agency. These are strictures one would want to address to any philosophical viewpoint.) Moreover, beyond the benefits cited, it is the orientation of Marxism more than other philosophies cited here which forces on the scholar the need to choose his procedures lucidly in accordance with one rather than another of the strategies in his own heritage; in other words, he must refine more precisely his sense of his work in relation to his own school and, thus again, to general methodological issues.

To illustrate. Within the Marxist heritage we know there is an oft-repeated claim to a "scientific philosophy," a formulation with an internal tension, a potential for divergency which is greater than most other orientations possess in their basic formulations. (Phenomenology considered as exact *Wissenschaft* is not making the same claim; it is a pure knowledge which ignores scientific constructions in its discernment of

artificial, conventional entities.) As a scholar in this tradition I find I must state my position clearly in relation to the "scientific philosophy" claim. This claim seems to obscure far more than it illuminates what is really distinctive in Marxist methodology, whether one understands by "scientific" the mechanical sociologizing of its earlier tradition (what we term scientism), or one understands the structuralist claims to science of Althusser and his students. The sociologizing at least points to some scientific methods of research which can strengthen or verify the findings of the philosophical-historical strategy by which I guide myself; but the Althusserian structuralist Marxism is in my view a doomed eclectic mixture of methodological ideas from Lévi-Strauss and Lacan with a selected and slanted group of Marxist categories. Rejecting as I do the confusion of science's methodologies with basic philosophical premises, I emphasized in my foregoing remarks the problems germane to the integral Marxist approach, that is, the human journey to freedom, the related questions of alienation and the social struggle to overcome it (disalienation), the aesthetic invariants compared with works of art as documents of their era, and the invariable tension in works of art viewed as simultaneously diachronic and synchronic phenomena. Let me emphasize that these areas of aesthetic reality, without Marxism, would remain either unilluminated or poorly developed by other approaches.

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I have described the priority role of philosophy in establishing methods of inquiry. Now I will consider scientific methodologies. They are every bit as given to excessive claims of exclusivity and scope. The nature of a competent scientific methodology is no different, that is, it casts new light on an object of study; it establishes unexpected connections between entities that apparently had no connections. In this approach even more than in philosophically based inquiries, one must be certain that an authentic aesthetic reality is assessed because exact methods of science are invented to apply to specific phenomena far beyond the realm of art; there is no guarantee in the methodology that aesthetic phenomena are being studied. Even the scientific methods especially employed for aesthetic research by neighboring disciplines (the humanities) are subject to this stricture. Thus the claims of exact sciences to competence in aesthetic questions must be unusually well scrutinized.

Notorious are the claims of *psychoanalysis*, through its categories of repression and regression, the unconscious, overdetermination, sublimation, and so on, to exhaust the significant aspects of creative process and artistic semantics. I am not thinking of vulgarizers of Freud, such as Eckart von Sydow, who mechanically transferred Freud's three stages of sexual development (autoeroticism, anality, genitality) to the realm of

visual arts to explain their origin and evolution. Rather I think of serious scholars like Charles Baudouin whose *Psychoanalyse de l'art* was something of a textbook from its publication in 1929 up until the Second World War. In Baudouin's terms, the artist is a neurotic who seeks gratification in the creative process where he acts out the pleasure principle in the domain of fantasy; he thus provides a kind of narcotic to himself and the audience alike. The work of art, moreover, projects the neurotic complexes specified by Freud. The content of art is freighted with hidden sexual motifs, thereby establishing a strong resemblance to daydreaming. Both artistic activity and the reception of art are thus powered by the sublimation of libidinal energy. In civilization the id is forever barely under control and sometimes breaks out of the ego's domination—the tension projected and monitored by the work of art is a substitute for the actual, perturbing experience.

I should add that the "Freudian" account of art is not to be confused with the views of Freud himself. Undoubtedly each of the statements supplied above could also be found in his writings, but for Freud there is more to art. In his study of da Vinci he warned colleagues and students against trying to locate the basis of works of art in psychoanalytic theory. He noted that the hypothesis of da Vinci's homosexuality is irrelevant to the artist's talent or the form of his paintings, and the sexual syndrome would contribute nothing to the understanding of artistic value. These qualifications must be borne in mind. We can, for example, apply them to a classic use of the Freudian methodology, Ernest Jones' analysis of *Hamlet*.

