# AFTER AESTHETICS

## HEIDEGGER AND BENJAMIN ON ART AND EXPERIENCE

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> For, in truth, the fact whether and how an era is committed to an aesthetics, whether and how it adopts a stance toward art of an aesthetic character, is decisive for the way art shapes the history of that era—or remains irrelevant for it.
>
> Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1

The problem of aesthetics haunts contemporary critical and theoretical debates: from post-Heideggerian thought, Derrida, and various forms of poststructuralism to Critical Theory, cultural studies, and discussions of cultural modernity. Many of these polemics, even when they do not openly foreground or elaborate aesthetics as an issue, implicitly engage in the negotiation of the nature, the limits, and the place of art in modern society. Positions on this issue range widely, from Habermas's reaffirmation of the boundaries and functions of philosophical and literary discourses to Rorty's endorsement of an eclectic, multi-voiced, text that knows no generic or functional divides.[1] These disparate approaches reflect the contentious debates about the significance of modernism, about the unsettling implications of the aesthetics proposed by modernist art and literature, or, even more poignantly, of the "non-aesthetics" advocated by the Avant-garde. Is this polemics with aesthetics and its metaphysical foundations of epochal significance, to use Heidegger's idiom, or is it just one more failed attempt at re-forming art, which, having produced a revolution in aesthetic sensibility and artistic and literary styles, comes short of renegotiating our understanding of art and its relation to critical thought? While many critics and thinkers deploy this "modern aesthetics" toward a critique of modernity, others reject it as a fetishization of art and an aestheticization of critical practice. With volumes written on this issue, responses to this crisis in aesthetics and its effects upon the postmodern scene will fall somewhere in between Habermas's denunciation and Rorty's optimistic embrace as long as we leave uninterrogated the junction between experience and the poetics of literary modernism. We need to inquire into the possibility that this poetics contains a non-aesthetic or a post-aesthetic concept of art that pivots specifically on refiguring the everyday as a critique of the techno-metaphysical representations of experience. Putting in perspective the historical determination of the social function of art as a sector of cultural activity, itself an effect of the confluence of the representational models of art and the divide between practice and theory, we can explore art as performative or enactive, as disclosive of the world, and hence as critical of the articulations that govern experience on the level of both everyday practice and theoretical construct. If art is to remain relevant in the age of technology and mass culture, it has to refashion its poetics to reveal its link to the way experience takes place, and demonstrate how this revision of experience can reorient the practice of thinking.

This interest in locating the "critical" potential in art at the twilight of modernity and the recognition in its poetics of the paradigm of historical experience capable of inflecting the metaphysical notions of history, and with them perhaps even the history of metaphysics itself, binds the otherwise quite different "modernist" projects of Benjamin and Heidegger.[2] The meeting point between Benjamin and Heidegger describes the juncture of art and experience: the interface that constitutes itself as language, structured prior to, and therefore capable of restructuring and deflecting, the aporias of practice and theory, experience and text, action and thought. Defining "Surrealist experience," Benjamin indicates that this juncture is enacted in the writings of the Avant-garde, specifically in their departure from the practice of aesthetically codified literature: "the writings of this circle are not literature but . . . are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less phantasms."[3] To the extent that avant-garde writing maps out or profiles experience, Benjamin sees its poetics as opening the historical dimension of

experience (*Erfahrung*) in the face of the immediacy and punctuality of the lived moment (*Erlebnis*). Although Heidegger remains more cautious about contemporary art, his reflections on poetry (*Dichtung*) repeatedly sketch out a distinction between the technic (in the sense of "enframing" or the *Ge-stell*) and the poetic modalities of experience or "unconcealment": "at the same time enframing, in a way characteristic of destining, blocks *poiesis*."[4] For Heidegger, poetic language not only reveals the presentation of the world as *poiesis*, as a coming forth into language, but also denudes and contests the techno-metaphysical schematizations of experience in terms of objectivity and availability of resources. In both cases, the poetic reflects the structuring of experience that is covered or erased by the technological framing of everydayness: the technological training of the human sensorium as Benjamin describes it or, in Heidegger's words, the ordering of reality into a standing-reserve (*Bestand*), a resource available for use or consumption. For both thinkers, the stakes of this poetic dimension of experience are high: they involve the understanding of otherness, its ethical and political dimensions.

