Chapter 1

Is Art Necessary?

The challenge that modernist art posed at the beginning of the twentieth century lay in its uncompromising rejection of what had been central to the artistic traditions of our civilization. Sensuous charm, the representation of intelligible content, and the nobility of thought and feeling were now banished from sight and hearing, with the effect of forcing a reconception of art. To accept the modernist enterprise meant that coherence, recognizability, and beauty could no longer be insisted upon without appearing to reject all that defined artistic creativity in the modern world. But the result is that, a century later, this challenge has produced not just skepticism about the ideal of beauty that art was traditionally to embody, but skepticism about the nature and function of art itself. Although artistic modernism is founded on the faith that art is one of the highest of human callings, its success is bound to call into question whether art is indeed necessary when it becomes incomprehensible, sensually unappealing, and deliberately provocative. The conviction of art's necessity cannot be divorced from the nature of its form and content.

Postmodern art shares with modernist art this effect of calling its own significance into question; although making use of elements of various historical styles of art, including modernism, it does so without a sense of historical narrative. The diversity of approaches to painting that are considered compatible with postmodernism, from neorealism to neoexpressionism, raises questions about the significance of these

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

approaches themselves.[1] Even the return to unabashed representation in neorealism fails to portray a significant content, and certainly not a narrative content such as was traditionally considered essential to painting. Postmodernist architecture, like postmodernist painting, also embraces a wide variety of styles and approaches. But in the most characteristic cases, the return to some elements of traditional form, such as pediments and gables, occurs without a corresponding return to classical ornament in the forms of identifiable orders and entablatures. The effect is more of an ironic commentary on formal possibilities than a coherent approach to architectural design: again, the question of the artistic significance of such a style cannot be avoided. Finally, the advent of a less dissonant music rooted in a rudimentary tonality is often hailed as a return to some semblance of tradition by those weary of the atonality of modernist composers. But again, there is a gulf separating the postmodernist minimalism from the premodernist tonal tradition, for there is no melody, only a monotonous rhythmic repetition or static chords as the focus of attention. Such music, too, raises the question of the significance of the art in the absence of beauty.

This sense of the loss of significance through the exhaustion of possibilities in the arts is what underlies the growing perception that art has reached its end. The museum of art may now include anything because there is no criterion defining art.[2] Yet today a deep skepticism reigns regarding the highest values of truth, beauty, and goodness that once defined art: this is the essence of philosophical postmodernism. Although it seems to have little explicitly in common with artistic postmodernism, it has clear consequences for how art is regarded, and in particular for whether art is held to have any compelling purpose or significance. This new skepticism is rooted in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger; it begins from the point of view that there is no rational truth, no absolute good or moral virtue, no transcendent source of authority.[3] There is therefore no beauty, no compelling argument for art such as the traditional doctrine of beauty once supplied, and no tradition that can still be asserted. Indeed, it sees the death of art as the characteristic of the postmodern era.[4] The new skepticism strips ideals (both moral and aesthetic) of their presumptive rightness, and decries—in a line of thought inherited from Marxism—the attempt to maintain a culture that displays such ideals publicly as an imposition of the values of one class on another, or of one social group on all others. But this postmodern skepticism

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

regarding the arts is an outgrowth of the earlier modernist aesthetic, in which traditional categories of beauty and moral purpose for the arts were decisively rejected.

In this condition, it is well that we take a step back to the era when the arts were held in unquestioning esteem: for the nineteenth century's faith in the power of art in the lives of both individuals and civilizations stands in stark contrast to the ambivalence with which the twentieth century has come to regard them. In this respect, the *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* by G.W. F. Hegel constitutes the most systematic and influential source for understanding the nineteenth century's attitudes toward art. Delivered in 1823, 1826, and 1828–29, and published after his death in 1835 in the collected works edited by H. G. Hotho,[5] Hegel's lectures were an attempt to integrate what would today be identified as largely separate concerns about beauty and the nature of art with the history of the individual arts. For Hegel, however, the philosophy of a contingent enterprise such as art was necessarily concerned with understanding the nature of its contingency, that is, with its history. But for the question, whether art is necessary in any sense, Hegel's historicism may be put to one side temporarily in order to discover the answer he gives. Doing so permits us to place the postmodern insignificance of art in a clearer light.

Hegel on the Necessity of Art

The traditional explanation of the significance of the arts was in terms of beauty, by which was understood a transcendent good pointing to the eternal nature of the Platonic Good itself. But this no longer convinces; the modern world has no use for Platonic Ideas or for beauty as a transcendent quality. For the modern world, art appears designed purely for aesthetic contemplation, and in its divorce from all utilitarian motives, it thereby loses the sense of significance that comes from being enmeshed in a network of needs and satisfactions. In contrast to both the traditional Platonic account of art as the imitation of beauty and the modern world's commitment to artistic autonomy, Hegel's aesthetic enmeshes art in a network of human needs and satisfactions and yet argues against all merely utilitarian justifications of art. Thus it avoids Platonic transcendentalism as well as utilitarianism: for these reasons, it should appeal to modern sensibilities. On

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

the other hand, precisely because it employs the traditional language of beauty, and accords to the historicity of art the value of each age—and particularly of the classical era—it has been as suspect as other, more Platonic aesthetics have been in the twentieth century. That it has not received the attention it deserves is largely due to its having so little in common with modern preoccupations.