Jones ascribes an Oedipus complex—which he makes the most important aspect of the play—to the hero of the tragedy and likewise to its author on the basis of the theme's recurrence in Shakespeare's work. In comparison, Freud understood that one cannot identify an artist as a neurotic, for an artist, by the effort of his imagination and the objectifying nature of his product, makes the return to reality. Moreover, the artistic act or aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to catharsis simply in the expression of what has been repressed, for the therapeutic effect of artistic catharsis is much broader. We should also recall Freud's second most important treatise on art, his study of wit and the unconscious; here he declares that a game charged with psychic energy and pursued for its own sake can function homeopathically, regardless of substitute gratifications that may be entailed. This similarly was the gist of his important 1920 essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Both Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse pointed to this Freudian classic in drawing some conclusions for art that earlier studies invoking Freud had ignored. I have no wish to introduce Brown and Marcuse here as faithful disciples of Freud, for their original adaptations lead us far afield from the original theses. But the works of certain others can be serviceable in exploring the basic psychoanalytic methodology.

In his *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* of 1953 Ernst Kris viewed Freudianism as an "open system" and rejected the school's frequent reductive treatment of art objects. Kris would not simply regard the work as a projection of the artist's psychobiography, as a case of pathology. He concerned himself particularly with the characteristics of the creative process. Here he took as his guiding text Freud's remarks in the essay on Dostoevsky and the *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* which stressed the bisexuality of the artist and the volatile character of the material suppressed in his psyche. Kris developed a theory of specific relationships of the id and ego, and of primary and secondary psychic processes, in the economy of the artistic creation. Sublimation occurs as only a transformation of the energy, not as a neutralization of the libido, whose volatility continues under the marginal control of the ego. In this presentation the pleasure principle and the reality principle do not exclude one another but are intricately balanced in the created art. The ego has relaxed (regressed), yet its purposive function is present as ever in its introduction of a deliberate stimulus to imaginative activity. Indeed, in dreams the sexual clues would be veiled, offered almost as an aside, and the whole charged with overdetermined meanings; in the work of art sexual clues can deliberately be made central and their symbolic character manifested in a complex ambiguous structure of form and content. In art, equivocal expression no longer implies concealment or a vagueness; it represents the evocation of many possible meanings in the framework of an artistic structure, an integrative ambiguity, carrying potentially a symbolic endowment which can reach and release the primitive energy of the recipient's id.

Another work, Anton Ehrenzweig's *The Hidden Order of Art* of 1967, also tried to show that the creative process structures libidinal energy into the work. He also argued that thought in the work was anchored in the unconscious. Ehrenzweig found this mediation of thought to the work to be a function of the ego, which he described as having two possible operations: a differentiating function, which deploys energy on a discursive plane; and a disintegrative function (dedifferentiation), which breaks down the images that have been provided to the ego's attention. This latter operation of the ego moves the artist into primitive and undifferentiated psychic energy; from this resource the multilayered and homogenous creation can be fashioned. The creative process, Ehrenzweig argues, includes both functions: the unconscious transformation of material accepted and proposed by the ego (poemagogic fantasies), and a structuring of the volatile undifferentiated matrix. For this reason the structure of works of art is coherent and controlled, yet complex and ambiguous; and this is true even in geometric art or in expressionistic abstraction.

Whether these methodologies are correct or incorrect is not of particular concern to me here. (It should be noted that Ehrenzweig's

book evoked very sharp polemics.) What I wish to point out are the efforts of Ehrenzweig and Kris to develop research methods which take full advantage of psychoanalytic methodology and which yet take adequate account of uniquely aesthetic phenomena. Whenever we encounter scientific approaches which lay claim to similar productivity when applied to matters as diverse as are religion, morality and art, individual and institutional behavior, and signs or objects, we must be cautious. We must require proof that the distinctive qualities of the various subject matters are fully acknowledged and explored. We cannot condone a mechanical application of principles of relevance learned and applied elsewhere; we cannot assume that psychoanalysis (or any other method) will be equally relevant in the same ways to every subject matter. The task for these methodologies is complicated by the fact that no single, precise definition of aesthetic reality seems available to their use. The so-called formalist method hoped to provide it, the assumption being that form is the subsuming constituent of art. However, critical inquiry has demonstrated many times that, first, form is not the sole constitutive element of art, and second, the distinctive aesthetic subject matter cannot be grasped apart from its context, which includes the approaches being brought to it. The distinctiveness of the art object must be recognized then from many sides, by analyzing the ways of being and structures of works of art, by placing this special reality among its diachronic and synchronic sociocultural structures, and by studying the traits which evoke our processes of empathy, of understanding, and so forth.

Let us again take up psychoanalytic methodology and the arguments of Kris. Kris accepted some important nonpsychoanalytic thinking in his theses on the regulated spontaneity of the creation and reception processes and on ambiguity as the distinctive trait of art objects. At the same time he used psychoanalytic theory to enrich the significance of traits taken from aesthetic tradition. The writings of Edward Bullough served Kris in conceptualizing the aesthetic attitude, and William Empson helped him develop the notion of ambiguity. Transposing these ideas into the psychoanalytic context of inquiry, Kris revealed unexpected aspects. It became fruitful and relevant to understand and interpret art by its peculiar characteristics: libidinal energy is projected into dream structures, the id is in dialectical conflict with the ego, and meanings are condensed and displaced. We may say in summary that the distinctive traits of art should be sought out by synthesizing the research method, which may be new, with the characterizations of the subject matter developed over the centuries by diverse approaches. This ensures both that the inherent characteristics of the subject matter will not be scanted and that the method will always be open to expanded understandings.