Following this juncture between poetry and experience, I explore the possibility of a "non-aesthetic" element in art, which, when articulated against aesthetics and its metaphysical foundations, displays subversive and critical potential with respect to cultural and political forms of rationalization dominant in modernity. By the non-aesthetic I mean specifically those aspects and significations of the work of art that cannot be accounted for in aesthetic terms, that not only overflow the categorizations of art in terms of a beautiful object, taste, and aesthetic judgment, but put in question the edifice of aesthetics and the system of thought that has produced it. As I argue, this non-aesthetic potential in art signals itself in art's confrontation with the impact of technological modernity on experience. In short, I see the "radicality" of modernist art in its displacement of the techno-scientific schematizations of experience, in the rift that opens an alternative, "poietic" to paraphrase Heidegger, space of experience that both underlies *and* questions the dominance of the rationalistic articulations of experience in modernity. If I call the inscription of this poietic dimension of experience in art "non-aesthetic," it is to strongly emphasize the limitations that aesthetics places on our understanding and engagement with the significations disclosed in art works. I am particularly interested in how this non- or trans-aesthetic element at work in Heidegger and Benjamin, an element that animates art and literature and, at the same time, resists aesthetic and rationalist categorizations, can afford us the possibility of an emancipatory, post-Enlightenment thinking that could operate with a critical impetus without subscribing to or congealing into the patterns of critical rationality.

In a recently published interview in *Acts of Literature*, Derrida, reflecting on the scope and significance of the literary influences upon his work, puts his finger on the reasons for the continued reappearance of the ghost of literature within the philosophico-critical realm: "In the end, the critico-political function of literature, in the West, remains very ambiguous. The freedom to say anything is a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction."[5] To the extent that literature, and I would add, art, refuses to be assigned any one purpose, meaning, or regulative ideal, it, at the same time, is political and risks having its implications neutralized neatly as a fiction. This unparalleled potential, and the danger of trivialization inherent in it, which Derrida finds in literature, reflects the tension between singularity and generality that literary texts can not only maintain but, in fact, highlight much more successfully than any other discursive practice. What these remarks by Derrida, as well as his work in its entirety, suggest is that it is this very same "feature" or "nature" of literature that endows it with eminent philosophical and socio-political significance and yet immediately erases those claims. Not without a trace, however.

This trace is the interplay in which literature puts the punctuality of the lived moment (*Erlebnis*) and the historical index of experience (*Erfahrung*). The historical interval that graphs experience, the inscription of the past or of the "always already" characteristic of *Erfahrung*, easily collapses into the immediacy of *Erlebnis*. The distance and the difference that constitute experience become erased into the uniformity of a punctual presence, the self-identity and closure of a lived instant. What Benjamin and Heidegger trope as the poetic in art shatters the purported immediate and intuitive nature of experience; it dislocates its self-presence and installs otherness

within it, thus keeping it open to what is to come—the future. The poetic indicates the possibility of *Erfahrung*, the historical and textual indexing of experience, against the punctual immediacy of the moment. Experience (*Erfahrung*) is neither immediate nor intuitive but, instead, always already mediated, both linguistically and historically. Its occurrence not only does not constitute an essence or achieve a substantive presence but fractures each moment and, marking its historicity, disallows consolidation or closure. Opening up *Erlebnis* and repositioning it within the register of history, the poetic tropes the historical experience as an index of ethical and political alterity. This is why, in their very different ways, Benjamin and Heidegger tie the question of the contemporary significance of art to the way it tries to refigure the models of experience dominant in "the age of mechanical reproduction." Both Benjamin and Heidegger approach the question of experience in the technological age in terms of the distinction between the two experiential structures of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Critiquing the notion of a full, auratic experience of the origin, they turn to *Erfahrung* as a more adequate reflection of modern experience. Benjamin reads *Erfahrung* in terms of dispersal, destruction, and loss of auratic character precipitated by the age of mechanical reproduction, whose effects make possible refiguration of historical thinking (departure from historicism and the notion of historical progress) and of the work of memory. If for Benjamin the effects of mechanical reproduction are ambiguous—on the one hand, they counteract the dangerous, unifying force of the aura, but, on the other, they turn experience into a series of unrelated lived presents—Heidegger sees reproducibility as enforcing the homogeneity promulgated by the scientific–technological worldview. In other words, the outcome of the technologization of life is an inverse and double form of *Erlebnis*, which, on the surface, fragments experience into isolated points of presence, while, in fact, unifying experience even more stringently within the technological paradigm of the *Ge-stell*. *Erlebnis* in this context refers to two distinct yet related versions of the fullness and unity of experience: one present on the microscopic level of the self-coincidence of a lived instant, the other reflecting the plenitude of presence on the macroscopic plane of a totality, system, or myth. *Erfahrung*, by contrast, describes the distance, dispersion, and withdrawal that, for both Benjamin and Heidegger, characterize language, and, especially, the discourse of modern poetry.

