



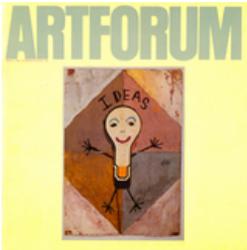
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The Sublime and the Avant-Garde

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

IN DECEMBER, 1948, Barnett (Baruch) Newman wrote an essay entitled "The Sublime is Now." In 1950-51, he painted a canvas that he called *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*; in the early and mid '60s, he cast three bronze sculptures entitled *Here I (For Marcia)*, *Here II*, and *Here III*; another painting, from 1962, was called *Not There—Here*; two others, from 1965 and 1967, were titled *Now I* and *Now II*. In 1949 he painted *Be I* (of which he did a second version in 1970), and in 1961-64 he painted *Be II*.

How is one to understand the sublime—let us think of it as the focus of a sublime experience—as something "here and now"? On the contrary, isn't it essential to this feeling to allude to something that cannot be demonstrated or, as Kant said, presented? In a short, unfinished text from late 1949, Newman wrote that he was not concerned with a manipulation of space or of image in his paintings, but with a sensation of time. He added that by this he did not mean the kind of time laden with nostalgia, or drama, or references and history—the usual subjects of painting. After this qualification, his text stops short.

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THE SUBLIME AND THE AVANT-GARDE

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD



Color David Friedrich, Albert Einstein, 1936, oil on board, ca. 70 x 100".
Collection of the Museum Kunstpalast

In December, 1948, Barnett (Baruch) Newman wrote an essay entitled "The Sublime is Now." In 1950-51, he painted a canvas that he called *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*; in the early and mid '60s, he cast three bronze sculptures entitled *Here I (For Marcia)*, *Here II*, and *Here III*; another painting, from 1962, was called *Not There—Here*; two others, from 1965 and 1967, were titled *Now I* and *Now II*. In 1949 he painted *Be I* (of which he did a second version in 1970), and in 1961-64 he painted *Be II*.

We are left with the question: what kind of time was Newman concerned with, what "now" did he have in mind? Thomas B. Hess, his friend and commentator, felt justified in writing that Newman's time was the *Makom* or the *Hamakom* of Hebraic tradition—the *there*, the site, the place—the way the Torah refers to the unnamable divinity. I do not know enough about *Makom* to know whether this indeed was Newman's intention. But then again, who does know enough about *now*? Newman surely cannot have been thinking of the "present instant," the one that tries so hard to claim territory between the future and the past, but manages only to be devoured by them. That "now" is one of the temporal "ecstasies" that have been analyzed from Augustine's day all the way to Edmund Husserl, according to a line of thought that has attempted to compose time out of consciousness. Newman's *now* is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be composed in terms of it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what dismisses



links



consciousness; it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to compose itself.

What we do not manage to think about is something happening, or, more simply, the happening. Not a major event in the media sense, not even a small event. Just an occurrence. This isn't a matter of sense or reality bearing upon *what* happens—on *what* this might mean. Before finding out about the what and its significance, before the *quid*, we need the "before" so that it "may happen"—quod. The happening always "precedes" the question of what happens. *It happens* comes "before" *is it happening?* , *is it this?* , *is it possible?* . "Only then" can any point be determined through inquiry: is this or that or that happening, is it this or something else, is this or that possible? An event, an occurrence—what Martin Heidegger called *ein Ereignis*—is infinitely simple. But this simplicity can only be grasped through need; that which we call thought must be disarmed. There are traditions and institutions for philosophy, for painting, for politics, for literature; these various "disciplines" have destinies in the form of schools, programs, research projects, and "trends." Thought seizes upon what is received, it seeks to reflect and overcome. It seeks to determine what has already been thought, written, painted, or socialized in order to determine what hasn't been. We know this process well—it is our daily bread. It is the bread of war, the biscuit of soldiers. But this agitation, in the most noble sense of the word (agitation is the word Kant gives for the cerebral activity that encompasses exercises and judgement), this agitation is possible only if something remains to be determined, something that hasn't been determined before. One strives to determine "something" by setting up a system, a theory, a program, or a project—and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating the "something." One can also inquire about that which "remains" and allow the indeterminate to appear as a question mark.

