On the Mattering of Silence and Avowal

Joseph Beuys' Plight *and Negative Presentation in Post-1945 Visual Art*

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ABSTRACT Joseph Beuys' installation *Plight* (1985) forcefully avows of the Nazi genocide by means of negative presentation. The work culminates a collective artistic investigation of negative sculptural strategies for representing traumatic history, opened by the Nouveaux Réalistes under the impact of Alain Resnais' documentary film *Nuit et Brouillard*. This article outlines this history and analyzes *Plight* in the context of the 'after Auschwitz' crisis of representation and traditional culture theorized by Theodor W. Adorno. For Adorno, Auschwitz demonstrated threats to autonomous subjectivity posed by tendencies unfolding within the global social process of modernity itself. Reflecting on the fate of music, poetry and literature under these conditions, Adorno advocated a hermetic art of silence and dissonance, as exemplified by Paul Celan and above all Samuel Beckett. This article shows that in the visual arts, too, the genocidal violence of World War II was confronted with analogous strategies of indirection. In *Plight*, Beuys would successfully synthesize John Cage's symbolic demolitions of traditional music and the investigations of negative presentation carried out in sculpture by Arman and Daniel Spoerri.
KEYWORDS Beuys, Negative presentation, Adorno

Two works by Joseph Beuys, or more precisely, two contrasting moments in his output: the first, a proposal for a Holocaust memorial produced in 1958, a feeble misfire; the second, the installation *Plight,* made and exhibited in 1985, a forcefully effective work of historical avowal. These two moments document the impressive development of one German artist. But more than that, they indicate the whole painful struggle within the visual arts to confront and respond to the Nazi genocide, a crime of state terror for which the place-name 'Auschwitz' has come synecdochically to stand. For visual artists willing to risk such a confrontation, the means and strategies with which to do so were by no means clear or obvious in 1958; if, after 1985, such means and strategies were established and available, that was due to the work of many, in a collective development that was absorbed and synthesized in *Plight*.

Beuys' proposal for a memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau, submitted in March 1958 to the juried competition organized by an association of camp survivors, was a failure by any standard. His offer to overshadow

the camp with a monumental 'monstrance' derived from Roman Catholic ritual was wildly, monstrously inappropriate. I register this moment of misfire only to establish Beuys' relatively early concern with the meaning, legacy and representation of Auschwitz. Beuys was one of 426 artists who submitted proposals to the jury convened in 1956 by the Comité international d'Auschwitz. For it, he produced numerous drawings and models in wood, pewter and zinc. None are compelling or evince much insight. Some were later incorporated into various installations and vitrines, including *Auschwitz Demonstration 1956–1964*; the dates in the title of the latter indicate the artist's retrospective desire to establish his continuous engagement with the Nazi genocide and the problem of its artistic representation. This desire is significant, especially given Beuys' evident reticence with regard to Nazism and its crimes. These early sketches and models, loaded with the Christian symbolism of sin, guilt, sacrifice and forgiveness, may betray the stirrings of the artist's own unresolved conflicts in facing this history. They certainly illuminate a profound confusion before the crisis of representation imposed on art 'after Auschwitz', to use the phrase of Theodor W. Adorno. This confusion was hardly unique at the time; it marks a moment when the dialectic between genocidal history and representation was felt by some European visual artists as the pressure of a still unclarified problematic.

The negative presentation of Auschwitz through the indirect material linkages and evocative strategies deployed so effectively in *Plight* – the environment he installed in the London gallery of Anthony d'Offay in 1985 – was only possible after the investigation of negative presentation in the visual arts had reached a certain point of development. The artistic strategy evident in this work manifests an understanding of the potentials of negative evocation to respond to historical trauma and catastrophe, as well as an at least minimally conscious control of the sculptural means for such evocation. With regard to artistic means, all the techniques used by Beuys in *Plight* had probably been developed by other artists by the end of 1961, although their potentials would not have been immediately clear to all.[1] The necessary historical disclosures no doubt took longer to circulate and fully sink in; the critical processing of those disclosures is by no means complete today.

Plight is a culminating work, in the precise sense that it consolidates this collective investigation and development that took place in the visual arts between 1945 and the end of 1961 in a way so compelling that it establishes a new standard for artistic approaches to Auschwitz. The negative memorials that in the 1990s would become the institutionally preferred

model for monumental public remembrance are prefigured by *Plight* and are, by and large, merely echoes or variations on it. I am not concerned in this essay to treat Beuys' personal development or career in any detail, beyond what I have done elsewhere.[2] Here I focus on *Plight*, in order to unfold from this one work the outlines of a larger history – the discovery and development, in the visual arts, of negative, dissonant strategies for representing catastrophic history in the aftermath of World War II.

Any such outline necessarily takes up problems articulated after 1945 by critical theory, namely, the very specific predicament or indeed plight of art 'after Auschwitz'. Critical reflection on the meaning and implications of Auschwitz, and indeed on the whole social context of violence that produced it, emerged and circulated relatively slowly. Of the few sustained reflections in the early postwar period, only Adorno's attempted to articulate fully the implications of Auschwitz for music, literature, philosophy and all forms of serious cultural production. A detailed study of Adorno's reception has yet to be written, but his critique of traditional culture in the aftermath was probably disseminated first in fragments and echoes. It would be surprising, though, if partial, more or less distorted forms of Adorno's complex arguments were not beginning to penetrate the visual arts in Europe by the late 1950s, given a push no doubt by the impact of Alain Resnais' 1955 documentary *Nuit et brouillard*. Literature and music led the way in developing new means and strategies for responding to Auschwitz, as even Resnais' film confirms: much of the force of *Nuit and brouillard* comes from the dissonance generated between the images qua visual evidence and the critical glossing of those images by Jean Cayrol's voice-over text and Hanns Eisler's score. Indeed, Adorno's thinking about dissonance was strongly stimulated by postwar developments in literature, music and theater. About the visual arts, he wrote relatively little. But as I show, visual analogues of dissonance and negative presentation emerged in sculpture and installation art as well beginning in the late 1950s.

The Elements of *Plight*: Installed Forms, Materials and Objects

Stepping through a doorway or passage, the spectator enters a rectangular room lined floor to ceiling with standing felt columns: two columns of equal size stacked vertically, one on the other, so that two closed ranks of standing columns extend horizontally, wall to wall. Each constituent column is about a meter and a half in height, and roughly the volume of a person. The repeated felt forms affect the space as an echoing lining that both isolates and insulates. Sound from outside is suppressed, temperature in-

side is conserved, and light seems to be absorbed by the rough gray tactility of the felt. Toward the back of the room, an opening in the lower row of columns on the right wall leads to a second room, also lined with felt columns. To navigate this opening, most spectators will have to bend down and pass beneath the upper row of columns. Having gained the second room, which in the original London installation contained no other openings, one finds a grand piano.[3] Both its case and keyboard are closed. A chalkboard lined with musical staves lies flatly on top of the piano; no notes are written on it. Lying on the staff board is an ordinary fever thermometer. From the dead end of the second room, the spectator's line of sight to the outside is severed, and the suppression of outside sound increases. An L-shaped, felt-columned cul-de-sac, then, containing three objects.

The wall label or equivalent signage identifies all this as the work of Beuys, a German artist. A certain history necessitates that we qualify this nationality rather severely. Beuys was eleven years old when, through no fault of his own of course, the Reichstag Fire Decree and Enabling Act of 1933 handed vast powers to the new Nazi Chancellor and his party. Subsequently, we know, Beuys was a member of the Hitlerjugend and served in the Wehrmacht. These facts do not permit us to think of Beuys the artist as just any 'German'. Encountering or considering his art, we are enjoined to remember that he was a boy scout and combat veteran of the Nazi regime. As such, he is indelibly marked as a member of the so-called perpetrating generation.[4] These facts are not a warrant for arrest. They cannot be construed in a way that would fix or freeze Beuys beyond any growth or change, or would deny to him any possibility of critical understanding or agency. And they certainly do not suffice to indict or automatically discredit his art. But neither can they be forgotten or blithely avoided. The work is not reducible to the life, but neither can it be isolated from it, behind a *cordon sanitaire*. Beuys' position within a certain, extremely violent and disastrous history is a social fact that is objective in a very unanswerable sense.