In "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin begins his considerations of experience specifically with an analysis of the change in the conditions for the reception of lyric poetry, a shift that he will use as the springboard to reflecting on the questions of memory, history, technology, and aura.[6] The transformation Benjamin diagnoses in poetic language reflects the changing conditions of experience: from fullness and intelligibility to the shock and dislocation characteristic of mass culture.[7] Heidegger's work, in turn, is most explicit in delineating the obscured yet potentially emancipatory significance of the juncture between technological practices of schematizing experience and the poetic, between technology and *Dichtung*, *techne* and *poiesis*. It is in "The Question Concerning Technology" that Heidegger articulates, through the distinction between the technological and the poetic, the rift in the modern understanding of experience.[8] His constant evocation of Kant as the background for his reflection upon art and poetry suggests that in order to understand our own relation to technology and its influence upon the modern world, we can no longer fall back on the Kantian strategies of schematizing experience either according to cognitive categorizations (understanding) or normative reason (universalistic morality).[9] Even the paradigm of reflective judgment and of aesthetics as such, though most promising in this context, still falls short of renegotiating art's relation to social and political dimensions, and often produces the twin dangers of the aesthetic isolationism of art for art's sake and of the aestheticization of experience.[10]

The alternative opened up by reading Heidegger and Benjamin underscores art's relation to (everyday) experience, where art, taken to be disclosive and enactive rather than representational and reproductive, produces (reveals) the world as the play of differences and heterogeneities, which disappear within the intuitive immediacy of experience. To the extent that it is poetic, a *poiesis*, art brings forth the obverse side of experience and its technological regimentation; it discloses the tain of the representational mirror, the other side of the metaphysical *Historie*—its "poetic" *Geschichte*. Since this poetic resists and re-

writes the dominant schema of experience, forcing us to think beyond any metaphysico–aesthetic categorizations of art's essence, I call it the "non-aesthetic" element in art. The provenance of the poetic—its poietic production of experience—questions the ways in which aesthetics describes art's relation to everyday experience, its social and political domains. In other words, at issue is the possibility of thinking beyond aesthetics, the possibility that, historically, unfolds at the end or in the aftermath of aesthetics, specifically with the articulation of the non-aesthetic dimension of art in modernism and the Avant-garde. Yet, this opening becomes possible only when we put in question the way we schematize, understand, and "experience" experience in the age of technology.

Such a critique is at work in "The Question Concerning Technology," where Heidegger, tracing the roots of "poetry" and "technology" back to their meaning in Greece, distinguishes between two forms or paradigms of experience, tangled already at the historical origin of Western metaphysics: *poiesis* and *techne*.[11] To make Heidegger's long argument short, both *poiesis* and *techne* refer to the modes of revealing, of letting "what is" happen as what it is. *Poiesis* names a bringing-forth, a manner of unconcealment that continuously challenges thought to question and shed its own constructedness and let what is be. *Techne*, on the other hand, though intimately related to a mode of knowing that allows humans to bring something forth, to create or produce it, has, in its modern post-Cartesian version, narrowed down the field of experience first to objectivity (Kant, German Idealism) and, most recently, to resource or standing-reserve (*Bestand*).[12] In its contemporary version, *techne* refers to modes of schematizing and predisposing experience according to which everything is experienced in terms of availability, that is, as a resource. Heidegger claims that the rift between the poietic and the technic is so significant as to virtually obliterate the *poietic* from experience and relegate it to the domain of fiction, irreality, or "aesthetic" experiences. In effect, the enormity of the rift erases the rift itself, leaving the technic organization of experience as *the* dominant, the only "real" mode of experience.[13]