All intellectual disciplines and institutions take for granted that not everything has been said, written, or recorded, that words already heard or pronounced are not the last words. "After" a sentence, "after" a color, comes another sentence, another color. One doesn't necessarily know which, but it is possible to guess if credence is given to the rules that chain one sentence to another, cue one color from another—rules preserved in precisely the institutions of the past and future that I mention above. The school, the program, the project—all proclaim that after such a sentence, such another sentence or at least such sort of a sentence is mandatory, that one kind of sentence is permitted, while another is forbidden. This holds true for painting as much as for any other activity involving thought. After one pictorial work, another is necessary, permitted, or forbidden. After one color, this other color; after this characteristic, that one. There isn't an enormous difference between an avant-garde manifesto and a curriculum at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, if one considers them in light of the relationship to time; both position themselves in relation to events that will, they believe lead to an eventual good. Both also forget the possibility that nothing will happen, that words, colors, forms, or sounds will be absent, that some sentence will be the last, that one day the bread will not arrive. This is the misery that the painter encounters with plastic surface, or the musician with an acoustic surface; it is the misery the thinker sees in the desert of thought. It isn't simply a matter of the empty canvas or the empty page, at the "beginning" of a work, but of each instance of something being imminent, which makes a question of every question mark, every "and now what?". We tend to assume that nothing will happen without the feeling of anxiety, a term much elaborated on by modern philosophers of existence and the unconscious. This gives anticipation, if we really mean anticipation, a predominantly negative value. In fact suspense can also be accompanied by pleasure—for instance, pleasure in the unknown—and even by joy—the joy, to paraphrase Baruch Spinoza, the intensification of being, that the event introduces. This probably brings up contradictory feelings. It is at the very least a sign of the question mark itself. The question can adapt itself to any tone, as Jacques Derrida would say. But the mark of the question is the "now," *now* in the sense that nothing might happen.

This contradictory feeling—pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression—was baptized or rechristened between the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe by the name of the "sublime." It is over this word that the destiny of classical poetics was wagered and lost; it is in this name that esthetics made its critical prerogatives matter to art, and that romanticism—in other words modernity—triumphed. It remains for the art historian to explain how the word sublime reappeared in the language of Barnett Newman, a Jewish painter from New York, during the '40s. The word sublime is common currency today in colloquial French to suggest surprise and admiration, somewhat like America's "great," but the idea that it denotes belongs to the most rigorous kind of reflecting on art for at least the past two centuries. Newman did not ignore the esthetic and philosophical stakes involved with the word. He read Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (1757), and criticized Burke's overly "surrealistic" description of the sublime oeuvre. Conversely, Newman judges Surrealism to be overly reliant on a preromantic or romantic way of dealing with the indeterminate. Thus, when he sought sublimity in the "here and now" he broke with the eloquence of romantic art but not with its fundamental task of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an "over there," in another world or another time, but in this: that "it happens." In the determination of pictorial art the indeterminate, the "it's happening," is color—the painting. The color—the painting—as occurrence or event is not expressible, and it is to this that it must bear witness.

Perhaps the locus of the whole difference between romanticism and the "modern" avant-garde is to translate "The Sublime is Now" as "Now the Sublime is This"—not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time, but here, now, "it happens"—and it's this painting. Now, and here, there is this painting where there might have been nothing at all, and that's what is sublime. Letting go and disarming all grasping intelligence, recognizing that this occurrence of painting was not necessary and is barely visible, an openness to the *Is it happening?* , the protection of the occurrence "before" defending it, by illustration or commentary, the guarding "before" putting up one's guard, and

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looking—looking under the aegis of *now*—these are the rigors of the avant-garde. In literary art this plea on behalf of the *Is it happening?* found one of its most rigorous realizations in Gertrude Stein's *How to Write* (1931). It's still the sublime in the sense of Burke and Kant, and (yet) isn't their sublime any more.