The title, *Plight*, constitutes the artist's concise statement about the work. A title is a linguistic tag, hence a conceptual anchor, tied to the work by a rode of intention. As such, it cannot be read naïvely. 'Plight', an English noun, denotes a dangerous, difficult or unfortunate situation. A verb form, marked as a secondary meaning of archaic origin, means to make a solemn pledge or promise. This semantic range points, if it is not ironic or deceptive, to some danger, difficulty or misfortune still to be specified. Alternatively or perhaps additionally, there may be some pledge or promise operative in or activated by the work.

The three objects installed in the work – piano, staff board and thermometer – are so-called found objects, the authorized presentation of which in art spaces was long established by 1985. The selective principles of montage and assemblage reach back to Cubist collage, which around 1912 first opened the door to invasions of visual art by bits and pieces of empirical life. Passing through Dada and the readymades of Duchamp, such object-choices were given additional psycho-erotic charges by the Surrealists. In the postwar period, empirical reality once again flowed undigested into works and galleries, this time in the service of divergently developing artistic agendas that tended, even in their divergence, to erode the borders between art and life and to subvert the stability of mimetic representation. The ambiguity and disruptive potential of found objects have undoubtedly been diluted with institutional acceptance and widespread use; today their appearance troubles no one. But they still carried some force when, in the 1950s and 1960s, the arts were overflowing the demarcations of traditional media and were recombining globally into new streams of pronounced performativity. Relevant here are Allan Kaprow's Happenings, largely a movement of New York painters spurred by the pressure of Jackson Pollock; the Gutai Art Association of Japanese painters and sculptors; and Fluxus, a network of composers and poets largely inspired by John Cage and active in Europe. The latter, along with Nouveau Réalisme, gave strong impetus to Beuys' artistic development. If, as we will see, he learned a great deal about the sculptural possibilities of found objects from Nouveaux Réalistes such as Arman and Daniel Spoerri, it was through his participation in events organized by or around Fluxus that Beuys was able to assimilate Cage's deconstruction of music and to work out his own more symbolist and allegorical approach to performance.

Beuys has gathered and configured three specific objects into an assemblage installed in the dead-end of the felt-walled space. The grand piano and the staff board clearly allude to music. But the piano is closed and no musical notes have been written on the staff board. So there is actually no music. Music is evoked by negative presentation, called in as it were, not by naming but by the selection and presentation of two found objects with specifically musical associations. Here, in the installation, the evocation avows that there is, or at least was, music, at the same time that it refuses, blocks and occludes the actual acoustic phenomenon of music. The grand piano alludes to concerts and concert halls, the practice and recital of sonatas. But no sonatas, or any other form of music, will be performed on this piano. The possibility is foreclosed by the shutting of

the case and keyboard: music as such has been silenced. The staff board, a pedagogical device, evokes scenes of musical instruction. But the lesson here is: no notes, no music. Silence and silencing, then, are the common associations of these musical found objects. Irony? Possibly. But what of the third object? The household thermometer evokes domestic scenes of illness. Does silenced music have a temperature or fever? A joke, perhaps? While such questions cannot yet be answered, their posing is made more insistent by the sound absorbing and temperature conserving character of the thick felt columns.

Silence and Demolition

It was John Cage, of course, who famously investigated ambient and found sounds – indeed, the very sounds of silence audible in the negation of formal or traditional music. Cage's best-known composition, the provocative *4′33″* (1952) was precisely a score, in three movements marked *tacet*, for the performed silencing of a piano. Experiments with an anechoic chamber in 1951 convinced Cage that so-called silence does not really exist. Music, he was proposing by 1955, is a duration of intended sounds and silences, while what we call silence is merely all the sounds we do not intend.[5]

Perhaps because Cage himself exuded a benign and serene gentleness and great personal generosity, the violence of his gestures vis-à-vis the Western musical tradition often goes unremarked. His experiments and compositions for prepared piano, dating back to 1938 or 1939 but intensifying between 1942 and 1948, enact mutilating interventions on the piano qua traditional instrument. Notes and harmonies are in effect disappeared and deflected into new and uncanny sounds, through the distorting insertion of screws, bolts, weather stripping and other objects and materials between the piano strings. Cage, a former student of Arnold Schoenberg, was schooled in dissonance. But his investigations of ambient and chance sounds eschew even that tradition. His subversion of artistic intention, linking up to heretical streams of automatism and aleatory gaming, goes far beyond the rigorous combinations of twelve-tone composition. With regard to the whole context of traditional music and its performance, Cage is quietly demolitionist. And his demolitions resound beyond the medium of music as such, to challenge the other arts as well. How much more devastating is Cage's silence, for example, than Duchamp's fictional turn to chess and 'silence', or the automatic poems of Surrealist aesthetes.

Cage's demolitions of tradition are not usually understood as responses to the violence of World War II. Such a reading runs against the tenor

of Cage's own words and his well-marked indifference to history. In an interview published in 1955, Cage refused the suggestion that his suppression of intention must still maintain some hidden lyric concern. He flatly cut off the interviewer's question ('Do not memory, psychology –') with a demonstrative '– never again'.[6] In a text from three years later, he repeats this refusal, ventriloquizing Kafka in a question that nevertheless endorses it: 'Do you not agree with Kafka when he wrote, "Psychology – never again"?'[7] If this refusal of memory and psychology, which might be suspected of protesting too much, reflects an avant-garde grasp of some real crisis of the subject under pressures of modernity, then, as we will see below, any such crisis itself throws us back on history. For how else could we explain it, or an art already looking beyond it? It is the violence of the mid-twentieth century, Adorno will argue, that demonstrates in specific and irrefutable ways, the crisis and fate of the autonomous – that is, the lyrical, psychological – subject.[8]

In the Beckett-like 'Lecture on Nothing', first delivered at the 8th Street Artists Club in New York in 1949 but not published until a decade later, Cage makes a rare but revealing mention of the war. 'The most amazing noise // I ever found / was that produced by / means of a coil of wire / attached to the // pickup arm / of a phonograph and then / amplified. / It was shocking, // really shocking, / and thunderous / . / Half intellectually and // half sentimentally / , when the war came a-long, / I decided to use / // only / quiet sounds / . / There seemed to me // to be no truth, / no good, in anything big / in society.'[9] (The lecture was reprinted in 1961, in Cage's collected texts, under the title *Silence*.) Wars of course do not just 'come along', and the close proximity of shock and thunder, insistently repeated, suggests that it, the war, rather than the fabricated sound, is what Cage really 'finds'.[10] These lines, including their passing naturalization of social violence, can be read symptomatically as the registration of a general, globalized trauma – one that Cage is working-through, or better, playing-through, as method, in his opening of a new line of artistic experiment. In this light it is not irrelevant that *4′33″*, first performed by David Tudor at Woodstock in 1952, was conceived in the immediate postwar period, as Cage was working on the *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1946–48). Even his famous turn to Zen and chance did not really begin until 1946.[11]

Even stronger confirmation of such a reading is found in the gestures and production of Cage's students in and around Fluxus. Clearly understanding something else or more in the master's lessons, Nam June Paik, La Monte Young, Benjamin Patterson, George Brecht, Philip Corner,

George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams and others, including Wolf Vostell and – yes – Joseph Beuys, radicalized Cage's relatively subtle and symbolic demolitions into often aggressive enactments of literal violence and destruction. Paik was the driving force.[12] In his notorious *Étude for Piano*, performed in Cologne in 1960, Paik leapt from the stage and attacked his watching 'fathers', Cage and Tudor, cutting off Cage's tie and pouring shampoo on both composers before fleeing the concert. In June of 1962, the symbolic violence was literalized onstage in Paik's *One for Violin*, at the event *Neo-Dada in der Musik* in Düsseldorf. Grasping a violin by the neck with both hands and raising it above his head, the artist suddenly swung it down, shattering it on a tabletop.[13] In September of the same year, a Fluxus gang in Wiesbaden performed Corner's *Piano Activities*. A photo shows Maciunas, Higgins, Vostell, Patterson and Williams cutting into a grand piano with a tree saw. Crowbars and hammers were also inflicted on the hapless instrument. In the following year, at Paik's *Exposition of Music Electronic Television* in Wuppertal, three prepared pianos and thirteen prepared television sets were demolished. At the opening, Beuys took an axe to one of the pianos.[14]