Information theory gives us another approach to the determination of how exact sciences can complement philosophical methods which investigate art. Cybernetic aesthetics is at a complete remove from psychoanalytic methodology. Max Bense and Abraham Moles are its founders; I shall refer not to Bense's *Aesthetica* but to his later *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Aesthetik* (1969) which incorporates suggestions and criticisms provided by Bense's students Siegfried Maser, Rul Gunzenhäuser, and Frank.

Bense and Moles are of one mind on the premise that the binary procedure which describes any process of information by the pairing of just two choices (0 and 1) is a strategy which can carry over into the domain of aesthetics. The assumption is that the character of the information is not essentially dissimilar from that available in other realms where cybernetic techniques are useful. The messages provided by art, in other words, can be processed as information when broken down into "bits" for binary requirements. The amplitude of this information is increased by its degree of equiprobability in its initial state, a law incidentally echoing the language of thermodynamics which finds that as entropy increases, the certitude of what may occur decreases. The repertory claimed by a given information channel is clearly measurable, and while the message may be accompanied by "noise," it is not significant. Thus on these findings Bense argues that aesthetics' study of signs (his macroaesthetics) should be supported by the study of discrete and quantifiable elements (his microaesthetics). Such select elementary information, which on the micro level is statistical, yields more complex information which is structural and semantic. Why? Because as Bense further argues each aesthetic state possesses a high degree of indeterminacy, in contrast to macrophysical states which are subject to the law of causality. It is here, in the state of entropy, that the creative element is present. Bense sees a total analogy between the statistical information which the structure of the material "bits" conveys about an aesthetic object and the artistic creative act which undermines the order of meaning inherent in earlier established codes. Bense relies on the formula for artistic measure provided by Birkhoff ($M = o/c$) and modified by Maser and Gunzenhäuser ($M = R/H$) to argue that the relationship of statistical information (H) to subjective redundancy (R) can explain the relationship of the innovation or originality to the order provided by canons of style. Bense sees that the question of unexpected meanings, or of regular and irregular structures, already carries us over into the semiotic macroaesthetics, but he argues that the problem of how the semantic message (Superisation) or configuration is formed can only be investigated with reference to the microaesthetic level. He appears to suggest that meanings—for example, of the word "sky"—cannot be grasped without investigation of the bits s, k, y ; or that the meaning of a

painted hand with forefinger extended could not be grasped without breaking it down into the irreducible elements of its shapes, colors, volumes, spatial localization, and so on.

The criticisms of Bense and his students have come from many sides. I may just mention Pfeiffer's *Kunst und Kommunikation; Grundlegung einer kybernetischen Aesthetik* of 1972. Pfeiffer notes how Bense alternates between a reductionist approach, which would locate all novelty, unpredictableness, and creativity at the level of statistical information, and a significant effort to distinguish micro- from macroaesthetics. This serious effort has to acknowledge *zufällige Mitrealität*, the tension which results between the message that embodies an established code and the one that evades that code. In respect to microaesthetics Pfeiffer tellingly charges Bense with an equivocal application of the concept of entropy. Bense's use of the concept sometimes refers to the model of statistical mechanics, where it indicates the opposite of an increased probability in the structure; and sometimes it refers to the model of thermodynamics, where it especially implies the disturbance of order and harmony. Thus, without distinguishing clearly, Bense applies the idea of redundancy, the opposite pole to entropy, to either the organized structure or an excess of information. Moreover, Pfeiffer expresses doubt regarding a universal application of microaesthetics. Although he believes that microaesthetics can provide only limited insight into the creative process, he does speculate to some effect that computer science can provide an implied "cybernetic aesthetics" founded on aleatoric results which approximates creative production; but this, as I say, gives scant credence to the greater claims of Bense and his school.

The criticisms of information theory are enhanced when combined with those by Umberto Eco, especially in his chapter on "Openness, Information, Communication" in the revised 1968 version of *The Open Work of Art*. Eco emphasizes that breaking a linguistic convention, that is, transcending the code of a particular poetic or musical message, is something other than merely a statistical excess of information. It is a qualitative change (reorganizing the meanings) not merely an increase of signals. Statistical increase involves entropic structure, but qualitative change implies definite ordering, or at least a conscious organization of disorder. Only figuratively can we term cybernetics' proliferation of information a creative act, Eco says; the number of bits that may be added is unlimited, but authentic creativity has originality. Eco helps us distinguish between semiotic and statistical planes far more lucidly and profoundly than does Bense, yet Eco surprisingly clings to metaphorical justification for procedures of information theory and declares despite his own arguments that the micro and macro spheres are separate both in range and in kind, that an application of mathematical-statistical measurements to aesthetic subject matter will provide excellent results. The

conclusion simply does not follow from his convincing argumentation, which indicates otherwise.