Like many of his contemporaries, Hegel's high estimation of the value of art rests on the conviction that art is an expression of the human spirit. The need to produce art, however, is not just a matter of spiritual self-expression or a desire to be creative. Rather, it arises from the rational nature of the human spirit. Human nature is a "thinking consciousness," so that necessarily "man draws out of himself and puts before himself what he is and whatever else is." This general remark may indeed explain both philosophical and artistic activity, but the unique impulse to create art resides in the particular need for the sensuous recognition of what we are and what the world is: "The universal need for art . . . is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self" (*VÄ* 1, 50–52; *A* 1, 31). In other words, the need for art originates in the need to surround ourselves with reminders of who we are and what kind of world we truly live in; the emphasis on re-cognition rather than on original cognition is crucial to avoiding utilitarian didacticism, which Hegel repudiates. But neither is art a purely intellectual means of perception: the need for art arises precisely because we have a sensuous nature, and art is directed to that side as well as to our intellectual or spiritual side by its union of the sensuous and the spiritual. We seek sensuous reminders of the human condition rather than exclusively theoretical knowledge.

Hegel goes further, however: art is necessary because of a need to impress on external things "the seal of his inner being," so that we make these things our own. We do this "in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself" (*VÄ* 1, 51; *A* 1, 31). That is, we need to create art fundamentally as a means of making the world our own; by art we come to feel at home in the world. Hegel is emphatic: "man in his worldly environment must be domesticated and at home," in both nature and social relations, so that the individual's character and "the objective totality of external existence . . . harmonize and belong together" (*VÄ* 1, 327; *A* 1, 252–53). The importance of this

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

feeling at home cannot be emphasized enough at this point, for the peculiar situation of the last century has been for man not to feel at home in the world. Martin Heidegger, in particular, describes the human condition as "throwness" into nowhere. It is only when we are removed from "entanglement" in the world of ordinary affairs that we have revealed to us the true condition of "not being at home" in the world.[6] Hegel's aesthetic, therefore, stands in stark contrast to the assumptions of recent modernity: in his view, we require feeling at home in the world, and art is the principal means by which we bring into effect what we so sorely need. But what we need is precisely, according to Hegel, knowledge of the true condition of humanity. Hence Hegel defines the high purpose of art's vocation: "to unveil the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration . . . " (*VÄ* 1, 82; *A* 1, 55). Art, in this view, is called to the highest possible purpose in representing the truth of who we are and the kind of world in which we live.

The Aesthetic of Modernism

From this brief consideration of Hegel's clear vindication of the necessity of art, it is possible to see why his aesthetic has largely fallen into disfavor and neglect. He understands humanity to have a given nature, out of which emerges certain definite needs. The need for sensuous recognition of our nature is what gives birth to art in the first place; to this is added the need for the sensuous recognition of our world. But the modern perception is instead that we have no nature: human existence emerges out of Nothingness, and the world in which we live is one in which we cannot possibly feel at home. If this indeed be the human condition, the case for art would have to be entirely different. For if humanity have no nature, art itself would have no given nature; we would neither expect to recognize in it our nature, nor the nature of the world into which we have accidentally come. In such a situation, the contemplation of art as a product of human activity divorced from any conception of human nature would have to answer to whatever purpose art might have. Indeed, the contemplation of art would have to be divorced from any conception of an overarching purpose rooted in human needs. Art would necessarily be as autonomous as human existence itself.

Without pretending to offer a complete survey of all aesthetic theories current in the philosophical literature, it is useful to seek out the

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

principal, most characteristic theories of the modernist period.[7] The modern conceptions of art can be reduced to four essential positions, taken as representative types for the purpose of this analysis. These reveal both the aesthetic positions fundamental to the modern period and the degree to which they form the foundation for a common modernist enterprise:

1. Art has a peculiarly aesthetic value to the spectator, listener, or reader that arises principally from the formal properties of the work.
2. Art attains its significance as the product of a creative act that is the artist's expression of his inner self.
3. What is of principal interest in art, to either the creator or the spectator, is the materiality of the medium.
4. Art has legitimacy only as the expression of the alienation of art, and the artist, from society as a whole.

Although these positions are essentially contradictory, all four establish art as autonomous from moral, religious, or social ends.[8] All of them, therefore, contribute to the paradoxical character of modernity's simultaneous celebration of art and ambivalence towards the arts as actually practiced. The result is that art becomes an end in itself, the object of an aesthetic contemplation whose value must be taken for granted.

The modern concept of aesthetic contemplation is rooted in precisely this autonomy: it severs art from the fulfillment of human needs. Textbooks tell students to notice the significant elements of form and the handling of the medium employed, but the justification of artistic creation is almost always cast in terms of the artist's self-expression, and the therapeutic exercise of the usually unidentifiable emotions that stir his or her soul. What matters is originality: we are asked to perceive the wholly new, and to see the value of what has never been done before. What is not admitted in aesthetic contemplation is the apprehension of objects or truths represented in art, even in traditional styles. This is the essence of the modernist enterprise; it has succeeded thoroughly after a century of artistic militancy. As a result, however, the value of the contemplation of such originality becomes mysterious.