Such demolitionist tendencies are by no means limited to music, or the overlapping of music, performance and visual art in Fluxus. We could trace a certain family resemblance across all of the arts in the wake of World War II. Two streams or tendencies are entwined, converging and diverging with a pulsing ambivalence: one, more cautious, forsakes or abandons traditional object-making and makes a leap into performativity, which then becomes a new object of investigation; the other, less restrained, attacks traditional culture, at first symbolically but soon enough literally. Both streams are globalized.[15] The Lettristes in Paris liquidate first poetry and then cinema. Fontana stabs and slashes the canvas in Milan, while in Japan, Shozo Shimamoto punches and kicks through stretchered paper and Kazuo Shiraga wrestles mud. Neo-Dada here and there cries havoc and raises hell. And so on. Nouveaux Réalistes Daniel Spoerri and Arman carried the demolition into sculpture. In 1961, Spoerri made two works of palpable menace: *Hommage à Fontana*, which carries the painter's slashes into an image of actual throat-cutting, and *Les lunettes noires*, a blinding booby-trap that jokes grimly on the optimist's rose-colored glasses, even as it raises the stakes of Man Ray's *Gift*.[16] Also in 1961, the year before Paik destroyed a violin onstage, Arman began his *colères* (tantrums or rages), in which beautiful stringed instruments of traditional music were systematically smashed to pieces, more or less instrument by instrument – a violin, a bass, a mandolin,

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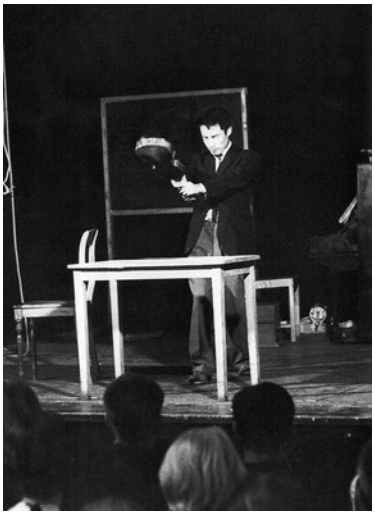

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1. Documentation photo of Nam June Paik's *One for Violin*, performed at the event Neo-Dada in der Musik, Düsseldorf, 16 June 1962.

2. Documentation photo of Philip Corner's *Piano Activities*, performed at the Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik, Wiesbaden, 1962. The photo shows George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Wolf Vostell, Benjamin Patterson and Emmett Williams attacking a grand piano with a table saw and other tools.

3. Arman, *Mama mia!*, 1961. *Colère*, destroyed violin on wooden board, 93 x 67 x 12 cm. Collection of Corice and Armand Arman, New York.

4. Arman, *Le Piano de Néron*, 1965. *Combustion*, burned piano in polyester on wooden board, 200 x 300 x 42 cm. Private Collection, Antwerp.

a piano, a harp – and the gathered bits and splinters affixed to boards. Three years later, in 1964, he varied the gesture in the *combustions* series; this time he burned the instruments to crisps and hung the charred remains on the gallery walls. This cursory highlighting would of course need to be backed up by close readings of specific works in context. But it suffices to indicate how far such attacks on the media and body of art can be grasped in general as mirroring displacements of the violence and trauma of the war.

'This radically guilty and shabby culture' (Adorno)

The bulk of postwar art was undoubtedly restorative and accommodating. But even if it is granted that the examples I have cited do constitute countertendencies of hostility and a crisis of faith in art's traditional authority, why should we think they are responses to World War II? The period indicated, from 1945 to the mid-1960s, is after all complexly full of momentous transformations, antagonisms and struggles. What about the Cold War and nuclear arms race, whose shadows fell constantly on the economic miracles of reconstruction culture? What about the anti-colonial struggles and wars of national liberation flaring across the so-called Third World? Was there not always much to be worried, anxious and angry about? Was not the traumatic ferocity of the Algerian War, for example, the more potent context of Nouveau Réalisme? Such questions are valid and point to factors that were no doubt operative, but the tumults and stresses of the postwar period unfolded within a global social process that was itself radically and irreparably altered by the violence of World War II. It is Adorno who announces and clarifies this.

Auschwitz, for Adorno, is *not*, strictly speaking, the catastrophe. The catastrophe is rather the global social process founded in and reproduced by antagonism and violence. All societies structured around the division of manual and intellectual labor and the domination of man and nature are doomed to 'perennial suffering'.[17] Capitalist modernity is the latest and most totalizing form of such a class society. Nor did Soviet-style 'actually existing socialism' offer any liberating alternative. In both 'late capitalism' and its stunted rivals in 'the East', Adorno saw the same two dominant tendencies unfolding: 'integration', or the tightening of social control and increasing elimination of difference under the reign of identity-thinking, and 'administration', or the expanding powers of bureaucratic concentration and managerial direction. In a globalizing society of expansive states and corporations tending toward 'total administration' and 'total integration', the scope for autonomous subject-

ivity, capable of spontaneous experience and feeling as well as a practice of critical thought, is progressively restricted. Dominated individuals are trained to accommodate themselves to social and economic forces indifferent to their happiness and beyond their control. Their anxiety and repressed rage over this apparent fate predispose them to fascistic appeals and ensure that episodic genocidal eruptions will be a perennial feature of contemporary life.[18] In this light, Auschwitz was only the 'first test piece' (*erstes Probestücke*), the proof that the tendencies of integration and administration contain within them the logic of genocide: 'Genocide is the absolute integration.'[19]

The industrial murder of whole categories of individuals, then, was a latent potential within capitalist modernity that was actualized under the specific conditions of Nazism and war. Racism and anti-Semitism were unquestionably central to the conception and execution of the Nazi genocide. However, the essence of Auschwitz, the fully globalized meaning and implication of this actualized potential, cannot be located in or reduced to anti-Semitism.[20] Once demonstrated, this potential haunts all forms of contemporary society, as a deployable power of state terror. Auschwitz was a qualitative leap in violence that reaches into and changes – must change – the very meaning of life, humanity, society, the future. Nor was it the only such leap, in the context of World War II. Hiroshima, the other threshold-crossing event of violence, demonstrates a different potential: the terminally genocidal power of weapons systems produced under the merger of science and war machine. Adorno takes note of Hiroshima in numerous places, but does not develop its implications in a way comparable to his meditations on Auschwitz.[20] Nevertheless, it follows relentlessly and necessarily from his arguments that Auschwitz and Hiroshima must be thought together, as historically-demonstrated genocidal potentials that remain entangled in the tendencies of the contemporary social process.[21] The meaning of the change that this imposes on us all, without exception, is that the future of humanity, in any form at all, is now in question and fully open to doubt. We may not survive our own social process.[22] Auschwitz and Hiroshima are the end of the myth of automatic progress, full stop. 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but one does lead from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.'[23] For Adorno, then, the catastrophe is emphatically not in the past, an event that happened once and now is to be avoided. We are in the catastrophe and it is ongoing.