Bense, Moles, and other authorities fail to prove that micro-aesthetic research has any bearing on the ways a code is altered by a concrete message (*parole*), or how artists apply a freedom of choice to alter that code, or how indeterminacy functions in a work of art, or the nature of the satisfaction accompanying a respondent's surprise on finding a work which departs from known codes. Of no more demonstrable help is microaesthetics in dealing with diachronic questions, even in the structuralist sense; to tackle the microaesthetic level is to rest upon "the chains of Markov," the probability that earlier links will determine later ones. If Eco is able to deal effectively with the supraphysical phenomena, it is because he applies semiotic theory rather than methods of information theory.

It appears that cybernetic methodology fails as a panacea of science for illuminating the domain of aesthetic phenomena. Indeed it never enters that domain. We must still pause, however, to consider whether some avant-garde works or para-aesthetic phenomena do not prove congenial to its methodology. I shall consider this below. Meanwhile, in summary, we see that the claims of information theory as a universalizing "true explanation" are different from those of Freudian psychoanalysis. The relevance is indirect, heuristic, rather than immediate. Information theory proposes suggestive theoretical models which can be applied (if cautiously formulated) in an analogical mode only, and only if all the differences of context and of basic categories are stressed. One has to note that Abraham Moles' pioneering work of 1958 acknowledged this difficulty. His discussion was somewhat vague, but it did discriminate between statistical, semantic, and aesthetic information. The distinction has become blurred among information theory advocates, but Pfeiffer asserted it again, invoking Novalis and Hegel, Rilke and Klee to affirm the qualitative constitutive characteristics of art.

It should be clear from what has been said that not all the methodologies of exact science suffer from the objections I have had to lodge against information theory. My fundamental objections are on the whole limited to research strategies of physics and mathematics. Even when one comes to statistics the case is somewhat modified. We can agree that statistical models have been applied successfully to chance (stochastic) procedures in literature, for example, by Stanisław Lem, a top Polish writer and prominent thinker as well, in his *Philosophy of Coincidence* (1968).

Semiotics is a case which, in terms of its relevance, falls somewhere between our principal examples so far. Its hypothesis is not parascientific, as is that of Freudian psychoanalysis; but neither must it conform to the technical requirements and theoretical models of mathematics, as does information theory. Semiotic research is relevant to the aesthetic

reality consisting of “signs” which appear in various kinds of “texts.” Semiotics is able to confirm many relationships among these phenomena and between them and the rest of aesthetic and other reality and thus offers unprecedented clarification of the nature of artistic communication, its dependence on mechanisms of coding and decoding, and the relation of this all to conventions in a particular culture with its time and space coordinates. I do not mention here the important differences among semioticians, but, offering just one example, there can be no reconciling Mukařovský, Lotman, or Eco and the majority of scholars at the Tartu Research Institute on the question of whether semiotic analysis can clarify the character of the aesthetic message or whether aesthetic subject matter is a problem beyond the reach and interests of semiotics.

While offering a most valuable methodology of inquiry, semiotics still requires placement in the range of approaches; it is neither of exclusive importance nor can it even be ascribed a superior role. We should give it a mythological rather than a soberly evaluated relevance if we called it the exclusive strategy. Superiority can be asserted only in relation to specific tasks to which semiotics is outstandingly suited. I must add a further qualification. While founded in part on the linguistic school of Saussure, this science of signs cannot, after all, be reduced to a linguistic science. Art simply is not characterized by such groupings of discrete elements as phonemes and morphemes. Nor has art a language constructed according to a grammar (nor does literature, if we understand the literary work as a special order, or disorder, “added” to the linguistic rules). Nor is system, *langue*, the basic characteristic of art (and indeed *langue* is the dialectical opposite of the distinctiveness of art, which is its *parole*).