These four distinct views share, moreover, a common hostility to the traditional conception of art as a good that is perceived as a good because its sensual beauty is understood as a reflection of a higher

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

intellectual purpose. More precisely, they reveal a refusal to consider art as having an ethical purpose that ennobles the viewer or listener in cultivating and participating in painting, music, drama, or literature. It is because ethical justification has shrunk that the exaltation of art as an end in itself has grown commensurately with the paradoxical consequence of its trivialization. That the concept of aesthetic value has become the most common substitute for the older language of beauty appears to suggest an equivalency that allows for a broader range of aesthetic responses than beauty suggests. Thus the aesthetic of contemplation of artifacts autonomous from any other purpose depends on having a category of appraisal such as "aesthetic value." Nevertheless, an examination of these four modern conceptions of art must raise questions concerning the adequacy of the concept of aesthetic value and, more broadly, the success of the larger modern project of an autonomous art meant purely for disinterested contemplation. Hegel's clear vindication of the necessity of art stands in the sharpest possible contrast to these four positions.

Form as the Source of Aesthetic Value

The prevalence of the concept of aesthetic value as the term for the significance of autonomous art should be problematic. For the assumption that there is such a value makes it imperative to identify its nature. In practice, aesthetic, or artistic value is a unique type of pleasure taken in the disinterested contemplation of works of art that are displayed solely for the purpose of such contemplation.[9] The nature of such a pleasure, however, is a problem: the solution that satisfies the criterion of artistic autonomy requires an escape or separation "from the real world of our practical affairs."[10] What then gives pleasure? The engagement of all our mental capacities is posited as an activity that produces a pleasure intrinsic to the contemplation of art. It requires art to be totally absorbing, an alternative to life rather than a part of life.

The concept of aesthetic value is most often held to originate in the formal properties of an artwork. Thus Monroe Beardsley, for example, finds the three canons of aesthetic value to be completeness, coherence, and intensity: the criteria of completeness and coherence are clearly formal properties of the work, while intensity recognizes a subjective component of the spectator's or reader's

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

experience of the artwork.[11] Like most other twentieth-century analytic philosophers, Beardsley dismisses the traditional concept of beauty as an account of the value of art on the grounds that to imply that something is judged to be good, just because it is beautiful, seems neither self-evident nor capable of convincing demonstration.[12] Beardsley also rejects any intrinsic moral effects of art, so that there is no necessary moral value attendant on an artwork taken to be beautiful.[13] All that is left is the set of general canons of aesthetic value, which are not demonstrated in any deductive way, but are taken to arise from the general practice of art criticism. In this way, the value of the experience of art is reduced to a stimulation of the spectator's perception of formal properties with a certain intensity.

But if formal qualities have often been taken as the object of aesthetic "appreciation," it is perhaps less clear what this means in practice for each art. Hence, recent defenders of the concept of aesthetic value seek its origin in multiple kinds of artistic properties. Goldman finds that expression and representation are as important as form, and Malcolm Budd finds that each art has its own species of artistic value.[14] Budd, in particular, seeks such artistic values as intrinsic values in any work of art. The more the concept of aesthetic or artistic value is pluralized, however, the more it risks becoming incoherent. It becomes difficult to say what exactly such artistic values are beyond generalities such as meaning and worth. In the case of music, for example, there is no identifiable meaning or emotional content.[15] Thus, what constitutes aesthetic value, and what gives rise to it, remains problematic in the modern concept of art. In particular, attempts to locate the vale of "serious art" in its formal qualities ultimately fail to convince.[16]

The origins of the problems in the concept of aesthetic value lie in the legacy of Kantian philosophy. The principle of autonomy can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when it attained its codification in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Kant argues that judgment of taste is not pure if it is subject to a definite concept, so that ideas of morality and the mimetic fidelity to reality are equally threatening to the purity of aesthetic judgment of what he calls "free beauty."

> There is presupposed no concept of any purpose which the manifold of the given object is to serve, and which therefore is to be represented in it. By such a concept the freedom of the imagination which disports itself in the contemplation of the figure would be only limited.[17]

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

Even though Kant speaks in the traditional language of beauty, what matters is the ability of the viewer to allow his imagination to "disport" itself freely. Natural beauty is "free," and so is "foliage for borders or wallpapers," and anything else that does not represent something "under a definite concept." The beauty of a human being, a horse, or a building, however, is "adherent beauty," because it presupposes "a concept of the purpose which determines what the thing is to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection"; thus the judgment of this kind of beauty is less than pure, and in that measure inferior (*CJ* §16, 66). Mimetic art is therefore less valuable than the arts of abstract design or of themeless music, or than nature itself.

What is called in modern terminology "aesthetic value," therefore, is for Kant a pleasure arising from the free play of the faculties of understanding and the imagination (*CJ* §35, 129). This free play is aroused by purely formal qualities having no inherent purposiveness; hence the formalism of the modern conception of art arose in the first place as a necessary consequence of the autonomy of the judgment of beauty. Kant concedes that adherent beauty has a place in the fine arts, but art is in general purposive and thus inferior (*CJ* §44, 148). The greater danger in the arts, however, was sensory charm, and against this corrupting influence Kant recommends a "more or less close combination with moral ideas," as giving the kind of self-sufficient pleasure that pure form would otherwise provide (*CJ* §52, 170). But, although moral concepts have a natural association with mimetic art, they too are a source of corruption to the purity of aesthetic judgment. Thus the autonomy of aesthetic judgment in fact devalued art itself according to the Kantian view. This remains the heart of the problem with the formalist theory of aesthetic value in art and the source of the modern paradox of the exaltation of art founded on an aesthetic of insignificance.