The implications of this for art, Adorno argued, are intimidating. With modernity, the arts had acquired a new autonomy, claiming their place,

along with letters, learning and autonomous science, within an honored production of 'spirit' (*Geist*). But such 'culture' remains the luxury of an extracted social surplus, conditioned on the division of manual and intellectual labor and thus implicated in domination. Emphatically differentiating itself from 'life', art nevertheless remains bound to it. As flaring promise of happiness, art cannot become the praxis that would realize what is promised. And this constitutive frustration converts art's very refusal of function into functioning affirmation of the given social reality. Art's 'double-character as both autonomous and *fait social*' is thus an antagonism that 'announces itself unceasingly from the zone of its autonomy'.[24] And the same antagonism haunts all autonomous culture conditioned on the splitting off of spirit in the division of labor, tainting its claim to enlightenment: 'all culture shares society's nexus of guilt'.[25] As the social process of modernity unfolds, and its totalizing tendencies of integration and administration undermine the very autonomous subjectivity on which culture depends and for which it alone can have any redeeming meaning, art's predicament becomes increasingly acute. Under the heading of 'culture industry', Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe how the market, mediating these social pressures, tends systematically to undermine art's autonomy and, behind the mirage of diversity, to reduce culture to conformist *'Ähnlichkeit'* (sameness).[26] Even before Auschwitz, a crisis of faith would merely have reflected an accurate registration of social reality. After it, art's 'very right to exist' is in question, as the opening sentence of *Ästhetische Theorie* announces.[27]

These critical reflections and arguments, developing and deepening in the period from *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944) to Adorno's death in 1969, are the context in which we have to read his assertion that 'after Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric' – and indeed has become 'impossible' (*unmöglich*).[28] Written in 1949 and first published in 1951, at the end of the programmatic essay 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', this infamous provocation only began to circulate widely in 1955, as the lead essay of *Prismen*. Adorno would subsequently revisit this claim, moderating and qualifying it, but pointedly leaving it in force.[29] If, as we have seen, the social process in general is tending to restrict and eliminate the very conditions of autonomous subjectivity, then the subject of spontaneous experience and feeling who could write or read lyric poetry is disappearing with it. And if Auschwitz is the demonstration that this tendency carries within it a genocidal potential, then the meaning of Adorno's provocation emerges clearly: poetry, already becoming 'impossible' through the loss of autonomous subjects who are its necessary condition, now be-

comes barbaric, if, failing to register the social catastrophe, it attempts to carry on as if nothing has happened. This first formulation, then, is a demand for self-reflectivity, a wake-up call that challenges art to attain full awareness of its own plight.[30]

Summing up in *Negative Dialektik*, Adorno insists that Auschwitz is the unanswerable proof of 'culture's failure' (*das misslingen der Kultur*):

> After Auschwitz, all culture, along with the urgent critique of it, is garbage. In restoring itself after what took place in its own landscape, it has become entirely the ideology it was potentially, ever since it presumed, in opposition to material existence, to inspire that existence with the light that the separation of spirit from bodily labor withholds from it. Whoever pleads for the preservation of this radically guilty and shabby culture makes himself its accomplice, while whoever refuses to have anything more to do with culture directly promotes the barbarism that culture revealed itself to be. Not even silence gets out of the circle.[31]

Art and the whole tradition of enlightened culture, then, must bear the ordeal of this predicament, reflecting on its own failure, origins and continuing dependence on injustice, brought to a head by its impotence in preventing or resisting genocide. It can neither permit any uncritical restoration of its ostensible authority, nor flee the field before the tightening knots of a hostile and totalizing system.

Adorno's critique of traditional culture helps us to understand the gestural violence of the artists and works I have cited. Struggling to find their way to the clarity eventually expressed in Adorno's late texts, these artists at first more or less blindly 'acted out' the predicament Adorno specifies.[32] Later on, we will see, some of them were able to work it through to moments of lucidity. The demolitionism that some artists directed toward art is misplaced, but is at least understandable. Moreover, we note that Adorno's first formulations of the 'after Auschwitz' problematic set out a general, structural predicament that argues from the tendencies of a global social process and an analysis of art's position within that process. It is not yet a question of representing the catastrophe in art.

Endgames

In the 1962 radio talk and essay 'Engagement', in the context of a running polemic against committed art, Adorno begins to grapple with the issue of artistic representation.[33] Considering the various strategies by which artists have tried to represent Auschwitz and the larger social catastrophe to which it belongs, Adorno begins to theorize and advocate for a form of

dissonant and hermetic production grounded in negative presentation. Adorno concludes that Brecht's and Sartre's committed representations are too direct, distorting and trivializing. As he later summarizes this critique in *Ästhetische Theorie*: 'Artworks exert a practical effect, if they do so at all, through a barely apprehensible transformation of consciousness, and not by haranguing.'[34] Kafka, Schoenberg and, above all, Beckett become his favored models.

The new elaborations of a negative art of dissonance, I have argued at length elsewhere, are Adorno's rewriting of the traditional sublime – or, more precisely, his attempt to understand how Auschwitz has made the old sublime impossible and replaced it with something radically different.[35] The traditional sublime had marked a passage from terror and disturbance to a pleasing self-admiration. The imagination's distress before the power or size of nature was rescued by reason, which reminds the subject of its supersensible destiny, as a free moral agent. But after Auschwitz and the dead letter of automatic progress, the saving recourse to human dignity is foreclosed. The terror of the social process supplants that of nature as the trigger of the sublime, but now the terror remains in force. Indeed, autonomous reason, if that can be found at all, now confirms precisely this. In the negative art Adorno favors, any feeling of enjoyment, any pleasure still generated by the mimetic structure of artistic semblance, is pulled back into terror when scrutinized. The subjects of this sublime are damaged, remnant subjects; they can only watch, as from barrels in the maelstrom, their own slow orbiting descent around the sucking trauma of history. The forceful dissonance of unreconciled artworks, Adorno argues, triggers the emphatic 'anxiety (*Angst*) that existentialism only talks about'.[36] In *Ästhetische Theorie*, he will call this effect '*Erschütterung*' – 'shudder'.[37]

Kant had introduced the notion of '*negative Darstellung*' (negative presentation) in connection with the sublime in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). In a passage famously including an admiration of the image ban of Jewish Law, he notes that abstract notions, such as the ideas of infinity or God, can be represented negatively, and that the feeling of the sublime loses nothing by a negative approach.[38] Similarly, Adorno argues, the 'abstractness of the objective law prevailing in society' cannot be captured in positive pictures or the simplifying fables of committed art.[39] Like the God of old, the social catastrophe can only be evoked and avowed negatively in art. Even Schoenberg, Adorno implies, does not always remember this. Criticizing *The Survivor of Warsaw*, Adorno suggests that it is still too positive. The remnants of enjoyment that still cling to even

the most ascetic and rigorous artworks, as the structural effect of semblance as such, have to be resisted. Such remnants threaten to turn art 'about' Auschwitz into a new violation of the victims. Only the most indirect, coded and hermetic representations of the victims' suffering generate adequate resistance and counter the enjoyment intrinsic to art. For Adorno, Beckett shows the way. He evokes the catastrophe in its essence, not by direct invocation or committed haranguing, but by showing just how little is left of the autonomous subject in its crisis. In *Endgame*, the catastrophe comes onstage as the news that Hamm has run out of painkiller.[40] 'Beckett responds to the situation of the concentration camp in the only way fitting – a situation he does not name, as if it were subject to a *Bilderverbot*. What is, is like the concentration camp.'[41] Or again, from Adorno's 1961 essay on *Endgame*: 'Only in silence is the name of the catastrophe to be spoken.'[42]

Adorno took a long time in coming to a position on the poetry of Paul Celan. For his part, the poet wrestled courageously with Adorno's challenge. Celan's *Engführung*, his radical 1958 reworking of *Todesfuge* (1945), was written in a full awareness of Adorno's works and arguments.[43] At the end, in the unfinished *Ästhetische Theorie*, Adorno granted Celan a place on his small list of those deemed to have successfully responded to the plight of art after Auschwitz. Arguably, this is the closest Adorno ever came to a real retraction of his 1951 stricture: 'In the work of the most important contemporary representative of German hermetic poetry, Paul Celan, the experiential content of the hermetic was inverted. His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence.'[44]

Negative Evocation and Avowal in the Visual Arts

In the visual arts, negative presentation had to develop in a different way. Found objects are fully positive presentations, rather than mimetic representations, of selected fragments of empirical life. But we have already seen that found objects can also function as negative presentations of other things that are withheld: the piano and staff board in *Plight* are direct and *positive* presentations of these objects but are *negative* presentations of music. The negative evocation works because the association of these objects with music is established and instantaneous. This suggests that negative presentation depends, and perhaps always depends, on a positive image or association that stands behind or underwrites it.