Semiotic processes occur on the supralinguistic plane and are informed by rules other than those of language. Analyses which deal with those rules, rather than confusing the problems with ordinary linguistic ones, can approach one side of the distinctiveness of aesthetic phenomena. In discussing “structuralist activity,” Roland Barthes has convincingly argued that the various “languages” of semiotic systems—in literature, photography, fashion, etc.—cannot be made uniform, they must be separately grasped. One develops an analysis of the symbolic, paradigmatic, and syntagmatic relations among signs, embracing the specific object in terms of its multi- or unileveled meanings. Semiotic structuralism wants to open this “pantry of meanings,” and it also asks whether a functional analogy can be made between the study of art and the making of art—the homology of choosing, sectioning, piecing together, and ordering units. In this sense, semiotic structuralism has to ask about the available resources the artist uses, and thus it is compelled to familiarize itself with at least the idiomatic character of the artistic discourse. Semiotic research does now and again also examine aesthetics

itself, the metalanguage of discussing works of art. An interesting advantage of this methodology is that it may apply its techniques not only to the system of meanings of a given art object or sphere, it can as well "control" its own system of meanings, its mode of pronouncing on aesthetic phenomena.

I have now considered briefly the various ways the more "exact," that is, scientific, approaches to aesthetic subject matter may function. My conclusions will parallel those reached earlier in examining the philosophical methods. The scientific approaches frequently have ambitions to dominate aesthetic inquiry with their models and theories alone; but this imperialism must be curbed. It is their weakness, not their strength. The enduring worth of a scientific methodology derives from the light it casts on one or another aspect of aesthetic reality. This aspect must correspond to the questions that are raised with a specific competence by that methodology. The exact sciences use strategies which carry a special danger because the models they attractively suggest may have no more than analogical, indirect significance for aesthetic phenomena. The scholar must be sure to employ philosophical foundations of his choosing to anchor scientific ambitions whenever the issues that are raised are ontological or epistemological or anthropological, whenever art requires positioning in a context of reality more broadly understood, and whenever the student ought to explain his own ideological commitment in preferring one or another research strategy. I should nonetheless stress that the exact methodologies can be utilized in a sense autonomously, in a state of philosophical suspension; and their achievements are independent of the available and eventually indispensable orientation by some world view or philosophical school. Moreover, I should emphasize again that the research methods whether of philosophy or the sciences do not so much compete to throw light on the subject matter of inquiry as they complement one another. They do something to vindicate the sometimes ill-famed principle of mutual tolerance.

3

We can ask whether any of the approaches discussed above can be rejected as not suited to studying the developmental characteristics of art or the evolving means of studying art.

First, I believe it is established that a complementary range of means to study art objects does not suggest that any momentarily out of use should be discarded for that reason. What may not be called upon today, may seem particularly important to apply tomorrow. Indeed the usefulness of a methodology may increase with the decrease of the scope of its ambition to dominate, to universalize. When methodologies are applied one beside another in a friendly dialogue, everybody learns more. Every

student of art should accordingly select the philosophical or scientific strategies which seem, on theoretical or sociopractical grounds, most compelling, develop that resource, and employ other methods only when certain the result will not become an eclectic mess. I believe that on the assumptions just stated, none of the methodologies presented here offers grounds for denial of a place in studying art in transition.

Phenomenology is especially attuned to the specific analysis of objects. While today's art tends to abandon formal structure to appear in ephemeral processes, phenomenology is equipped to examine such temporary structures together with the structure of cognitive acts associated with the creation and the perception of these processes.

Hermeneutics might seem anachronistic. Today's art almost as an act of faith negates the role and idea of personality and is unconcerned not only with the hidden meaning of creativity but also with the wisdom of perpetuating art at all. Nonetheless, among today's vanguard one can find "metaphysicians" who undoubtedly would be willing to defend the hermeneutic method they themselves practice in their own ways.

Existentialism offers theses of such open character that any creative act may be linked to them. Nonetheless, especially kindred to this philosophy are artistic works which revolt against the social reality, express a troubled demeanor, or which abhor the meaning of existence altogether. The range of subject matter appropriate for existentialist explanation includes abstract expressionism, the films of Antonioni, theatre of the absurd, some of the happenings.

Marxism can fruitfully explore the origin and function of the current avant garde in the context of transformations in civilization and culture. Moreover, it can examine the multileveled connections between today's struggles for social and political freedoms and the rebellion embodied by today's artists.

Psychoanalysis needn't expect it will have hidden messages of libidinal symbolism to decipher in minimal art or electronic music or the *nouveau roman*. However, it may discover such messages—often as happily intentional—in today's pop music and jazz, surrealistic happenings, or manifestations of play in art.

One can detect from my perfunctory survey above that there is a gradually rising *limit* to the relevance of these methods for contemporary aesthetic activity. On the other hand, it appears that such methodologies as the *cybernetic* or *semiotic* may be *augmented* by new developments. This is precisely due to the changes of civilization and culture mentioned above as a topic of study. And some of the art today calls forth its own appropriate criticism. Certain modern currents are best served by the exact methodologies. Moreover, the creative process has undergone both intellectualization and methodization. Certain theoretical models which

may be derived by conscious choice of a method of investigation are thereby interjected into art itself.