Expression as the Value of Art

Twentieth-century aesthetic theory has not, however, restricted the concept of aesthetic value to simply the formal properties of an artwork; there has also been a powerful current of thought focusing on both the subjective experience of the spectator and the subjective motivation of the artist. These two foci combine in the theory of

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

expression as the source of aesthetic experience, exemplified cogently in the philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey's aesthetic is founded on the psychological experience of the subject who beholds art. Aesthetic perception involves enjoyment; it is an active rather than a passive role because it involves the surrender of the self to the process of perception.[18] But this is not unlike the experience of the artist in creating art; for the artist must in fact begin with an aesthetic perception of what he wishes to create. The psychology of perception, then, is used to vindicate the autonomy of art:

> An object is peculiarly and dominantly esthetic, yielding the enjoyment characteristic of esthetic perception, when the factors that determine anything which can be called an experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception and are made manifest for their own sake.[19]

As in Kant's aesthetic, there is a peculiar pleasure attached to the category of the aesthetic—which here replaces the older term of beauty—and which is taken to be autonomous from any other concern. Yet a pleasure so autonomous would be justified as significant only on hedonist grounds unless there were something deeper in art itself. It is to avoid the peril of insignificance that Dewey joins to the doctrine of Kantian autonomy that of expressivism.

For Dewey, art is fundamentally emotional expression—but expression understood not as mere emotional "discharge," but rather as an ordering through the lens of prior experience, the resistance of the environment, and the artistic medium itself.[20] Thus Dewey's doctrine of expressionism is not crude:

> . . . the expression of the self in and through a medium, constituting the work of art, is itself a prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self with objective conditions, a process in which both of them acquire a form and order they did not at first possess.[21]

Form and order are here made central to the work of art and indeed to the working of the artist. But the self that is expressed is the "emotivist self" of Alasdair MacIntyre's description; ultimately, then, the self that is perceived in the work of art is just this emotivist self.[22] Thus Van Gogh depicted a particular object, for instance, a bridge over the Rhône, as "a new object experienced as having its own unique meaning." That meaning was created by the fusion of the artist's own emotion of "utterly heart-broken" desolation with the object; thus the depiction of the bridge became an "expression" of the artist.[23] The aesthetic value of the work of art,

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

therefore, becomes precisely the perception and enjoyment of such expression of the artist, in which the artist's self and his object are thoroughly fused. This has become a firmly rooted dogma in the teaching of art appreciation.

Dewey also, however, conceived art as the making of something entirely new, endorsing the modernist project of creation as rejection of tradition while at the same time defending the thesis of art's autonomy. Dewey writes: "Impulsion beyond all limits that are externally set inheres in the very nature of the artist's work." He specifically denies moral limits for art, and asserts that "one of the functions of art is precisely to sap the moralistic timidity that causes the mind to shy away from some materials. . . ."[24] This position relies on Clive Bell and Roger Fry, the two art critics of Bloomsbury who did much to advance the cause of modernist art through their attention to its formal qualities rather than its objective content. Thus the modern conception of artistic autonomy is fundamental to both formalism and expressivism in modernist aesthetics.

The modern conception, however, is not rendered more coherent for having combined the elements of formalism and expressivism. For if the weakness of Kantian formalism lies in the potential insignificance of an autonomous art, that potential is not alleviated by the insertion of the artist's expression of himself into the account. Rather, significance is attached to an activity precisely in the degree to which it addresses the deepest needs of life, whether cognitive, moral, religious, or social. In that sense, art is a derivative activity, and the doctrine of autonomy will always risk trivializing art. Hence it is no surprise that even aesthetic theories which remain formalist in defining art attempt to find some redeeming effects that make aesthetic experience important.[25] But why the artist's emotion would appear to be significant enough to merit anyone's attention, much less enjoyment, is not explained in Dewey's account, nor is the necessity of pleasure taken in artistic form. The insistence on the radical originality of art, indeed, only makes such pleasure surely more difficult. Thus neither formalism nor expressivism secures to art the significance which the doctrine of autonomy fails to justify.

The Aesthetic of Materiality

Formalism and expressivism, however, do not exhaust the varieties of modern aesthetic theory which seek to account for the value of art a

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

subjective value to the spectator. Nor do they exhaust the possible points of view artists often hold; in particular, artists frequently cite the material of their medium as the primary focus of their attention. Even in explaining their work to others, they assume that the real interest in their work must lie in the way they handled the material medium. This is so striking that it must be curious, but in fact there is ample philosophical precedent for it in the work of Martin Heidegger. Situated within his existentialist analysis of the condition of modern life to which we have already referred, Martin Heidegger's study, "On the Origin of the Work of Art," is perhaps the most sophisticated attempt at an aesthetic of modernity. Heidegger provides the greatest continuity with previous aesthetics, while searching for an answer to the question of what is art that will be well adapted to the modern social condition. He maintains the concept of the work of art and, like Hegel, he retains a link between art and truth: "Art is truth setting itself to work."[26] Such a conception of art is essentially poetic: "Art, as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry"; poetry thus becomes the model for all the arts (*PLT* 72). But in saying this, Heidegger inverts the traditional responsibility of poetry to a preexistent truth; instead, poetry becomes the making of truth. Indeed, in *Being and Time*, he had already rejected the concept of objectivity and truth.[27] Finally, like Hegel, he argues that whatever beauty art has is precisely the appearance of truth in the work of art: beauty is something conceptual, not a merely surface quality or an external formal property (*PLT* 79). But in spite of such superficial continuities with Hegel, who Heidegger admits has the most comprehensive treatment of the question of art, Heidegger's aesthetic in other ways is strikingly modern. It is these ways of thinking about the nature of art which are of most importance to us.