The sublime may well be the single artistic sensibility to characterize the Modern. Paradoxically, it was introduced to literary discussion and vigorously defended by the French writer Nicolas Boileau-Despéaux, classified in literary history as one of the most dogged advocates of ancient classicism. In 1674 Boileau published his *L'Art poétique*, but he also published *Du sublime*, his translation or transcription from the *Peri hupsous* (On the sublime). This is a treatise, or rather an essay, attributed to a certain Longinus about whose identity there has long been confusion, and whose life we now estimate as having begun toward the end of the first century of our era. The author was a rhetorician. Basically, he taught those oratorical devices with which a speaker, of whatever style, can persuade or move an audience. The didactics of rhetoric were then still linked to the tradition of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. They were, in other words, linked to a republican institution wherein one had to know how to speak before assemblies and tribunals. One might expect that Longinus' text would invoke the maxims and encomiums transmitted by this tradition. But this compact text is permeated by unsureness, as though its subject—the sublime, indeterminacy—sabotaged didactic strategies. I cannot analyze this hovering any further here. Boileau himself and numerous other commentators were aware of it, and concluded that the sublime could only be attained through a sublime style. Longinus certainly tried to define sublimity through discourse, writing that it was unforgettable, irresistible, and, most importantly, thought-provoking. He even tried to locate sources for this sublime in the ethos of the orator, in his pathos, and in the various procedures of discourse: figures of speech, choice of words, enunciation, composition. However, when it comes to the sublime, major obstacles get in the way of rhetorical and poetic regulations. There is, for example, wrote Longinus, a sublimity of thought sometimes recognizable in speech by its extreme simplicity of shape, at the precise point where the high character of the speaker creates an aura of solemnity. It sometimes takes the form of outright silence. While I would welcome and accept that silence for a beat or two, the reader will agree that it constitutes the greatest indeterminacy of all. What can remain of rhetoric (or of poetics) when the rhetorician in Boileau's translation announces that to attain the sublime effect "there is no better figure of speech than the altogether hidden, that which we do not even recognize as a figure of speech"? How does one conceal speech; are there self-erasing figures of speech? How do we distinguish between hidden idioms and nonidioms? And what is a nonidiom? And what about this, very likely the final blow to didactics: the fact that such a sublime discourse accommodates any number of stylistic defects and formal imperfections? Plato's style, for example, is full of bombast and strained comparisons and excess. Plato, in short, is a mannerist or a baroque compared to a Lysias, and so is Sophocles compared to an Ion, or Pindar compared to a Bacchylides. Only the former names in these pairings are sublime, whereas the latter one are merely perfect. Shortcomings in this *métier* are apparently therefore trifling matters, if they are the price to be paid for "true grandeur." Grandeur in speech is true when it bears witness to the discrepancy between thought and the real world. Is it Boileau's translation that brings us to this analogy, or is it the influence of early Christianity on Longinus?

So, the kind of perfection that one might reasonably expect within the domain of *techné rhetorike* (something between the art and the technique of rhetoric) isn't necessarily a desirable attribute for matters sublime in feeling. Longinus went so far as to propose inversions of "natural" syntax as examples of sublime effect. As for Boileau, in the preface he wrote in 1674 for Longinus' text, in addenda of 1683 and 1701, and elsewhere, he finalized the previous tentative break with the classical institution of *techné*. The sublime, he demonstrated, cannot be taught, and didactics are thus powerless in this respect; the sublime is not linked to rules that can be determined through poetics; the sublime requires only that the speaker or listener have conceptual range, taste, and the ability "to sense what the whole world senses first." Boileau was therefore in accord with Père Bouhours when, in 1671, he declared that beauty demands more than just a respect for rules, that it requires a further "*je ne sais quoi*," call it *genius* if you will, or something "incomprehensible and inexplicable," a "gift from God," a fundamentally "hidden" phenomenon that can be recognized only by its effects on a selected individual. And in the polemic that set him against Pierre Daniel Huet, over the issue of whether the Bible's *fiat Lux, et Lux fuit* (let there be light, and there was light) is sublime, as Longinus thought it was, Boileau referred to the opinion of the Jansenists of Port Royal, in particular to le Maître de Saci; the Jansenists are masters when it comes to matters of hidden significance, of silence that talks, of feeling that transcends reason, and finally of openness to *Is it happening?*

At stake in these poetic-theological debates is the status of works of art. Are they copies of some ideal model? Can contemplation of some of the more perfect examples yield rules of creation that determine their success, persuasiveness, or pleasurable? Can understanding in fact triumph through this kind of contemplation? By concentrating on the sublime and indeterminacy while meditating on works of art, *techné* and related institutions such as the academics and schools, mentors and disciples, taste, and the enlightened public of princes and courtiers, undergo a major mutation. The purpose and even the destiny of artworks is questioned. The dominance of *techné* placed works of art under multiple regulations—that of the studio mode, the schools and academies, shared taste among the aristocracy, a finiteness in art that had to do with illustrating the glory of a name, divine or human, and attaching to it the perfection of a cardinal virtue. The idea of the sublime put all of this harmony into disarray.