Within the framework of this opposition, the technic refers to experience interpreted in terms of the general and the schematic. As such, it underscores the paradigmatic over the specific and its emphasis falls primarily on calculation, regulation, and predictability rather than on singularity and particularity. The poietic, on the other hand, describes the historicity of experience, underlining the contingency, singularity, and specificity of its articulations. Calling in question the metaphysical and onto-theological schemes of history, with their practices of forgetting and neutralizing historicity to produce a systematic account of experience, the poietic "respects" alterity by underlining the contingency of relations that obtain as experience. In a sense, the difference between the poietic and the technic reproduces the tension between the singular and the general that Derrida identifies as the most disruptive/productive trait of literature. The main difference between the technic and the poietic could be articulated precisely in terms of the role that alterity plays in them: while the technic tends toward erasure and subsumption of otherness under the experiential schemas it provides, the poietic, attentive to the "non-essential" fashion in which experience unfolds, emphasizes the surplus of alterity that ruptures the cognitive, social, and political articulations of experience.

Constituting the unfolding of what is, the poietic transpires prior to any cognitive grasp, and always reserves the power to call into question technic schematizations of experience. This is why Benjamin takes Surrealism and avant-garde art as "the basis for the transposition of [his] theory of the artwork into the medium of a general theory of experience."[14] The avant-garde practice provides not only a model for experience but, in fact, performs the continuous displacement of the immediacy of the lived moment into the differential occurrence of experience. Like the alarm clock that Benjamin mentions at the end of his essay on Surrealism, the poetic interrupts the slumber of *Erlebnis* and mobilizes the dislocating effects of *Erfahrung* for the purposes of remembering and inscribing alterity—for the characteristic work of *Eingedenken*. This is also the reason why language comes to play the pivotal role in the manner in which Benjamin and Heidegger figure the connection between experience and writing. In Heidegger's case, it is this specific role assigned to the poietic in the historical moment of the fulfillment of metaphysics in techno-scientific thought that accounts for his interest and extensive work on poetry and poetic language. This reflection upon poetry brings us

to what I see as the nerve system of Heidegger's thought: the parallel between the structure of experience and the structure of language. I would argue that much the same obtains for Benjamin's thought on language and translation as it is presented in his two essays, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" and "The Task of the Translator." All the more so since Benjamin's reflections on modernity, though perhaps more ambiguous and conflicted than Heidegger's, constantly project the issue of experience against the background of poetic and artistic developments in modernism.

In Benjamin's case, the issue of the relationship of language and experience is articulated in his idiosyncratic understanding of the problem of translation. When we read "The Task of the Translator" together with Benjamin's earlier essay on language, "On Language As Such," it becomes clear that Benjamin's idea of translation conceals in fact an understanding of the essence, better yet, the intention, of language as itself a translation: *Intention auf die Sprache* identifies the transfer from the Adamic naming to human languages.[15] According to this conception, things impart their linguistic being (their intention to communicate themselves, their "essence") to human beings, who bring this linguistic being into words by way of naming. In this way, human languages complete "language as communication *in actu*."[16] In the context of "On Language As Such," Benjamin's concept of pure language as *Intention auf die Sprache* inherent in each language can be taken to spell out precisely the relation between experience and language, between the world and its linguistic representation. To the extent that Benjamin takes the world's nature to be its intention to communicate its linguistic being, we can see how he can conceive of language as a translation from the already linguistic "essence" of experience to language systems, a transfer that resonates in each actual translation.

Similarly, for Heidegger language is not a text or a signifying system, by definition separated from its other—reality, experience, world, etc. The "expanded" idea of language Heidegger proposes in *On the Way to Language* differentiates between the way of language—or its unfolding—and language as a product (in the form of a system or a text) of this event. The notion of the language way describes the "interface" that takes place between experience (world) and language, their interweaving. In other words, language has a dynamic, event character (*Wesen*), and occurs as a paradoxically "translative" fault between experience and words. Rendering experience and language simultaneously inseparable and different, "the way of language" constantly replays and reforms this exchange through the particulars of being. This exchange or nearness, as Heidegger often calls it, underscores the historicity inscribed in the *Ereignis* or the event structure of experience. It also ties historicity to this "moment" of translation between experience and words that has always already taken place without ever becoming a part of a temporal continuum. Heidegger's insight suggests that language (re)produces meaning by way of its proximity to the world, the world which itself occurs already as a saying, as a matrix of significations (the reading of Benjamin outlined above suggests a corresponding relation between languages and "pure language" to be the translative intention that directs linguistic expression).[17]