Before it would be possible to attempt a negative visual presentation

of Auschwitz, for example, it would be necessary for positive images to circulate widely, deeply and long enough to become burned into public consciousness – and presumably to do so against strong resistances and tendencies toward forgetting, avoidance and disavowal. Their establishment in public awareness would not at all suffice to demonstrate that either the Nazi genocide or the catastrophe in Adorno's larger sense had actually been worked through and processed; it would indicate only that the minimal awareness necessary for critical processing was at least in place. Once the positive images are so established, however, once it can be taken for granted that most people have been exposed to and carry the trace of such images, then it is possible to work with them without showing them. The release of Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* in 1955 was the vehicle of this dissemination and, as such, had a profound impact not just on public consciousness, but on European artists. It seems in fact to have opened and stimulated the investigation of negative presentation, *as a specifically visual strategy for evoking and avowing traumatic history*. The film's form itself, alternating and contrasting archival still and moving images with newly shot color footage of camp ruins in pastoral landscapes, poses the problem of representation, which Cayrol's text then articulates explicitly at several points. If Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film *Shoah* is now recognized as a landmark of negative presentation in film, his 'fiction of the real' probably depends, more than Lanzmann would care to admit, on the impact of Resnais' earlier documentary. Lanzmann criticized Resnais' film for showing too much, too positively, while the actual genocide of millions, taking place in gas chambers, are terror scenes of which no film exists and to which no image could be adequate.[45] Without denying the truth of this, the force of Lanzmann's combination of rigorous refusal of documentary images and a devastating accumulation of testimony is only intensified by our past exposure to positive images. Indeed, this exposure is necessary if we are to grasp, through Lanzmann's work, how inadequate such images must be.

After just a few years, in which implications of Resnais' film were evidently absorbed and translated into an agenda for further research, the investigation of negative presentation as a means for the visual avowal of traumatic history began in earnest in Paris, where *Nuit et brouillard* received its primary reception. From 1959 on, the dots were connected very quickly within the group of Nouveaux Réalistes. Issues that previously were of artistic interest only as problems of form, such as the relation between performance and trace in mark-making, were revisted under the pressure of a growing awareness of catastrophic history and its ground-

ing in an ongoing social process. When Yves Klein returned to figurative painting with his *anthropemétries* in 1960, he would recover ground already explored by Robert Rauschenberg, for example in his negative figures made with floodlit blueprint paper in 1949. But Klein had now seen the shadows burned onto walls and sidewalks of Hiroshima during the atomic bombing. In 1961, the year after France exploded its own atomic bomb and Resnais' and Marguerite Duras' feature film *Hiroshima mon amour* opened in cinemas, Klein's *anthropométries* made a sharp topical veer toward the real: in the sequence from *People Beginning to Fly* to *Hiroshima*, a potential of negative presentation has become lucid. History forces the dialectic of form and content, and figuration after 1945 cannot be what it was before.

More pertinent here were the sculptural investigations of Spoerri and Arman. In his *tableaux pièges* (snare pictures), begun in 1960, Spoerri fixed the objects found on everyday tabletops, shifted them in situ onto the vertical plane and hung the result on the wall. In their negative reconstruction of specific scenes of conviviality and contingency, his *pièges* of meals and shared tables in effect turn the trace into historical evidence, and the assemblage of found objects into forensic exhibit. In 1959, Arman made his first *poubelles* (rubbish bins), boxes and vitrines filled with found garbage and refuse, as well as his first *accumulations*, serial collections of specimens of the same or similar object. As Benjamin Buchloh's analysis of these works and their context establishes, Arman's cumulative reflections of commodity culture and its garbage transform the tradition of found object and readymade and announce 'the end of the utopian object aesthetic'.[46] Quite clearly, the hope and optimism that Duchamp and other artists from the early avant-gardes had sometimes invested in industrialized objects have been objectively liquidated along with the myth of automatic progress. Readymades are no longer optimistic exactly to the degree that optimism in general is no longer possible, and this is an objective problem, as Adorno made clear, that is not alleviated at all by the reconstructed pseudo-optimism of commodified abundance. With eloquent precision, Spoerri's *Lunettes noires* make the same point.

I am less convinced that Arman's selection and manipulation of found objects under postwar conditions empty these objects of every kind of charge and aura, as Buchloh's account in places also suggests. If we supplement his account by tracing the thread of negative presentation, as I do here, then the story becomes more complex. Arman's *portraits-robot* registered the fact that the invisible charge connecting individuals to their things exceeds and survives a mere relation of possession.

Individuals can be evoked negatively in a very precise way by the presentation of things that are linked to them, and Arman shows this in those 'portraits' of his dealer and friends that seem merely to sample each one's garbage. These jokes in poor taste also look to the stage properties of Beckett's *Fin de partie*, which premiered in London in April 1957 and was playing in Paris three weeks later: in that dismal work, Hamm keeps his elderly parents, Nagg and Nell, in two dust bins.[47] Yet, even the exhibited misery and obsolescence of a subjectivity facing its historical endgame carries a certain pathos that we, the crippled remnants of subjectivity still clinging to damaged life, are able to feel and register. Similarly, as we have seen with the *colères* and *combustions* of musical instruments, the destruction of these very auratic objects, with their fragile wooden bodies and warm patinas, produces a secondary aura: the flaring halo of a traditional culture that, like the subject, is in the process of disappearing – and only dimly grasps the objective ground for its demise. For sheer, shocking antihumanism, the smashing or burning of violins and pianos is on a par with the burning of books; even as artistic gestures, all these acts implicitly threaten the body itself with violence. It is wrong to assume or conclude that there is no pathos at all generated by culture's crisis, even if the operative feelings fluctuate unstably between terror, rage, dismay and shame. It is not a matter of no aura at all, then, so much as a need to specify exactly what kind of auratic charge is structured, if even as potential, in Arman's objects.[48] In this direction, we must be painfully precise.

It is now established, and known by those who have taken the trouble to inform themselves, that Auschwitz and the other Nazi murder factories were the scene of a theft so immense and systematic that it recalls Marx's famous account of violent, 'so-called original accumulation' (*sogenannte ursprüngliche Akkumulation*). At these camps, the victims were not just killed; their bodies and personal property were plundered without restraint, in ways so gruesome and appalling that it defies belief. At Auschwitz, where alone a million victims were murdered, ninety-percent of them Jews, the stolen property was carefully sorted and stored in special warehouses, sardonically called 'Canada' by the prisoners forced to carry out this criminal labor. When the Nazis evacuated Auschwitz before the advancing Soviet army in January 1945, they blew up the crematoria and attempted to burn or destroy all obvious evidence of the genocide. But much evidence still remained, and Soviet cameramen on scene at the camp's liberation recorded immense pyramids of sorted clothes, suitcases, eyeglasses, shaving brushes, everything of any possible value

to the Nazi war economy – even dentures stolen from corpses as the teeth of victims were ransacked for gold caps and fillings. Nearly an hour of archival film footage exists, and excerpts were shown as evidence at the War Crimes Trials in Nuremburg. Excerpts were also utilized for some of the montages of *Nuit et brouillard*, which shows stolen eyeglasses, bowls and clothing. Stills taken from the reels of moving image may have had a wider circulation that remains unmapped.

Two of Arman's works in particular are exact reconstructions, on a much smaller scale, of these documentary images. *La Vie à pleines dents*, from 1960, is a disturbing accumulation of dentures; and *Argus extra myope*, from 1961, gathers and boxes found spectacles. Both are negative presentations of the individuals, whose personal belonging these dentures and eyeglasses actually were. At the same time, by reason of a visual linkage to history that is far too precise to be dismissed, these works evoke other people whose dentures and eyeglasses were stolen in the course of their administered murder. By this second evocation, these works of Arman avow the Nazi genocide. The artistic potential uncovered and mobilized here, then, is very clear. This is how visual negative presentation works and how it 'remembers': these works *avow* – they assert that these evoked people existed but were murdered, and that this crime was perpetrated. And this avowal is indeed charged with an awful aura.