To amplify the characteristics of this disarray: under Denis Diderot's pen *techné* becomes "the little technique," and the artist is no longer guided by a culture that made him the object and master of a message of glory. Instead, he has become the genius, an involuntary receptacle of inspiration which comes to him from some "*je ne sais quoi*." Public judgement no longer relies on the traditional criteria of shared pleasures, and individuals unknown to artists (the "people") read books, wander through

exhibition galleries, crowd into theaters and concert halls, and are prey to unpredictable feelings of shock, admiration, contempt, or indifference. The question is no longer to please a public by bringing it into a process of identification and glorification, but to surprise it. "The sublime," wrote Boileau, "really isn't something that tenders its own proofs and demonstrations, but a marvelousness that seizes, strikes, and inflicts sensation." Even imperfections—aberrations of taste, ugliness—play a role in this shock appeal. Art would no longer imitate nature but would create a whole other world, *eine Zwischenwelt* (a between world), as Paul Klee would later say, *eine Nebenwelt* (a side world), one could say, where monstrosity and malformation have rights because of sublime potential. (Forgive this simplification.)

One can find traces of the sublime, foreshadowings of this modern transformation, well before modern times—in medieval esthetics, for instance, like those of the religious order the Victorines. Precedents suggest how thoughts on art would no longer have much bearing on the dispatch of artworks, whom we would leave to the solitude of genius, but on the recipients of these artworks. It would henceforth become necessary to analyze the ways in which audiences could be affected, how the recipient receives and experiences works of art, and how works of art are judged. This is how esthetics, the analysis of the amateur's feelings, came to replace poetics and rhetoric, which were didactic forms intended specifically for the artist. The question was no longer: how does one make art? but: what does it mean to experience art? Any analysis of this last question brings us back to the subject of indeterminacy.

Alexander Baumgarten began *Aesthetica Acromatica*, the first esthetics, in 1750. Kant briefly said of this work that it was based on an error. Baumgarten confused judgement, as it is exercised and understood when there is a governing consensus that classifies phenomena categorically, and judgement that, exercised intellectually or emotionally, has to do with an indeterminate relationship among the properties of the subject. Baumgarten's esthetics depend upon a conceptually determined relationship to the work of art. The sense of beauty is for Kant a pleasure kindled by a free harmony between the function of images and the function of concepts whether the subject is a work of art or nature. Esthetics of the sublime are still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, pleasure that comes from pain. In the event of an absolutely immense object—a desert, a mountain, a pyramid—or one that is absolutely powerful—a storm at sea, an erupting volcano—which like all absolutes can only be considered without reason, the imagination and the ability to present fail to provide appropriate representations. This frustration of expression kindles a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined. But this pain in turn engenders a pleasure, in fact a double pleasure: the recognition of the impotence of the imagination contrarily attests to an imagination striving to illuminate even that which cannot be illuminated, and the imagination thus means to harmonize its objects to reason—and furthermore the inadequacy of images, as negative signs, attests to the immense power of Ideas. These unruly powers give rise to an extreme tension (Kant's agitation) which sets the pathos of the sublime apart from the calm sense of beauty. From any vantage point around this cleavage, infinity, or the absoluteness of Idea, is revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a nonpresentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure reduced to nearly nothing promotes an endless contemplation of infinity. Even before romantic art was unleashed from classical and baroque figuration, the door had thus been opened to inquiries pointing toward abstract and Minimal art. Avant-gardism is thus present in germ stage in the Kantian esthetic of the sublime. The art, however, whose effects are analyzed therein, is of course essentially made up of attempts at representing sublime subjects. And the question *Is it happening?* does not pertain—at least not explicitly—to Kant's problematic.