According to this conception, the translative event of language constitutes the structure of experience, or the manner in which experience takes place as its own displacement into discourse. This "translation" or "way of language" describes the "interface" between world (experience) and text (thought). To be more exact, this interface *is* experience itself, as it describes the distance framing *Erfahrung*, that is, the structure by which experience occurs as having always already reached its articulation into the presence of discourse. Experience is equivalent to its discursive articulation and yet never coincides with it without a remainder or a reserve, that is, without the deferred recognition of the always already effaced distance that has inscribed it into presence. Experience is understood here as predicated on an interval, a way, which, bringing experience into language (*poiesis*), maintains it in (linguistic) proximity to what has produced it as experience. Experience conceived this way is "poietic"; it occurs in the manner of *poiesis* and, therefore, can be described as linguistic. As a matter of fact, the distanciation through which experience eventuates coincides with the way language arrives into words, and marks the institution of language and thought. The most significant aspect of this conception of experience is the structure of erasure that indicates how experience unfolds by effacing its poietic occurrence, its play of differ-

ences, making room for its own imminent essentialization.[18] In this context, the poetic dimension of art can be understood as nothing other than the inscription in the work of art of the *poiesis* character of experience and its eventuation into language.

In Benjamin, this inscription takes the form of the now-time (*Jetztzeit*), where the distance between the present and the past is both collapsed and reconfirmed for the sake of the future and its redemption.[19] In the now-time, the recognition in the present of the incompleteness and the weak Messianic force of the past propels the present to the future, to action that might bring revolutionary change and, however partial, redemption of history. Benjamin's scheme employs two moments in time—the collapse of their temporal distance—to rupture the linearity of time and explode the continuity of historical experience. The incompleteness and openness of the past translates into the "revolutionary" possibilities of the present, which renders the now-time excessive and disruptive vis-à-vis conceptual, social, and political articulations of presence. As Peter Osborne suggests, in his notion of *Jetztzeit*, "Benjamin redefines the political, neither as a particular kind nor a particular sphere of action, but rather as a particular *temporal mode of experience*: an action-generating, as opposed to a contemplative, orientation toward the past."[20] Identifying the distance and incompleteness at work in the *Erfahrung*-form of experience with the Avant-garde's questioning of the conceptual and institutional separation of art and other cultural practices, Benjamin transposes avant-garde writing into the matrix of experience capable of keeping in view its historicity, evacuated already from the self-presence of a lived instant. This distanciation, which both structures and unworks experience as a form of *Erfahrung*, constitutes the political signification inherent in the mode of experiencing itself; it both produces and puts into question the articulation of experience in terms of a politics or a policy. To the extent, then, that avant-garde art puts in question and dislodges the dominant ideologies of experience, its own enactment of the incompleteness and heterogeneity of experience has, as it were, a political structure and significance.

In Heidegger's work, what ruptures the continuum of historical time is the event character of experience, specifically the aspect of it which Heidegger calls "nearness," that is, the manner in which past, present, and future interlace. The fourth dimension of time—as Heidegger calls it in "Time and Being"—nearness upsets the logic of identity and difference and undoes conceptual or aesthetic articulations of temporality in terms of presence or essence. The disruptive potential of historicity lies in the four-dimensionality of the event, the dimensionality erased in everyday, scientific, or philosophical conceptions of experience. The temporal effect of nearness, signified by Heidegger's notorious phrase "always already," indicates that experience unfolds in a fashion that almost totally erases historicity and transposes it into presence. To the extent that the technological paradigm of experience bases its conceptuality upon the notion of presence, it covers over and even annuls the poietic occurrence of experience—its historicity and event character—by rendering it homogeneous and object-like. What registers this event-temporality of experience, its disruptive, even transformative, force, is the poetic/literary fabric of language and writing. Therefore Heidegger sees in poetic language and in poetic thinking not so much an alternative to the technological model of experience as a way of transforming and broadening the "scale" of experience to include its poietic dimension—a dimension that opens up conceptual and aesthetic, but also political, questioning of cultural practices.