Buchloh notes these echoes of *Nuit et brouillard* and concludes: 'In their extreme forms, Arman's *accumulations* and *poubelles* cross the threshold to become memory images of the first historical instances of industrialized death.'[49] But he hesitates to assign any interpretive primacy to this avowal or to explore the implications further. The 'inevitably limitless choice of Arman's object aesthetic' points Buchloh rather to the new conditions for subject formation – the enforced identification with 'sign exchange value'.[50] Taking all of Arman's production into account, these two works and perhaps a handful of others that articulate a similarly precise avowal do seem to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume and randomness of the artist's accumulations. This far, Buchloh's point must be taken. Yet, it must also be said that the relation of these few works to Arman's total output also, and crucially, mirrors and avows the position of industrial murder within the general, global logic of capitalist accumulation: it is there, actually, before our eyes, visible but not necessarily seen – a poorly understood potential or latency that we may well miss in the flux and flood of commodified life and spectacular culture. Buchloh's claim, that a 'dialectic of silence and exposure' (or 'of disavowal and spectularization') forms the historical framework

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5. Arman, *Petits Déchets bourgeois*, 1959. *Accumulation*, rubbish in case of glass and wood, 60 x 40 x 12 cm. Collection of Philippe Arman, New York.

6. Arman, *La Vie à pleines dents*, 1960. *Accumulation*, dentures in case of wood and plexiglass, 18 x 35 x 6 cm. Collection Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

7. Arman, *Tues-les tous, Dieu reconnaîtra les Siens*, 1961. *Accumulation*, insecticide in case of wood and plexiglass, 80 x 60 x 12 cm. Private collection, La Laune.

of postwar art, is unquestionably correct.[51] But in Arman's case, we can see that it is by negative presentation that his work is able to avow the full catastrophe, in Adorno's sense.

It is necessary at this point to insist that this efficacy of negative presentation does not depend on artistic intention. These visual linkages to history are irrefutably objective. Coded into these works are potentials for precise evocation and avowal that, as soon as they are activated, produce effects – including the hit Adorno called 'shudder'.[52] This holds true even if these linkages were produced unconsciously – even if Arman was utterly blind to what he had done. Nevertheless, a few other works by this artist indicate that he in fact was quite lucid about it. *Tuez-les tous, Dieu reconnaître les Siens*, from 1961, is an accumulation of household insecticide pumps. The prominent brand-names of some – Fly-Tox, Flit, Projex – testify to the commodification even of poison. Here we have to remember Clov, in Beckett's *Fin de partie*, who, discovering a flea has gotten inside his pants, doses his own genitals with poison. As Adorno noted, the scene is one of several in this work that point to the endgame of human domination of nature, which was always self-repressive and carried latently within it a reversal of the instinct for survival. Moreover, insecticide is historically entangled in the pre-history of Zyklon-B, the toxin used in the Nazi gas chambers: 'Insecticide, which pointed toward the death camps from the very beginning, becomes the end-product of the domination of nature, which now abolishes itself.'[53] Arman's title is a line imputed to the Abbot of Cîteaux, the Church official who commanded the massacre of the inhabitants of Béziers, in the south of France, in 1209, during the Albigensian Crusade. It expresses the moment in the escalation of administered violence when the jump is made to whole categories of people, all the members of which are to be targeted and killed indiscriminately. After Auschwitz, racializing translations of the slogan continue to circulate; one in English ('Kill them all and let God sort 'em out') seems to have been popular among US soldiers in Vietnam and, passing through the proxy wars of the South African apartheid regime a decade or so later, to have become a badge of mercenary culture.[54] To point quickly in passing to two more accumulations: *Le village des damnés*, from 1962, packs dolls of children into a glass vitrine as tightly as those deported to the camps were packed into cattle cars; *Birth control*, from 1963, echoes this, but this time the dolls are packed in a hinged cardboard box that evokes the suitcases of the deported.

One more aspect of the Nazi genocide must be attested before this constellation of references can throw its negative light on *Plight*. The

makers of *Nuit et brouillard* produced a German-language version, with Paul Celan's translation of Cayrol's text. *Nacht und Nebel* opened in German cinemas in late 1956, and in April 1957 was broadcast on German television.[55] In the sequences treating the Nazi plunder of victims, Resnais' film takes note of the fact that the victims' hair was shaven, collected in depots, and eventually turned into 'cloth' or textile (*tissu*). Several images show a pyramid of human hair, and another shows what is presumably raw human hair, in a column-like form wrapped in paper. The paper is marked: *K*[onzentrations].*L*[ager].*Au*[schwitz] *Kg 22*. The voice-over for this sequence tells us '*Rien que des cheveux de femme... A quinze pfennigs le kilo... On en fait du tissu.*' (Nothing but women's hair... at fifteen pfennigs a kilo... it's used to make textile). What the hair was turned into, actually, was felt. At Auschwitz, Soviet cameramen filmed the seven tons of human hair that was packed for shipment to German factories, where, other captured documents entered into the record at Nuremburg revealed, the hair of the victims was routinely turned into felt. In these sequences, which last more than a minute, we see 293 column-like sacks of hair, laid on their sides in two stacks, end to end. The sacks are roughly the size of the 284 felt columns used by Beuys to line the walls of *Plight*. The Soviet film footage was reissued in 1985, for the fortieth anniversary of the war's end. In the same year, Lanzmann released *Shoah* and Beuys opened *Plight* in London.[56] In the Pompidou catalog, the full title of Beuys' work, which presumably reflects the artist's retrospective alteration of the dating, is: *Plight 1956–1985*.

The Avowal of *Plight*

We now have all we need to understand what this work is and how it does what it does. Beuys took a long time to attain this synthesis, which in its quiet, restrained precision and power is unequalled by anything else in his output. In the interval before: the Eichmann Trial (1961–62), the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials (1963–65), the German student movement and global uprisings of 1968, the trauma of the RAF. And several decades of playing the art game: haranguing from chalkboards, melting fat, wearing felt, wrapping pianos with it. By 1985, he was ready, whether or not he had full and lucid consciousness of what he pulled together there. In constructing a sculptural afterimage to enclose this space, Beuys in effect 'snared' the sacks in the hair room at Auschwitz and flipped them up from the horizontal to the vertical, just as Spoerri did with his *pièges*. In standing ranks, the felt columns now evoke the victims by negative presentation – this time through the inescapable

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8. Documentation photo of seven tons of human hair, packed in sacks for shipment to factories for processing into felt, abandoned at Auschwitz-II-Birkenau. Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Poland.

9. Joseph Beuys, *Plight 1956–1985*, 1985. Installation, Collection Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

specificity of an irrefutable material linkage. The thermometer, we can now see, evokes the crematoria and lies on the staff board and piano like a crushing weight or pressure that holds it closed and keeps it silent.

We now have an avowal of the catastrophe that, at the same time, allegorizes art's predicament after Auschwitz, just as Adorno theorizes it. Music, the medium of raw feeling and deep consolation, will not be adequate before the facts of what happened; art will have to shut up. Or rather, because not even silence gets us out of the circle, art will have to go on, bearing its shame and the challenge to break radically with its affirmative tradition. Only in silence can the name of the catastrophe be spoken, but still it must be spoken – if only through the dissonance of a negative, hermetic installation. This one, here, now, puts the spectator under the surveillance of a community of evoked victims, ranked along the walls, as if along fences of barbed wire. The title confirms the interpretation and takes its place within it: if the avowed trauma was that of which no worse can be conceived, it remains, in its urgent legacy for us, a situation of extreme danger and difficulty. Even the secondary meaning of 'plight' piles on, as a question that, given the tendencies of the social process, we must leave open: the situation imposes on us a duty and promise, but only insofar as we can still claim at all to be autonomous, ethical, political subjects. Maybe, in the trial and moment of truth, we earn that designation, maybe we do not. In this work, there is no trace of confident posturing, jester's tricks, or the weird dancing of shamans. The work draws no conclusions about our capacity either to fathom the horror or save ourselves from it. It simply avows: *that happened* and so it is. The disturbance of this work – attested by the punches and kicks of spectators, imprinted into the columns of the second room – leads through the dead-end, to the shudder of the after-Auschwitz sublime.