This last point is of considerable interest; let me offer some examples.

Ou-Li-Po—L'Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle—founded by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau in 1960, looks at art as a game of language and also as a manipulation of materials in accord with statistical and mathematical rules (the “chains of Markov,” Boole’s algebra, the algebra of matrix, the numerical series of Fibonacci). This team uses exact strategies, embracing semiotic methods, to combine words and sentences and sequences with the idea of exhaustive investigation. “Cent milles milliards de poèmes” by Raymond Queneau is programmed to offer the possibility of the reader’s substitution of one verse for another in each of ten sonnets so that analogical poems may be composed by a factor of ten to the fourteenth power. *Ou-Li-Po* also offers more playful constructions such as lipograms, wholes from which one or two letters are missing; texts with words followed and in effect separated by their definitions; collages of fragments drawn from various books; texts which substitute the original words with words that appear seven-down in a particular dictionary (the S + 7 method); and earlier announced permutations of syntax. “Algolic poems” are also written to complement the capacities of an analogical machine, and other works are based on Boole’s scheme for sets and subsets.

The *nouveau roman* or antinovel of Alain Robbe-Grillet down to the recent experiments in *Tel Quel* dramatize the almost total desemantization of literary prose. Robbe-Grillet has made an artistic theme out of the very method of writing. His transparent experiments with literary characters and with structures correspond to the thesis that fiction is made of semantic systems embedded in the language and visible there. A sign polyphony appeared in Maurice Roche’s so-called novel titled *Circus* (Collection *Tel Quel*, Paris 1972). It is composed of words, musical notes, street drawings, and the editorial markings. Its word text is continually interrupted and divided, sometimes into separate columns that conflict with one another. Not only the sense but the syntax is shattered. The visible topography changes all the time with a sheer play of graphics interwoven with a manipulation of signs and symbols. One may surmise the intention behind the work: our world presented as emanations that fade into one another, these borrowings overlapping with borrowings, a chaos of proliferation of slogans all lacking sense and pompous in formulation, a circus-like procession of a riot of themes, religious, political, sexual; a muddle of a reality. What remains to the efforts of the living but *guerillade par l’épistole*, with a weary sense that literature is helpless in the struggle of society and civilization and that the traditional literary style (its hieraticism, but also any organized narrative as such) is anachronistic.

Another author of the *Tel Quel* circle, Nanni Balestrini, has a work *Tristan* (1966) which must be read as simply an experiment in semiotic collage. Each of the ten chapters contains ten sections, each consisting of fragments lifted from other literary works. One can view the text as composed of signifying elements, *les signifiants*, laid out so as to provide the impression of some major significance, *les signifiés*, utilizing an artificial “plot” of mythic sweep which nonetheless is quite obviously hoked-up. The title is deliberately sensational, the title figure virtually anonymous and without discernible identity. In this way the author comments on the mechanism of constructing a novel which today cannot possibly muster the conviction needed by living literature. Balestrini does this with a cool deliberateness that forces us to answer the implied questions—and that cannot possibly be analyzed, in literary terms, by tools other than those provided by Roland Barthes, Jean Ricardou, Jacques Derrida, or Philippe Sollers. Literature and criticism are cheek by jowl.

Computer-involved artists are similarly close to the aesthetic conceptions that bear on the development of a “computer art” in music, the graphic arts, and poetry. Max Bense has here played an active role. But his studies centered on the written word of *Texttheorie*, while his students Nike and Nees introduced the cybernetic conceptions directly into the graphic arts—see the Darmstadt exhibition of 1966 or Frankfurt’s Galerie d of 1967. A survey exhibition organized by Jasia Reichardt in 1968 at London’s Institute of Modern Art was titled “Cybernetic Serendipity—The Computer and the Arts,” and included film, music, architecture, and choreography. Reichardt’s book, *The Computer in Art*, of 1971 provides the chronicle of this development.

I must also mention Bense’s student, Rolf Garnich, who successfully adapted the formulae of aesthetic measurement to *industrial pattern-making*. One should note that he rejected the Gunzenhäuser version of information theory as microaesthetics. He modified Birkoff’s macroaesthetic equation ($M = o/c$) to include the functional aspects provided by “technical beauty.” This provided Garnich with a final formula of M_3/M_0 with M_3 as the value of the object in relation to its surroundings and its user and M_0 as the structural value (*Feinstruktur*) based on the Birkhoff model.

There is a link between *conceptual artists*, especially in the English group, Art-Language (Baldwin, Atkinson, and others), and Wittgenstein and Oxford analytical philosophers. They develop their interest in strictly linguistic problems—or more precisely, metalinguistic problems in the propositional mode—and reflect their concern for the problematic status of art in light of arbitrary definitions in this way. Joseph Kosuth, in New York in the early 1970s, turned this same way, and Kirilli turned toward French semiology.