The need to reinscribe the rift between the poietic and the technic in modern experience explains the role that Heidegger and Benjamin assign to art and poetry in their polemics with modernity and its aesthetics. Moving the discussion beyond aesthetic categories means not only relinquishing the paradigm of the subject as the governing cognitive scheme, with its corollary notions of beauty, taste, and genius, but, and primarily, exploring the link between the poetic in art and the poietic in experience. In other words, we need to examine the relation between the poetic that, as "The Origin of the Work of Art" would have it, underlies all art and the poietic character of experience and language.[21] For Heidegger it is art, and in particular poetry, that can, if it is at all possible, register and inscribe the poietic dimension of experience. It is in this inscription that Heidegger looks for the power to subvert and possibly gain distance to the technic schematization of experience that overrides modern cultures. Obviously, the poietic the way I

have construed it here with the help of Heidegger and Benjamin, is not limited to or reserved for art and poetry. The poietic and the poetic are certainly not equivalent, even though their linguistic and etymological proximity suggests pertinence to the same domain of experience. While not all poetry and art is poietic in the sense proposed above, the discourse that is "at work" in art—what might be called its "poetics"—registers in its very structure the poietic manifestations of experience that may be covered over and effaced by other discursive practices. In keeping with the signification of the poetic proposed here, the concept of art itself would have to be detached from aesthetic categories and redefined through the prism of experience as event.[22]

The need for such a redefinition of art marks one of Heidegger's last lectures, "The Provenance of Art and the Destination of Thinking," delivered in Athens in 1967, where he poses precisely this question of the domain of modern art and the demands it places on contemporary thought; that is, of the role that the non-aesthetic or the poietic element of art plays in determining the form of future thinking:

> from what region comes the exigency to which modern art, in all its domains, responds? . . . one is easily prompted to explain that the region from which the requirements to which modern art responds is none other than the scientific world.
> We hesitate to give our ascent. We remain in indecision.[23]

Heidegger's hesitation illustrates the predicament in which contemporary theoretical and literary debates find themselves with respect to the problem of the aesthetic, the difficulty of articulating the exigencies facing modern art and its often conflictual relationship with technology. What implications does the most radical, "post-aesthetic," poetics hold for thought at the time when the latter no longer feels comfortable with its philosophical provenance and borders? Heidegger's lecture is not of much help beyond suggesting the complicated terrain on which such an inquiry would have to take place: between the provenance of modern art, that is, the region or world to which art responds, and contemporary thought, which attempts to redefine itself and its relations with alterity in the aftermath of the deconstruction of metaphysics. However, the space between "the origin of art" and "the determination of thinking" is not neutral: this interval corresponds to the scientific, technological reality of the modern world, its global civilization, and consumerist society. The encounter between modern aesthetics and the possibility of non-metaphysical thought decides not only artistic and philosophical issues but indicates the interdependencies between aesthetics and social praxis.[24]

Looking at art through a post-aesthetic lens that magnifies the expediency of redefining the inscription of experience in language touches upon the question of art's relation to the social and the political. I would agree here with J. M. Bernstein's remark in his recent book *The Fate of Art* that within modern art there may, in fact, be a hidden political discourse, an absent politics.[25] Without subscribing to Bernstein's conclusions that identify Adorno as a proper response to the challenge of modern art, I would suggest that it is indeed the absence of an adequate discourse on the non-aesthetic element in art, a discourse on the poietic, rather than the "merely poetic," significance of art, that identifies the troubling spots in the polemics that take place at the edge of metaphysics, in the narrow passage between modernity and post-modernity. Such a discourse can begin by elaborating the problem of the poietic in experience: of that characteristic manner of unfolding as displacement, which registers the historicity of being. Such a modality of happening, whether in Benjamin's "now-time" or Heidegger's "way to language," describes the differential and "inessential" character of experience, the unboundedness and heterogeneity of its event. The effect of this poietic element or dimension is both a destructuring of experience—a repeated dissolution of the conceptual, historical, and political strictures that govern the formation of experience—and a reconceptualization of alterity. Heidegger's understanding of art suggests that art happens as such a porous event, where experience is each time reinscribed in its historicity in the design of the work. Such a conception of art can be explored specifically with a view to how the porousness of the event keeps recoding the work with the ethical and political implications of the otherness that keeps inflecting the work's design. The cultural-political significance of art shows itself in particular in the possibility of reimagining of the political: no longer understood instrumentally, as a means to achieving social

and political change, the political instead describes the temporal structure or, in fact, a destructuring, of experience, which becomes subversive with respect to the dominant ideologies of experience.