Heidegger takes a particular work of art—Van Gogh's still life representation of shoes—as his example to show what truth art can reveal. The portrait of the shoes reveals the essential nature of the shoes as they lie in repose: we perceive that they are "equipment," possessing the quality of "blank usefulness" (*PLT* 34). Shoes themselves do not reveal their nature so transparently, because in a real pair of shoes, we see their "thingness." But art portrays not the thingly nature of the thing, but their character in their use as equipment, which is intermediate between "thing" and "work" (*PLT* 31). This does not mean, however, that art must be representational, the adequacy of which might be decided by the recognizability of its imita-

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

tion. Rather art is simply "the reproduction of the thing's general essence" (*PLT* 36). For Van Gogh, certainly, that did not require careful attention to the details of any of his subject matter; in fact, Van Gogh agrees with Heidegger on the purpose of art as the representation of general essences.[28] As a consequence, it makes sense to say that for Heidegger not only does art reveal truth; but rather, it is only in art that we see truth revealed. For the fact that shoes in real life do not reveal their true nature as equipment, but instead contaminate our perception with the material of which they are made, means that we must turn to art to discover the truth even about shoes.

It is of course not the case that we turn to art in order to learn something as trivial as the nature of shoes. But, Heidegger argues, this simple example reveals the nature of art and the nature of the truth found in art. The work of art isolates the nature of the thing it presents for perception: thus the artwork is purely autonomous from any context or any larger purpose. Indeed, Heidegger notes that "[t]o gain access to the work, it would be necessary to remove it from all relations to something other than itself, in order to let it stand on its own for itself alone." This, however, is precisely what every great artist intends for his work. "The work is released by him to its pure self-subsistence" (*PLT* 39). Again, Heidegger gives an example. Architecture, the most nonrepresentational of the arts, produces works which reveal a truth, not in the context of other works, but in creating a world as a context for human life. Thinking perhaps of both Greek and Catholic statuary inside sacred precincts, he notes that the temple provides the place where the statues are set up, so that the god himself will be present in this place. Thus the work of art is set up "in the sense of dedication and praise" (*PLT* 42). But the praise is specifically not of the divine, but rather of the world created by the artwork itself. The function of art, then, is to reveal the truth in the deep sense of unveiling a world. "Towering up within itself, the work opens up a world and keeps it bidingly in force" (*PLT* 43).

The concept of the world opened up by art, however, is counterbalanced by what Heidegger calls "the earth"; the work of art also lets the matter of the earth be itself, as in the quality of the stone used in architecture, or the splendor of the gold used to adorn the moldings in a church. The artwork, therefore, lets the material of nature shine forth in itself, not as something to be used as equipment. But there is a tension, then, between the attention to the earth and the attention to the world in the work of art. Hence, "[t]he work-being of the work

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth" (*PLT* 48). Art "sets forth" the earth and "sets up" the world, and in doing both of these, "lets truth originate" (*PLT* 75). Thus art is a mode of knowing, not merely a craft or a skill in making, and the work of art emerges as utterly unique in the way it establishes truth (*PLT* 60–61). We need art to know both the earth and the world in their essential natures, that is, the material and the world created by the work itself.

Heidegger's aesthetic, therefore, insists neither on representation nor on beauty, and therefore it seems well suited to the artistic conditions of the twentieth century. It has a high view of the purpose and autonomy of art. But the truth that Heidegger finds in art is a presentation of the genuine character of the materials used in the work of art—again, a perception more suited to the twentieth century's preoccupation with the medium employed in the artwork—as well as a creation of a world in itself. Because such a world is essentially unique to each work of art, the truth thus created is a truth unique to each work. It is nonobjective, because "the world" in general is not an object in any case: the paths of our lives are perceived through their subjective effects on our being (*PLT* 43). The work of art, therefore, in "setting up" a world, is an opening into the subjectivity of human existence. There is no need here, then, for art to concern itself with a moral or ethical content as the reason for its existence; in this, it conforms to the canons of contemporary artistic practice. Heidegger validates the sense of autonomy and subjectivity of art in the modernist era, in the course of constructing an aesthetic of materiality. For just that reason, however, Heidegger's aesthetic deprives art of any objective significance arising outside of its own narrowly constructed world.

The Aesthetic of Alienation

If Heidegger's aesthetic proves able to justify the significance of an essentially subjectivist art in the modern world, the Marxist aesthetics of Adorno and his postmodernist successors articulate much more clearly the alienated character of art and the artist as underlying the phenomenon of modernism. According to this view, the self-representation enclosed in modernist art is of the self as alienated from the possibility of the ideal: the artist, in this view, becomes emblematic of the universal condition of humanity. Thus, although the social realization of truth and of an ideal of moral goodness is denied, postmod-

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

ernism depends for its interpretive stance on the very categories it denies. In this way it embodies the alienation it sees as characteristic of modernity.