All of these examples represented a *consciously methodized art*.

Now we turn to other examples which demonstrate the parallel development of artistic and methodological goals and intentions. These probes helped the cyberneticians and semiologists in their development and application of research ideas.

Ben Laposky, an American, as early as 1952 employed a computer and an oscillograph to produce a series of graphic compositions. Five years later Roland Fuchshuber, a German, launched identical experiments. He originated an artistic tendency based on certain mathematical formulae and programmed cryptographs. The practical aesthetics that was later developed by information theorists was termed generative (it would follow the directives of methodological procedures developed by cybernetics) and the corresponding art could be called by that name as well. Some critics have suggested that this development is a direct outgrowth of the long-harbored wish to create a robot man, a homunculus, as well as of attempts to produce machines that will produce art according to principles of a universally acclaimed *mathesis universalis*.

Max Bense, in 1956, in the second part of his *Aesthetica* already pointed to the paintings of Max Bill, "White Square" and "Accents," and the abstract-expressionist *mouvements* of Henri Michaux, especially in his mescaline series, as a proof of the increasing physicalization of art. He noted in this work a molecularly scaled surface and an equiprobability of the initial state (entropy). Bense emphasized the absence of the macroaesthetic traditional illusionism. There appeared instead a *reziproker Illusionismus*, a mutual interplay of the physical data with the sign content of the work.

The so-called systemic creativity of Sol LeWitt and Walter de Maria drew on a method adopted from mathematics. It offers permutations of specific units or employs the numerical series of Fibonacci. Bernard Venet, the conceptualist, has said he does not practice art but rather a documentation of what happens in mathematics and theoretical physics in order to achieve a monosemic system and code. It is not so much a "zero degree" painting as, in the words of one of his critics, an invitation to reflect on the logic of totally neutral communication which provides his chief aim. Robert Barry issued a manifesto concerning "invisible" art, an art of the air employing vibration of particles or wave energy. Such work, at or near the zero threshold of art, can best be explicated with a methodology drawn from theoretical physics or astrophysics in cooperation with semiotics.

The so-called technical art, experiments by Les Levine, Nam June Paik, Rauschenberg, Schöffer, or Piene that draw on various instrumental sets and channels of information, and recently the hologram technique, is unthinkable without the information theory and even more the conceptions of Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan. These

influences are also clearly evident in the cinematic explorations described by Gene Youngblood in his *Expanded Cinema* (1970). The contemporary kinetic and luministic experiments may be described in either cybernetic or semiotic terms. Surely, too, semiotics is the most promising research strategy for elucidating op and pop art, and for that matter all contemporary art which draws mass-communication resources into itself. Thus it is no surprise that Moles in *L’Affiche dans la société urbaine* (1970) is able to utilize communications theory to explain the structure and function of a poster. Umberto Eco in his *La Struttura Assente* (1968) similarly provides a most refreshing analysis of the advertising message and the architectural sign (focused on the proxemic code).

Are these too few examples? They are here to convince the reader, if that were necessary, that the departures from a traditionalist aesthetic code have had far-reaching effects. On the one hand, art has been moving toward daily-life phenomena; and on the other hand, it has been drawn toward methodological conceptions and theoretical models for them. I have only omitted citing examples from music. These would demonstrate even more persuasively the connections between developments of the artistic avant garde and theoretical development. Properly then, we may ask whether the success of this art in approximating current thought (and the reverse occurring too) has not ended in art not being itself. Although the makers of it may still use that name, does it apply?

This is a most serious question, obviously. Our answer will have to direct our future delineation of categories and problems and strategies. I find it is a question which in no way can be answered generally. When it is taken up with specific cases—as can be done and is done—I think we find that art has not entirely lost its specific character in the avant garde. An aesthetic identity can still in most cases be pointed out. We require the same specific analysis to discover the extent to which semiotic methodology can make adequate sense of the unique characteristics of aesthetic messages. (One can here look at Eco’s remarkable reflections on idiolects.) What nonetheless becomes clear, *grosso modo*, is the crisis of the traditional aesthetic categories which is precipitated by an art that deliberately breaks with them to move into open opposition with its minimalism, zero-level endeavors, so-called anti-art, and conceptualism and cybernetic models. Meanwhile the research strategies developed by communication and information theory and based on technical and mathematical rigors prove increasingly appealing.