I do, however, believe that question to be at the very center of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*. Kant may well have rejected Burke's thesis in favor of empiricism and physiologism, he may also have borrowed from Burke's analysis of the characterizing contradiction of the sublime, but he clearly ransacked Burke's esthetic for what I consider to be its major gambit—to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat that nothing further might happen. Beauty gives positive pleasure, but there is another kind of pleasure that is bound to a passion far stronger than satisfaction, and that is suffering and impending death. In suffering the body affects the soul, but the soul can also affect the body just as though it were experiencing some externally induced pain, and it can do this solely by means of representations that are consciously linked to painful situations. This entirely spiritual passion, for Burke, is synonymous with terror. Terrors are linked to privations: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* will not happen, that it will stop happening.

Burke wrote that for this terror to mingle with pleasure and with it produce a sublime sensation, it is also necessary that the terror-causing threat be suspended, kept at bay, held back. This suspense, this lessening of threat or danger, provokes a kind of pleasure which is hardly positive satisfaction, but is rather more like relief. This still qualifies as privation, but it is privation in the second degree: the spirit is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life. Burke distinguished this pleasure in privation from the positive pleasure, and he baptized it with the word "delight."

Here then is a breakdown of the sublime sensation: a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any and all "happenings," stuns it (at lower intensities, the soul is at this point seized with admiration, veneration, respect). The soul is dumb, immobilized, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life. For Burke, the sublime was not a matter of elevation (the category within which Aristotle defined tragedy), but a matter of intensification.

Another of Burke's observations merits attention because it heralded the possibility of emancipating works of art from classical mimetic laws. In the long debate over the relative merits of painting and poetry, Burke sided with poetry. Painting is taken to task for imitating models, and for its figurative representations: if art's object is to create intense sensations in those for whom it is intended, imagistic figuration is a limiting constraint on the possibilities for emotive expression. However, in the language of arts—and particularly in poetry, which Burke did not consider a genre with regulations but the field for countless active investigations of language—emotive powers are free from the verisimilitudes of figuration. "To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged; but what painting can furnish out any thing so grand as the addition of one word, 'the Angel of the Lord?' " And how does one go about painting—in such a way that strength measures up to feeling—the "universe of death" where ends the voyage of fallen angels in Milton's *Paradise Lost*?

Words have several advantages when it comes to expressing feelings: they are themselves charged with passionate connotation; they can evoke matters of the soul without having to consider visibility; finally, Burke remarked that "by words we have it in our power to make such *combinations* as we cannot possibly do otherwise." The arts, with whatever their materials, pressed forward by the esthetics of the sublime in a quest for intense effects, can and must overlook mimetic models that are merely beautiful, and must test their limits through surprising, difficult, shocking combinations. Shock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing at all. It is suspended privation.

Burke's analyses could easily be resumed and elaborated in a Freudian-Lacanian problematic (precisely what Pierre Kaufman and Baldine Saint-Girons have done). But I am bringing them up in a different spirit, the one the subject of this article—the avant-garde—demands. I have tried to suggest that at the dawn of romanticism Burke's esthetic of the sublime, and to a lesser degree Kant's, outlined a world of possibilities for artistic expression through which the avant-gardes would later wend their way. There are no direct influences, no empirically observable connections. Manet, Cézanne, Braque, and Picasso probably did not read Kant or Burke. What I am suggesting is more a matter of irreversible deviations in the directional course of art, deviations that have affected all the valences of the artistic condition. The artist would begin to attempt combinations in order to create events. The amateur would no longer experience simply pleasure or derive some ethical benefit from his contact with art, but would instead expect an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent joyousness. The art object would no longer bend itself to models, but would try to present the unrepresentable; it would no longer imitate nature but would be an artifact, a simulacrum. The social community would no longer recognize itself in art objects, but would scorn them, reject them as incomprehensible, and then would accept that the intellectual avant-garde might preserve them in museums as the remnants of offensives that bear witness to the power, and the rawness, of the spirit.