Theodor W. Adorno, one of the most representative philosophical apologists for the avant-garde, links this alienation explicitly with the condition of modern bourgeois society, in which art's autonomy withdraws art from a society that is "ever less a human one." Thus does art become "the social antithesis of society," having for its aim not the contrast of an ideal held up against the commercial spirit of the capitalist world, but the persistent critique of the inhumanity of that world.[29] Hence art is left with the task of directing aggression against established norms, of shattering the ideology of decoration which, in reflecting "the world in a positive light," in calling "for a better world, became a lie which legitimated evil."[30] The aesthetic ideology of the beautiful must be dismantled by art itself.

The alienation expressed in art may also be described in terms of an inevitable feature of advanced industrial society, a sociological fact of the diremption of the individual and society. The avant-garde, then, "claims to be the model for a privileged mode of knowledge of the real, a moment of subversion of the hierarchized structure of the individual and society, and thus an instrument of true social and political action."[31] It rejects (and therefore the defender of the avant-garde must also reject) the traditional aim of art in aspiring to embody the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. The work of art will become ambiguous, defining "its success fundamentally in terms of rendering problematic such a set of values, and in overcoming—at least momentarily—the limits of the latter."[32] The alienation of the individual, therefore, is fundamentally an alienation from the values of society: the postmodernist apologist for the avant-garde must call into question all determinate notions of goodness and truth in defense of the individual.

This position has several consequences, which have been realized in more recent postmodern critics. One is a calling into question of artistic institutions, such as museums and theaters and concert halls, which collect and display the artistic canon of great works, either literally in the case of museums or figuratively in the case of theaters and concert halls. The museum, on this view, ceases to be an institution where the great works representing the best artistic achievements are kept on display to allow the public to view them. Rather, the museum becomes a metaphor of capitalist possession, an

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

instrument of the ideological domination that "allowed its visitors symbolically to possess objects that were inaccessible . . . and as such invested with high cultural prestige."[33] The "imaginary museum" of music is even more suspect, as the avant-garde of totally serialized and aleatoric music have both brought a disappearance of the traditional concept of a work that is self-contained and developmental. Hence, critics of the concept of the work look to the dismantling of the ritual of the concert, with its traditional focus on European classical music, as a necessary step to opening up musical institutions to other kinds of music—especially the avant-garde, which has rarely been successful in the concert hall.[34] To destroy the institutions preserving the inherited artistic traditions becomes the means of destroying the ideals and values exhibited and represented therein. It is the concommitant of the avant-garde's wish to destroy the normativity of the artistic styles and forms inherited from the past.

The second consequence, however, is to call into question the very notion of what constitutes a public for art. The perspective of many postmodernist critics is to see artists and audiences as representatives of specific sociological groups, denying the category of a larger "public" altogether. In this view, marginalized peoples of different races and societies, or a marginalized gender or orientation, become the objects of solicitude, as the artistic culture of the majority becomes illegitimate simply through being portrayed as an imperialistic abuse of power.[35] But the error here lies in reducing an art to its originator, the values expressed in it to its class of creators, and the audience to a collection of fragmented social groups. What is lost entirely is the concept of the public as a universal body: the fallacy of the sociological dissection of society thus intrudes into the dimension of artistic taste and activity.

A third consequence therefore emerges: the reduction of art to perpetual insignificance. For even more radically than the positions already examined, deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida seek to dismantle the claim of rationality as it applies to the arts. Viewed in this light, art becomes something entirely separate from the already suspect realm of rational argument and truth claims; it becomes a perpetual challenge to reason precisely because of its autonomy and sovereignty. Art can never be integrated into life; it can only be a catalyst of problems, productive of a crisis for reason, never a solution of problems or a reconciliation of opposing sides in a conflict.[36] But this is precisely to render art a suspect category altogether. Without discrete works embodying ideals of truth, beauty, and moral goodness,

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

institutions that preserve those works in identifiable narrative traditions, or a coherent public sharing the ideals embodied in art, it is difficult indeed to argue for the relevance of art to life. The arts pale into insignificance as they are severed from the domain of reason.

The postmodernist critique suggests, therefore, that the position of the arts in the modern world is peculiarly problematic: there appears to be no consensus that ideals should be represented in individualized works, that those works should have a public role, or that a canon of works should be publicly preserved as the historical embodiment of any ideal. The double alienation of the individual from the possibility of the ideal and from the larger society leaves art as only the expression of that condition of alienation. It is, of course, not only the artist who is thus estranged, but ostensibly every individual. Such a condition is at once pathological and paradoxical: pathological in its universality, and paradoxical if society can be composed of none but individuals who find themselves never at home in it. In such a condition, as Jacques Barzun argues, the tradition of an art that sought knowledge and representation of truth appears to be at an end; the devaluation of the world must inevitably diminish the need for art as traditionally understood.[37] But this will mean the end of art as we know it from the historical tradition.

Having examined four principal philosophical positions from the modernist and postmodernist schools of the twentieth century, it is clear that what unites them in a common enterprise is hostility to any kind of moral, ethical, or spiritual ideal as the content of art. Thus, although the importance of art generally, and new art in particular, is assumed, it appears to have little justification outside of the subjective experience it affords the spectator, or the expression of the artist's alienation which is asserted to be the properly universal experience of modern humanity. The Kantian thesis of art's absolute autonomy, therefore, dissolves three elements that were once considered together as vital to all art:

1. the ethical content as the intelligible substance of art;
2. the responsibility to intelligible norms of form as the transparency of artistic content;
3. and the concept of a beauty that is at once of this world and yet transcendent in origin.