What should be said, in conclusion, of this desertion of the normal field of art by art itself? The traditional methods of inquiry, those which are adequately generalized and not at all exhausted, should also be applied to this modernism. Their results should be carefully determined, without preconception. Meanwhile we must recognize that the

exact methodologies have a more immediate relevance to describing these arts. They have grown up together. They can tell us otherwise unknowable things about this transition from an art to a no-longer-art status. The change of status is genuine, and brought on by sweeping, profound changes of civilization which have altered the structure and the social function of art. We may judge the adequacy of the new exact methodologies in part by the makers' own set aims to intellectualize their work in light of this recent theorization. The aura if not always the claims of the makers is still artistic, but their art is to be "methodized," it is to be drawn closer to the knowledge of its status, which is paramount today. If I may cite Roman Jakobson's vocabulary, this avant garde of today has abandoned the self-referring function of the arts and has moved far in the direction of metalinguistic, phatic, and conative functions.

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In the above I have only drawn on philosophical methods and exact strategies which are well known and widely used. I should not want this to be taken to mean that I have no respect for omitted methods. The aim has been to arrive at some general conclusions about the state and the means of aesthetic inquiry, and not even all well-known resources had to be introduced to reach these conclusions. If my reasoning has been correct, then my results will be applicable to orientations other than general methodology as well. The basic task has not been to make an exhaustive catalogue or inquiry but to verify, in a specific analysis, some general assumptions. I regret presenting the latter in the abbreviated format of postulates and theses.

A further point must be touched. Roland Barthes in an interview for *Tel Quel* in 1963 said one should always choose a research method capable of casting the widest understanding on a subject matter. Barthes argues that such a research method will never coincide with the philosophical, ideological, scientific, or other point of view of the artist and his work. I think his argument makes at least two errors. One, although Barthes believes (I think rightly) that artists possess an attitude which is questing, questioning, and never fully rationalized, he seems to assume on this point that should the artist have adopted a psychoanalytic outlook or the Marxist philosophy, the critical method corresponding to that outlook would have nothing to contribute. Yet all evidence of artistic history on the embodiment of philosophical or social doctrines or scientific orientations, including today's avant-garde art, suggests that a distinct distance remains between the conception and its artistic embodiment. Indeed one fascination of art is to observe how, and why, these modifications, whether shifts of emphases or deformations, have oc-

curred. If one starts from Barthes' own notions of systems of meaningful signs, one would have to say that the artist's incorporation of one or another system in fact permits the investigation of the variations in the accepted code. My second objection is this: if inquiry sets as its goal the clarification of subject matter, then even the research method of most consuming interest for the scholar will be of no assistance if it is not suited to the given message. What has at times happened, in such cases, is that the scholar becomes absorbed in his procedures, while the genuine subject matter is disregarded.

Julio Cortázar, writing his "instructions," in *Cronopios and famas*, on how to appreciate the paintings of Titian, Raphael, and Holbein, demonstrates with ironic wit and artistic skill how much involvement in an artist's work can be expected from a critic. Cortázar, I think, parodies to some extent Barthes' point of view. I do share the Barthesian view that a research strategy should be of a structural unity and that it may be useful only insofar as it encompasses a subject matter. But when Barthes writes of "filling" a subject matter with a method of inquiry, I think he either stumbles or he suggests something I have tried to overcome by argument in the foregoing pages, the notion that a single research method might be able to "take care of" the whole of aesthetic reality. Moreover, at the same time he favors something contrary; he asserts that the methods should be altered and applied according to the occasion in line with the choice of the investigators. I should add at this point that it is one thing, and a good thing, to be tolerant of numerous productive methods of investigation. It is another thing to claim for the persistent mutability of method the greatest productivity. Finally I am surely in disagreement with Barthes when he opts for the scientific methodology as the most promising. For I have tried to establish that we must turn to the philosophical methods rather than exact sciences for the broadest scope of comprehension; and once we have settled our choice as to the most rewarding method among those available for our purposes, we must pursue that method consistently, by its integral resources penetrating vertically through the problems and issues that its premises open up in the subject matter, not allowing this method to extend itself horizontally over into aspects of aesthetic reality which the method of inquiry has not demonstrated it has the right to tackle. These "rights" are on the whole well established by the original and lasting contributions the various philosophical approaches have made over time.

I should finally say once more how some of these philosophical methods, not excluding the most ambitious, show a strain—or antinomy—between genuine assumptions that enable them to describe some specific structures and fill these with meaning—although the meaning may at times go beyond empirical verification—and appeals to an authority which aspires to scientific or quasi-scientific footing. I have

remarked that this antinomy is noticeable, for instance, in the approach of Marxism. All bold and serious thought has had to contend with this gap between the given and the proven, the foundation and the method of investigation. It is part, I suppose, of what makes the choice and fullest application of a philosophy especially fascinating to the person sharply aware of methodological problems. I shall not linger over the problems of Marxist method and subject matter in this regard. One must, however, always bear in mind that the tense antinomy was never squared (solved), while all self-aware, courageous thinking must face this circumstance.