To have said this is not to have said everything. One would like to say more, and should. Avowal is a moment only – of and in a social process that churns on in defiance of all avowals. What we do with our avowals, where we go with them and how we put them to work, with others, is another, more political matter. The sublime, in itself, is not self-rescue, any more than it ever was. We may think *Plight*, as synthesis and culmination, came rather late in the dialectic of avowal and avoidance. But the irony, if that is what we must call it, lies elsewhere: in *Plight*'s reception, which long managed to avoid what the work avows, and in the social *factum brutum* that all the accelerated proliferation of remembrance in art and official culture since has not resulted in any global public lucidity about the social process. Its powers of terror, far from being arrested,

have only continued to grow. Rememoration is not always, not automatically, counter-memory. It is no longer 1985.

Notes

1. Dissemination is a process rather than a sudden event of universal transmission achieved with perfect success, once and for all, upon first exhibition or publication.

2. See my 'Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime', in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (New York: D.A.P. and The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 59–61; and revised in Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 37–38.

3. The London configuration is the main focus here. I do not take into account later alterations, such as clear plexiglass barriers lining the entrance passageway, introduced into the Paris version at the Centre Georges Pompidou, or damage inflicted by spectators.

4. As far as I am aware, Beuys is not suspected of any direct participation in the Nazi genocide. How much he may have known about it, from within the Nazi war machine, is less clear and more open to controversy, but in the absence of irrefutable evidence remains unknowable.

5. John Cage, *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 13–14.

6. Ibid., p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 47.

8. Cage's name appears only once, in passing, in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*, but there Adorno aligns him with Beckett's reduction of meaning to the absence of any redeeming meaning: 'Schlüsselphänomene mögen auch gewisse musikalische Gebilde wie das Klavierkonzert von Cage sein, die als Gesetz unerbittliche Zufälligkeit sich auferlegen und dadurch etwas wie Sinn: den Ausdruck von Entsetzen empfangen.' ('Key phenomena may include musical constructions, such as the piano concert of Cage, which by imposing relentless chance on themselves as law thereby attain something like meaning: the expression of horror.' *Ästhetische Theorie* [1970], eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 231; *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 154. Here and throughout, English renderings of Adorno are my modifications of the standard translations.

9. Ibid., p. 117, my slashes (/) marking discrete measures, four to a line, and double-slashes (//) marking line breaks in Cage's scored lecture. The text continues: 'But quiet sounds / / were like loneliness / , or // love / or friendship / . / Permanent, I thought // , / values, / independent / at least from // Life, Time and / Coca-Cola / .'

10. What a shock it must have been, for example, when the full extent of the Nazi genocide was revealed, to have remembered his 1942 work for prepared piano, titled *In the Name of the Holocaust*, after Joyce's pun from *Finnegans Wake* ('In the name of the Holy Ghost.'). Such an accident might fuel anyone's reflection on the relation of culture and chance. But for Cage the sensitive American, Hiroshima was probably the more traumatic detonation.

11. In that year, Cage began studies of Zen with D. T. Suzuki and of Indian philosophy with Gita Sarabhai.

12. Born in Korea, Paik finished a thesis on Schoenberg at the University of Tokyo in 1956. Afterwards in Europe, he studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne before meeting Cage in Darmstadt in 1958.

13. Contrast this with Cage's most extreme embrace of indeterminacy, *0'0"*, performable by anyone in any manner, composed in the same year.

14. See Douglas Kahn, 'The Latest: Fluxus and Music', in Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1993), pp. 100–21; on Beuys and Fluxus, see Joan Rothfuss, 'Joseph Beuys: Echoes in America', in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray, pp. 37–53.

15. For other readings of these tendencies in postwar art history, see *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979*, eds. Paul Schimmel and Russell Ferguson (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

16. Spoerri, like Paul Celan and Isidore Isou a Rumanian Jew displaced by the Nazi terror, is probably the most complex and interesting of the Nouveaux Réalistes. By his own account, he fled with his mother and siblings to Switzerland in 1942, his father, Isaac Feinstein, having been murdered by the Nazis in 1940. See Spoerri's interview with Freddy De Vree in *Daniel Spoerri: Detrompe-l'oeil* (Antwerp: Ronny Van de Velde, 2000), no pagination. Cf. *Nouveau Réalisme*, ed. Susanne Neuburger (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 2005), p. 198; and *Anekdotomania: Daniel Spoerri über Daniel Spoerri* (Basel: Museum Jean Tinguey Basel and Hatje Cantz Verlag), p. 290.

17. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* [1966] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 355: 'das perennierende Leiden'; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995) p. 362. Cf. the variant, 'das perennierende Unheil', in 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1951], in *Prismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 16; 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 25. Both mark the legacy of misery unfolding from the division of labor, 'die tödliche Spaltung der Gesellschaft', 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', p. 15; 'the deadly splitting of society', 'Cultural Criticism and Society', p. 24. Pertinently, the separation of spirit (*Geist*) from manual labor is the necessary condition and primal scene of all autonomous art and culture.

18. See Adorno, 'Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit' [1959], in

Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 139; 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 98.

19. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 355: 'Völkermord ist die absolute Integration', in *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362.

20. Part of Adorno's critical provocation is to insist that, essentially, Auschwitz is an absolute threat that exceeds its historic specificity. Auschwitz qua appearance-form (*Erscheinungsform*), to use Adorno's Hegelian idiom, was driven by toxic and anti-Semitic fantasies of racial purity that took hold, with official promotion, in Germany, within a highly specific conjuncture of history. Auschwitz qua essence (*Wesen*), however, is the genocidal potential of social tendencies toward integration and administration. Behind the murder of Jews by Nazis, the logic of modernity itself is unfolding.

21. To clarify this was a main aim of my *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*; see in particular chapters one and eleven (of the revised soft-cover edition), as well as my further elaborations in 'Hits: From Trauma and the Sublime to Radical Critique', *Third Text* 23, no. 2 (2009): 135–49.

22. As Adorno puts it, the 'threat of total catastrophe' ('*der … Drohung der totalen Katastrophe*') has become '*allgegenwärtigen*' – omnipresent, ubiquitous, saturating the contemporary. *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 362; *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 243–44.

23. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, p. 324: 'Keine Universalgeschichte führt vom Wilden zur Humanität, sehr wohl eine von der Steinschleuder zur Megabombe.' *Negative Dialectics*, p. 320.

24. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 16: 'Der Doppelcharakter der Kunst als autonom und als fait social teilt ohne Unterlaß der Zone ihrer Autonomie mit sich.' *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5.

25. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', p. 26; 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', p. 17: 'alle Kultur am Schuldzusammenhang der Gesellschaft teilhat'.

26. Max Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* [1944] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2003), pp. 128–76; *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 94–36.

27. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1; *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 9: 'nicht einmal ihr Existenzrecht'.

28. Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', p. 34; 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', p. 31: '[N]ach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben.'

29. In 'Engagement' [1962], in *Noten zur Literatur*, pp. 422–23; in English as

'Commitment', in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 87–88; *Negative Dialektik* [1966], pp. 355–56; *Negative Dialectics*, p. 362; 'Ist die Kunst heiter?' [1967] in *Noten zur Literatur*, pp. 603–4; 'Is Art Lighthearted?' in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, p. 251; and 'Kunst und die Künste' [1967] in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.1, p. 454; 'Art and the Arts', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 387.

30. Both '*Gedicht*' and '*Gedichte*' are to be read here as synecdoche for all the arts, in the same way that 'Auschwitz' stands for the Nazi genocide.

31. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 366–67; *Negative Dialektik*, pp. 359–60: 'Alle Kultur nach Auschwitz, samt der dringlichen Kritik daran, ist Müll. Indem sie sich restaurierte nach dem, was in ihrer Landschaft ohne Widerstand sich zutrug, ist sie gänzlich zu der Ideologie geworden, die sie potentiell war, seitdem sie, in Opposition zur materiellen Existenz, dieser das Licht einzuhauchen sich anmaßte, das die Trennung des Geistes von körperlicher Arbeit ihr vorenthielt. Wer für Erhaltung der radikal schuldigen und schäbigen Kultur plädiert, macht sich zum Helfershelfer, während, wer der Kultur sich verweigert, unmittelbar die Barbarei befördert, als welche die Kultur sich enthüllte. Nicht einmal Schweigen kommt aus dem Zirkel heraus.' Cf. Adorno's gloss on 'Schuld' (guilt) in *Ästhetische Theorie*, pp. 347–48; *Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 234–35.

32. I of course am not claiming these artists were all struggling readers of Adorno. The dissemination of Adorno's texts may have played a role, but cannot explain everything. It is the social process, unfolding as history that bears down on all, which both Adorno and artists responded to, in whatever ways they could.

33. Adorno's case against Brecht is stimulating, but not without serious problems. I examine these in 'Dialectical Realism and Radical Commitments: Brecht and Adorno on Representing Capitalism', *Historical Materialism* 18, no. 3 (2010): 3–24.

34. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 243; *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 360: 'Praktische Wirkung üben Kunstwerke allenfalls in einer kaum dingfest zu machenden Veränderung des Bewusstseins aus, nicht indem sie haranguieren.'

35. See my *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*, chapter one; and my summary discussion in 'Hits: From Trauma and the Sublime to Radical Critique.'

36. Adorno, 'Commitment', p. 90; 'Engagement', p. 426: 'Kafkas Prosa, Becketts Stücke oder der wahrhaft ungeheuerliche Roman Der Namenlose üben eine Wirkung aus, der gegenüber die offiziell engagierten Dichtungen wie Kinderspiel sich ausnehmen; sie erregen die Angst, welche der Existentialismus nur beredet. Als Demontagen des Scheins sprengen sie die Kunst von innen her, welche das proklamierte Engagement von außen, und darum nur zum Schein, unterjocht. Ihr

Unausweichliches nötigt zu jener Änderung der Verhaltensweise, welche die engagierten Werke bloß verlangen. Wen einmal Kafkas Räder überfuhren, dem ist der Friede mit der Welt ebenso verloren wie die Möglichkeit, bei dem Urteil sich zu bescheiden, der Weltlauf sie schlecht: das bestätigende Moment ist weggeätzt, das der resignierten Feststellung von der Übermacht des Bösen innewohnt.'

37. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 364: 'Erschütterung, dem üblichen Erlebnisbegriff schroff entgegengesetzt, ist keine partikulare Befriedigung des Ichs, der Lust nicht ähnlich. Eher ist sie ein Memento der Liquidation des Ichs, das als erschüttertes der eigenen Beschränktheit und Endlichkeit innewird.' *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 245: 'Shudder, starkly opposed to the usual concept of experience, is no particular satisfaction of the ego, is not similar to desire. Rather, it is a memento of the liquidation of the ego, which, shaken to the core, becomes aware of its own limitedness and finitude.' At this point, Adorno's rewriting of the sublime intersects with Jacques Lacan's rewriting of Freud's theory of trauma in the 1964 Seminar, published as *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 63–75, in English as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 53–64.

38. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*,*Werkausgabe*, vol. 10, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 201.

39. Adorno, 'Commitment', p. 90; 'Engagement', p. 425: 'die Abstraktheit des Gesetzes, das objektiv in der Gesellschaft waltet.'

40. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 260; 'Versuch, das Endspiel zu Verstehen', in *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 303: 'es keine Nährpillen mehr gebe'.

41. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 380. *Negative Dialektik*, p. 373: 'Beckett hat auf die Situation des Konzentrationslagers, die er nicht nennt, als läge über ihr Bilderverbot, so reagiert, wie es allein ansteht. Was ist, sei wie das Konzentrationslager.'

42. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 249; 'Versuch, das Endspiel zu Verstehen', p. 290: 'Schweigend nur ist der Name des Unheils auszusprechen.'

43. See the correspondence between the two, published with an introduction by Joachim Seng in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter*, no. 8 (2003).

44. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 322; *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 477: 'Im bedeutendsten Repräsentanten hermitischer Dichtung der zeitgenössischen deutschen Lyrik, Paul Celan, hat der Erfahrungsgehalt des Hermetischen sich umgekehrt. Diese Lyrik ist durchdrungen von der Scham der Kunst angesichts des wie der Erfahrung so der Sublimierung sich entziehenden Leids. Celans Gedichte wollen das äußerste Entsetzen durch Verschweigen sagen.'

45. See Raye Farr, 'Some Reflections on Claude Lanzmann's Approach to the Examination of the Holocaust', in *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933*, eds. Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), pp. 161–67.

46. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'From Yves Klein's *Le Vide* to Arman's *Le Plein*', in Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 270.

47. This seminal work was written in French and translated by Beckett into English; a German edition, however, translated by Elmar Tophoven with Beckett's approval, appeared even before the English: *Fin de partie* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1957); *Endspiel* (Suhrkamp, 1957); *Endgame* (Grove, 1958). Adorno met and had long discussions with Beckett in Paris in 1958; he had already seen a production of *Endspiel* in Vienna. The dedication of Adorno's essay on *Endspiel* reads, in English: 'To S.B., in memory of Paris, Fall 1958.' On the dustbins, Adorno comments: 'Beckett's trashcans are emblems of the culture reconstructed after Auschwitz.' 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', pp. 266–67; 'Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen', p. 322: 'Becketts Mülleimer sind Embleme der nach Auschwitz wiederaufgebauten Kultur.' On Adorno's meetings with Beckett, see Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 356–60. On the early production history of *Fin de partie*, see Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), pp. 458–66.

48. Walter Benjamin taught that aura is a charge or effect of distance grounded in various kinds of authority – that invested in singular artworks, authentic experience or returning 'lost time'. We may belong to the era of reproducibility, degraded experience and enfeebled memory, but even withered subjects can still suffer trauma. Traumatic history, evoked and avowed by negative presentation, would very emphatically have claim to a requisite authority.

49. Buchloh, 'From Yves Klein's *Le Vide* to Arman's *Le Plein*', p. 274. Indeed, as a footnote (19, p. 283) to his discussion at this point indicates, he went to the trouble of confirming, in an interview with Arman, that the artist 'saw the film upon its release and remembers its having a profound impact on him'.

50. Ibid., p. 272–74.

51. Ibid., p. 259.

52. This is to say that only in *reception* does the subjective decisively reappear: only in specific spectators can such linkages be activated and effects produced. All the factors conditioning the encounter between spectator and artwork (namely the shaping of subjective disposition by the objective social process) then come into play. With regard to *production*, artistic intention is not necessarily fully conscious and cannot always be verified. Nor are moments of attained lucidity necessarily permanent. *How* such potentials were installed in

specific works is finally not as important as the fact, which we *can* verify, that they *are* installed there. With Beuys, too, this is the case.

53. Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 270; 'Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen', p. 315: 'Das Insektenvertilgungsmittel, das vom Anbeginn auf die Vernichtungslager hinauswollte, wird sum Endprodukt der Naturbeherrschung, die sich selbst erledigt.'

54. The slogan was openly promoted in the pages of *Soldier of Fortune*, a magazine found on the racks of retail bookstore chains, and even today T-shirts bearing it can be purchased online from Amazon.com.

55. On the German version and its reception, see Ewout van der Knaap, 'Enlightening Procedures: *Nacht und Nebel* in Germany', in *Uncovering the Holocaust: The International Reception of Night and Fog*, ed. van der Knaap (London and New York: Wallflower Press), pp. 46–85.

56. The footage filmed by Aleksander Woroncow at Auschwitz in 1945 was reissued by Irmgard von zur Mühlen, with added voice-over commentary and a new interview with Woroncow, as *Die Befreiung von Auschwitz* (1985). The film has been available on DVD since 2005.