With the advent of sublime esthetics, the stake of art in the 19th and 20th centuries was to be witness to indeterminacy. For painting, the paradox that Burke signaled in his observations on the powers of words is that such testimony can only be achieved through determined methods. Support, frame, line, color, space, the figure were all to remain subject to the representational constraints of romantic art. But this contradiction of ends and means had, as early as Manet and Cézanne, the effect of once again casting doubt on the legitimacy of certain rules that determined representations of the figure in space and the organization of colors and values since the quattrocento. Reading Cézanne's correspondence, one understands that his accomplishment was not that of a talented painter finding his "style," but that of an artist responding to the question: what is a painting? His work had at stake to record on a support only those "chromatic sensations," those "*petites sensations*," that would, according to Cézanne's hypothesis, of themselves constitute the entire pictorial existence of an object—a fruit, a mountain, a face, or a flower, without consideration of history or "subject," of line, of space, even of light. These elementary sensations are hidden in ordinary perception. They are only accessible to the painter, and therefore can only be reinstated by the painter, through the expense of an interior discipline that rids perceptual and intellectual fields of prejudices as deeply ingrained as vision itself. If the viewer does not submit to a complementary interior process, the painting will remain senseless and impenetrable to him or her. The painter must not hesitate to run the risk of being taken for a mere dauber. "One paints for very little." Recognition from the regulatory institutions of paintings—Academy, salons, criticism, taste—is of little importance compared to the discernment the painter-seeker brings to the success obtained by the work of art in relation to what is really at stake: to reveal what makes one seen, and not what is visible.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty elaborated on what he rightly called "Cézanne's doubt" as though what was at stake for that painter was, in effect, to seize perception and render it at birth—perception "before" perception; the wonder of "it happening," I would say, color in its occurrence, at least as regards the eye. The phenomenologist who so confidently bestows the value of "origination" upon Cézanne's "*petites sensations*" must be at least a little credulous. The painter himself, who often complained of their inadequacy, wrote that they were "abstractions," that they "prevented him from covering the canvas." But why should it be necessary to cover the canvas? Is it forbidden to be abstract?

The doubt that gnaws at the avant-gardes did not stop with Cézanne's "chromatic sensations" as though they were the last word, and it did not, for that matter, come any closer to stopping with the abstractions they heralded. One after another, the barriers against the current of questions from theoreticians and manifestos from the painters themselves were carried away by the necessity of testifying on behalf of the indeterminate. A formalist definition of the pictorial object, such as that proposed by Clement Greenberg when confronted with American "post-plastic" abstraction, was soon overturned by Minimalism. Do we have to have stretchers so the canvas can be taut? No. What about colors? Malevich's black square on white had already answered this question in 1913. Is an object necessary?

Body art and happenings went about proving that it was not. Is a space necessary, at least a space in which to display, as even Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917, still suggested? Daniel Buren's work testifies that even this is subject to doubt.

Whether they belong to the current that art history calls Minimalism or Arte Povera or whatnot, the investigations of the avant-gardes one by one solicited components that one might have thought "elementary" to or at the "origin" of the art of painting. They have operated *ex minimis*. One would have to oppose the rigor that animates them to the principle sketched out by Theodor W. Adorno at the end of *Negative Dialektik* (1966), and that controls the writing in *Aesthetische Theorie* (1970): that the thought that "accompanies metaphysics in its decline" can only proceed in terms of "micrologies."

Micrology is not metaphysics in crumbs, just as Newman's painting is not Delacroix in scraps. Micrology registers the occurrence of thought as the unthought that remains to be thought in the decline of the grand philosophical thought. The avant-gardist effort records the occurrence of a perceivable "now" as something unrepresentable that remains to be presented in the decline of the grand representational painting. Like micrology, the avant-garde does not worry about what happens to the "subject," but about *Is it happening?*, a raw state. In this sense it belongs to the esthetic of the sublime.

In questioning the *It happens*, avant-garde art abandons its previous identifying role in relation to the receiving community. Even when considered, as it was by Kant, a horizon or assumption *de jure* rather than a reality *de facto*, a *sensus communis* (which Kant refers to when writing about beauty, not the sublime) does not jell when it comes to works of art that question. It barely coalesces, and usually too late, when these works, deposited in museums, are considered part of the community heritage and are made available for its cultural edification and pleasure. And even here we are still talking about objects or entities that can be objectified, for instance through photography.