The dissolution of these three elements, taken individually, accounts for the rise of formalism, expressivism, and materialism as aesthetic

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

stances. But taken together, they define the modernist enterprise generally and guarantee the alienation of the artist from the larger society, as well as the trivialization of art. Indeed, if critics as divergent in their assumptions as Arthur Danto and Jacques Barzun share a deep pessimism regarding the present and future significance of art, it should be a sign that the premises of the modernist enterprise must be reconsidered. Given the inadequacies in modernist aesthetics, as well as the sense that the course of art history has come to an end, it is essential to return to the earlier aesthetic tradition for a better understanding of art. Hegel's aesthetic, with its vindication of the need for art arising from the purpose of unveiling the truth, as well as its understanding of art's historicity, appears as the best prospective alternative to the modernist aesthetic of absolute autonomy. However, Hegel also recognizes the unique condition of modernity, so that his argument for the need for art turns out to be more attuned to the sense of alienation characteristic of the twentieth century than we might expect.

Hegel on the Need for Art in the Modern World

The alienation characteristic of the modern world was diagnosed already by Hegel, who had no illusions about the actual relation of the individual to the larger society. A person's actions arise, he argues in the *Philosophy of Right*, as the fulfillment of social roles prescribed by custom, law, and institutions in which individuals maintain their freedom, but modern civil society is ruled by economic motives. The result is a loss of independence through the development of a thorough interdependence among the individuals comprising society. One's activities are mechanical and one's requirements are largely not fulfilled through one's own labor (*GPR* §198; *PR* 129). In language that may seem astonishingly prescient, Hegel describes modern society even more harshly in the *Aesthetics* as consisting in "mutual exploitation" with extremes of both poverty and wealth. But poverty and distress create a permanent condition of alienation as the inevitable consequence of a life economically determined, while the wealthy individual's withdrawal from this condition of "endless dependence" fails to cancel his alienation: "for this reason the individual is not at home even in his immediate environment, because it does not appear as his own

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

work" (*VÄ* 1, 337; *A* 1, 260). Modern economic life, therefore, has the character of universal alienation from the products of individual labor.

Such a paradoxical pathology of modern life is ill suited to representation in art, but it goes far to explain the difficulties art faces in the modern world. Hegel claims that we need art, in order to make ourselves feel at home in the world, by representing to ourselves what we most truly are—as not alienated from either the ideal or society. Yet the fact of modern life is that the individual is not at home in the world. What is required, then, is an ideal represented in art that will be other than the actuality in which we necessarily find ourselves living:

> Therefore what is most fitted for ideal art proves to be a third situation which stands midway between the idyllic and golden ages and the perfectly developed universal mediations of civil society. This is a state of society which we have already learnt to recognize as the heroic or, preferably, the ideal Age. (*VÄ* 1, 337; *A* 1, 260)

It is the age described by Homer, in which the heroes kill their own food, make their own armor, and inherit their families' symbols of authority. The feeling portrayed, Hegel says, is one of joy in possession that can come only from the satisfaction in one's own labor, and the identification of the individual with his family.

It is not only in the products of individual labor, however, that the heroic age presents us with an ideal to which we can no longer aspire; it is also a matter of moral action in the larger ethical life of the community. The modern world is bureaucratized and interdependent, so that the individual appears as insignificant, having no action he can call his own. Individuals must be ruled by the state through law, whether by compulsion or by their free assent to the laws, and the punishment of a crime is necessarily assigned to the proper authorities, but all this removes a large field of action that was important to heroic times. What is required above all in art is the representation of individuality "in which the authority of the ethical order rests on individuals alone, who, by their private will and the outstanding greatness and effectiveness of their character, place themselves at the head of the real world in which they live" (*VÄ* 1, 242; *A* 1, 184). This condition is found in art from heroic times; for heroes "are individuals who undertake and accomplish the entirety of an action, actuated by the independence of their character and caprice" in carrying out "what is right and moral" (*VÄ* 1, 243–44; *A* 1, 185). The absence of a state provided the condition for the model of moral action that most fully

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

represents the true potential of individuality in making law and enforcing it by private action.

In yet another way ancient society in the Heroic Age differed from modern conditions: in spite of the individuality Hegel emphasizes in contrast to the modern state, the individual in heroic society knew himself to belong undividedly to his family and clan. A hero's actions were never merely the defense of his own private interests, but always the assertion of the rights of his family. Thus it is not only the presence of a fully developed economic life in civil society, or a state that punishes crimes and thereby precludes revenge that distinguishes modern society, it is also the restriction of individual activity to the arena of the family and domestic affairs. In contrast to the ancient hero's defense of the family's rights:

> A father's care of his household, and his honesty, the ideals of decent men and good women, are the chief material here, where their willing and acting is restricted to spheres in which the human being, as an individual subject, still operates freely . . . in accordance with individual choice. (*VÄ* 1, 253; *A* 1, 193)

Yet actual action is quite often so restricted that what remains is mere disposition to choose, because what is required in action is dictated by circumstances. This was the prosaic state of affairs in Hegel's day; it is ill suited to representation in art because it is so far from the ideal of decisive moral action. But it is also another reason why art from earlier, more heroic times becomes all the more necessary, and why Hegel praises the dramatic works of Schiller and Goethe as an attempt to revive the heroic point of view (*VÄ* 1, 255–57; *A* 1, 195–96). To be sure, Hegel later states emphatically that no "Homer, Sophocles . . . or Shakespeare can appear in our day" (*VÄ* 2, 238; *A* 1, 608)—thus creating the impression that the creation of truly great art is impossible in the prosaic modern world. Hegel finds no reason to lament the rise of a modern, integrated, interdependent society, but only the preservation of art grounded in the ideal of individual independence can sustain it by providing the necessary recognition of the moral life.