In this situation of isolation and misunderstanding, avant-garde art is vulnerable and subject to repression. It seems only to have aggravated the identity crisis that swept these communities during the long "depression" that lasted from the '30s until the end of "reconstruction" in the mid-'50s. It is impossible here even to suggest how the Nation-parties were struck with fear before the *Who are we?* and an anxiety of the void, and how they tried to convert all of this into hatred for the avant-gardes. Hildegard Brenner's study of artistic policy under Nazism, and the films of Hans Jürgen Syberberg, do not simply analyze these repressive maneuvers. Instead they explain how neoromantic and symbolic forms imposed by cultural commissariats and collaborating artists, painters and musicians especially, had to block the mute, negative dialectic of *Is it happening?* by translating the question as having to do with waiting for a fabulous "subject": Is a pure people happening? Is the Führer happening? Is Siegfried coming? The esthetic of the sublime, thus neutralized and converted into a politics of myth, was able to construct its architecture of human "formations" on the Zeppelin Field at Nuremberg.

Because of the "crisis" of hypercapitalism that has swept through most of today's "developed" societies, another attack on the avant-gardes comes to light. The threat weighing against avant-gardes advances in the area of the artwork-event, against avant-garde attempts to welcome the *now*, no longer even requires Nation-parties. It proceeds "directly" out of market economics. The correlation between this and the esthetic of the sublime is ambiguous, even perverse. The latter, no doubt, continues to be a reaction against the matter-of-fact positivism and calculated realism that governs the forms, as writers on art such as Stendhal, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, and André Breton all have underlined. Yet there is a kind of collusion between capital and the avant-garde. The forces of skepticism and even destruction that capitalism has put into action—something that Marx never ceased to analyze and identify—have encouraged among artists a mistrust of established rules and a willingness to experiment with various modes of expression, with styles, with ever new materials. There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it denies nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an Idea—infinite wealth or power. It does not provide any example from nature that might verify this Idea. In subordinating science through technologies, it only succeeds in making reality appear increasingly intangible, subject to doubt, unsteady.

Human experience, individual and collective, and the aura that surrounds it are diluted by instant gratification and self-affirmation through success. Even the virtually theological depth of the worker's condition, and of work itself, which has marked the socialist and labor movements for over a century has been devalued since work has become a monitoring device and manipulator of information. These observations are banal, but what does merit attention is the disappearance of the temporal continuum through which the experience of generations used to be transmitted. The distribution of information is becoming the only criterion of social importance, yet information is by definition a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and share it ceases to be information but has instead become an environmental given; "all is said"—we supposedly "know." It has been fed into the memory machine. The duration of time it occupies is, so to speak, instantaneous. Between two informations, by definition, nothing happens. A confusion thereby arises between what is of interest in terms of information and in terms of circuitry systems, and another between the avant-garde investigation of that which has just happened—the new—and the *Is it happening?*, the *now*.

One has to concede that the art market, subject as are all markets to the sovereignty of the new, can exert a kind of seduction for artists. This attraction has to do with more than just corruption. It exerts itself within the boundaries of a confusion between innovation and the *Ereignis* that time itself imposes on contemporary capitalism. "Strong" information, if one can call it that, exists in an inverse logic to the significance that can be attributed to it through the code available to its receiver. It is like "noise." It is easy for the public and for artists, advised by intermediaries—the diffusers of cultural merchandise—to draw from this observation the notion that a work of art is avant-garde in direct proportion to the extent

to which it is stripped of meaning. Is it then not rather like an event? Just as with any novelty, it is necessary that the absurdity of the work not discourage buyers. The secret of artistic success, like commercial success, resides in the balance between that which is surprising and that which is "well-known," between information and code. Innovation in art is such: one resumes already proven formulas, one throws them off kilter by combining them with other, allegedly incompatible formulas, by amalgamations, quotations, ornamentations, pastiches. One can go as far as kitsch or baroque. One flatters the "taste" of a public, and the eclecticism of a sensibility enfeebled by the multiplicity of forms and available objects. In this way one thinks one is expressing the spirit of the moment, whereas one is merely reflecting the spirit of the marketplace. Sublimity no longer is in art, but in speculating on art.

The enigma of *Is it happening?* nonetheless is not dissipated, nor is the task of painting the indeterminate out of date. The occurrence, the *Ereignis*, has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the rentable pathos, that accompanies innovation. Hidden in the cynicism of innovation is surely a despair that nothing further will happen. But to innovate means to behave as though any number of things could happen, and it means taking action to make them happen. In affirming itself, *will* affirms its hegemony over time. It also conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. Innovation "advances." The question mark of the *Is it happening?* arrests. *Will* is defeated by occurrence. The avant-garde task is to undo spiritual assumptions regarding time. The sense of the sublime is the name of the dismantling.

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