This is to say, however, that the modern world needs an artistic representation of a way of life it is no longer permitted to enjoy. Hegel would agree with the postmodernists that the individual is alienated not only from society, but from such an ideal, in the sense that we are permanently estranged from the heroic ideal as an actual way of life. But he insists, against the postmodernists, that just

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

because of that alienation, we require the artistic representation of the ideal: it is only through the preservation of the ideal of life in art, and specifically in heroic art, that we can feel at home in the world in spite of the actual social conditions in which we live. Thus Hegel begins from the same premises as the postmodernists, but arrives at precisely the opposite conclusion. Art ought not be antagonistic, seeking to destroy ideals simply because society does not live according to them, but rather portray the ideal in order to allow humanity to feel at home in the world.

The analysis Hegel provides in the passages cited above explains not simply the importance of the category of art, but also the imperative of the preservation of a canon of works embodying the heroic ideal. Those works which have most perfectly represented the ideal of morally active individuality in substantive unity with the family are those that will be preserved for posterity, and will be most necessary to modern society. These are, first and foremost, the poems of Homer. Moreover, art will be in the character of an adornment of social life: a decoration that will always be more splendid than the actual conditions of life. The impulse to ornament arises from the desire for "contemplative satisfaction," and even in the beautiful things from nature such as gold and jewels: these "have no interest for him in themselves," but acquire their significance from belonging to man, and "to what he loves and venerates," whether his kings or his gods. In the same way, too, art is an adornment, as are the institutions of the art world such as museums and theaters. Art, therefore, honors and venerates even more than the beautiful things of nature. It creates the splendor of a civilization, and "it can but redound to the fame and supreme honour of every people to devote its treasures to a sphere which within reality itself, rises luxuriously above all the distress of reality" (*VÄ* 1, 335; *A* 1, 258–59).

The splendor of the arts, then, is fundamentally a publicly displayed activity. "But however far the work of art may form a world inherently harmonious and complete, still, as an actual single object, it exists not for itself, but for us, for a public which sees and enjoys the work of art." Hegel adduces theatrical performances as his illustration, but musical performances could be added easily, as concerts are public affairs (*VÄ* 1, 341; *A* 1, 263–64). Had he elaborated further, he could have pointed to the creation of art museums, such as the one in Berlin in his day, as precisely the institution that was finally able to create a public for the visual arts.[38] Heretofore, paintings and drawings might

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

be created for royal or aristocratic patrons, or for a bourgeois art market after the seventeenth century: but now such works of art were placed on specifically public display. Moreover, the institution of the salon (as in Paris) helped to make even new art the subject of public display, as new works were exhibited in first the bienniel and later annual competition. Finally, he might have pointed to the public character of the city itself, both in the architecture adorning the public buildings on squares such as the Alexanderplatz, and in the more mundane buildings in which people dwelt and lived their private lives: all these combined to create a public realm.[39] Hegel was correct, therefore, in claiming the principle of the public nature of the arts.

Yet Hegel's argument for the necessity of a public, canonical art is weak: what modern society needs most it cannot produce, and must in fact preserve from the earliest days of recorded history. The heroic poetry of Homer may indeed be timeless, but it must also be an anachronism. Hegel's argument, therefore, runs the serious risk of being a kind of false consciousness, preserving the heroic morality of another era for a modernity that not only does not produce such artistic representations, but cannot allow such a lawless moral impulse to exist. Hegel's aesthetic may indeed be accused of partaking of the same problem as is often perceived to afflict nineteenth-century art and aesthetics in general: admitting but decrying the essence of modernity, it seeks refuge in an irrelevant past. Yet to do so would be to miss the larger point he raises for understanding art in the modern world. When the conditions of social life assume a form that dehumanizes the individual person, this cannot be taken as the ultimate truth of the human condition. Rather, art becomes all the more important as the representation of what human nature is called to be. Without art, in other words, we would have no reminder immediately before us of the truth of what we are and what kind of world in which we ought to live.

It is imperative, therefore, to turn to a deeper consideration of the problems of aesthetics and Hegel's response to them in order to get beyond his well known and quite traditional esteem for the Greek classics. To understand Hegel on the need for art aright, we need to understand his concept of the ethical content of art and its relation to artistic form and the traditional concept of artistic beauty. For it was in the nexus of the good and the beautiful that the philosophical tradition understood the significance and need for art. Although Hegel rejected any kind of crude didacticism such as had been common in

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany

the eighteenth century, he did see a profound connection between beautiful art and the ethical order. The beauty of the Ideal is essential to his conception of art.

© 2006 State University of New York Press, Albany