Derrida has argued for some time now that the way the event of experience, its singularity and unboundedness, are articulated and simultaneously reduced into laws, statements, or truths, has broad cultural implications, both ethical and political. For Derrida, to the extent that experience as an event is always singular, dislocated, and unrepeatable in its heterogeneity, it opens up an asymmetrical and disjointed relation to the other, in which the other's alterity is maintained in the face of the totalizing structures of meaning and reason. In other words, what is inscribed in experience understood as event, in the singularity of its event-ness (*événementialité de l'événement*),[26] is the injunction or interpellation by the other—an ethical and a political injunction. In *Specters de Marx*, Derrida begins his reading of Marx's spectrology by quoting *Hamlet*,[27] evoking in this way not only the specter of Hamlet's father but also the ghost of literature, and doing it specifically in the context of political philosophy and the question of revolutionary practice. Even though Derrida does not elaborate on the juncture between the aesthetic and the political, the non-essential or spectral economy of experience he proposes in his readings of Marx, cites both Heidegger's notion of Ereignis and Benjamin's concept of the weak messianic force of history. In this "political" context, art and literature keep reopening the question of the implications traced by the injunction of singularity, whose differential event has significance that is not simply or only aesthetic (or poetic) but also ethical and political. Engaging art, as it were, before the aporias of art and politics, thought and action, such an approach locates the cultural significance of the work of art—its political and social meaning—in the way art inscribes, or fails to inscribe, the historicity of experience. Aesthetics cannot read this inscription, because it itself is the result of its erasure, perpetuated by the aporias that structure the system of representation. The politics of this inscription lies, therefore, beyond the aesthetic gaze; it is poetic otherwise.

**ENDNOTES**

1. One of Habermas's most forceful statements in which he takes issue with Derrida's practice can be found in "Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 185–210. Among Rorty's essays, one can consult "Deconstruction and Circumvention," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 1–23.
2. Writing about Benjamin and Heidegger together cannot fail to immediately bring up the question of politics and political commitment. Benjamin's interest in Marxism and opposition to fascism and Heidegger's support of National Socialism, even if only temporary, seem to place them irreconcilably apart, drawing frequent praise for the former and calumnies for the latter. As conflicted and contested as the question of the place of Heidegger's support for National Socialism in his thought is, I have to leave it aside for the purposes of this brief essay. In spite of the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Benjamin and Heidegger, their writings take a similar turn with respect to their implications for thinking the structure of experience and the possibility of the inscription of otherness in it. It is true especially of Heidegger's post-war texts on poetry, technology, and art, which attempt to open up a post-metaphysical venue for thinking experience through the conflict between technology and art. This approach considers alterity constitutive to the "non-essential" happening of experience as an event. It is this particular confluence between Heidegger and Benjamin that my essay explores.
3. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 179.
4. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1977, 1993), p. 335.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 38.
6. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). See, in particular, pp. 155–57.
7. In this way, Benjamin ties the problem of experience and technology, in a culturally more concrete manner than Heidegger, to poetry and literary practice. Benjamin's ongoing reflections on modernist art and literature and, specifically, on the way they reflect the changes in experience caused by social and cultural changes in the 19th century,

are pivotal for articulating the significance of artistic modernism. It is the redefinition of art in the aesthetic, cultural, and political practice of the Avant-garde that prepares the ground for theoretico-philosophical critiques of modernity.

8. Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," inquires about the possibility of such a rift in modern experience. For the beginning of Heidegger's discussion of the difference between *poiesis* and *techne*, see p. 317.
9. Heidegger's understanding of art opposes the Kantian divides between cognition and ethics, on the one hand, and cognition and aesthetics, on the other. It is important, perhaps even necessary, to read Heidegger's revision of the notion of the work of art as an alternative to Kant's aesthetic paradigm, at least in the sense that the two crucial moves that Heidegger makes in order to rethink art undercut the metaphysical separation of ontology and ethics and posit a proximity between thinking (*Denken*) and poetry (*Dichtung*). If for Kant aesthetics is to serve as a possible bridge between understanding and reason, for Heidegger no crossing is necessary since thinking is in an originary way ethical. The terrain of inquiry is therefore different: it is not a question of elaborating a conceptual apparatus for a non-conceptual workings of art but of reciprocal questioning between the operations of thinking and the poetic happening of art.
10. Benjamin's work, among others, specifically his reflections on fascism, has made us aware of the consequences of such aestheticization of experience and its most dangerous offshoot—the aestheticization of politics. While we are all aware that Heidegger's thought, especially in the 1930s, is certainly not immune from what Michael Zimmerman calls "ontological aestheticization," his analysis of experience in the 1950s and 1960s, especially of what might be called its *poietic* dimension, provides a most interesting critical, and still largely unexplored, vantage point for exploring art's significance in understanding modernity's culmination in the age of technology. The juxtaposition of Benjamin and Heidegger suggests that, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the unprecedented awareness in the 20th century about the liability of art and literature when it comes to politics and practices of exclusion and domination, we have to revise not only our understanding of art but also our appreciation of the ways and the levels on which it engages experience in its everyday, both social and political, dimensions. Zimmerman focuses his analysis on the moments in Heidegger's texts that have the unmistakable flavor of rural ideology, nostalgia for great art, and the mourning of pre-Socratic Greece. See *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), chapters 3, 7, and 8.
11. See "The Question Concerning Technology," pp. 317–20 and 333–41.
12. "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 322.
13. Unlike in Kant's thought, for Benjamin and Heidegger, schematization is not a matter of the transcendental conditions of experience but instead has to be understood apart from the paradigm of the subject. The modes of schematizing, conceiving, and regulating experience characteristic of modern society with its technological predilections function pre-subjectively; they operate as the structuring of the modern world that pre-disposes, channels, and organizes experience. As such, this schematization is eminently historical; it in fact constitutes history in its cultural and social specificity. It is this "worldly," "cultural" schematization which, operating beyond the powers of the subject and its will, influences the modes in which the world is experienced. Although this organization is reflected in institutions and encoded in social and cultural formations and their respective discourses, it, in fact, undergirds them and allows them to unfold into their specific forms. It is reciprocally reinforced by the formations it allows for, produces, and regulates in the first place. This mechanism not only institutes the technic organization of experience as the reigning paradigm of thought or the dominant ideology, but makes it into *the* way of experience, *the* way of being.
14. Peter Osborne, "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time," in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 64.
15. It is "The Task of the Translator" that defines language in terms of translation, yet, only when juxtaposed with the earlier essay on language, this description can be taken as reflecting Benjamin's understanding of the relation between language and experience. See "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, pp. 69–82; and "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," *Reflections*, pp. 314–32.
16. See Rodolphe Gasché, "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language," in Rainer Nägele, ed., *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 93. Gasché's text offers an excellent and concise explanation of how the two essays have to be examined together in order to understand Benjamin's approach to language.

17. Proximity here has to be, however, sharply and decisively delimited from identity, adequation, or unity characteristic of various models of cognition. For both Heidegger and Benjamin the unfolding of meaning is a necessary and, in a sense, propitious, mistranslation: an errancy, which is produced by the otherness of the world but which also, in the same gesture, maintains, respects, and takes care of this alterity. Hence this Benjaminian/Heideggerian approach is incommensurate with any mimetic conception of language and cognition: it not only puts in question and rearranges the scene of representation, it in fact lifts the curtain onto what takes place behind the scenes or transpires prior to and thus makes representation an issue in the first place.
18. In Heidegger's work, this self-veiling nature of experience is further complicated by the historical preeminence of technology and productionist metaphysics and their tendency to assign to non-existence alternative modes of experience. Thus, in modern society, the poietic as constitutive of experience is doubly erased: by its own structure of self-concealment and by the suppression of the poietic through the technic modes of organizing and regimenting experience.
19. Benjamin deploys this conception of *Jetztzeit* in his critique of historicism in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, pp. 261–64.
20. Osborne, "Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats," p. 68.
21. "*All art*, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*." Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 72.
22. Both Benjamin and Heidegger recognize that the importance of this particular inscription of the poietic in the poetic or the aesthetic has a historical significance. It is Benjamin, however, who, in his analysis of modernist literature and art, is much more attentive to how this recognition of the poietic potential of art is tied most closely to the progressive rationalization and technologization of culture and the irruption of avant-garde modernist aesthetics as a critique of progressivist culture. Yet, this poietic potential in art and the possibility of its release into culture at large depends on pushing our understanding of art beyond aesthetics and on elaborating a parallel mode of thinking, perhaps on the model of Benjaminian constellations or the Heideggerian "other thinking."
23. This excerpt quoted after Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's book *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 167.
24. What is perhaps even more important, and what Heidegger's hesitation vis-à-vis interpreting art through categories and requirements commensurate with scientific-metaphysical conceptuality registers clearly, is that it is the reading of the problematic affair of modern art with technology that decides and determines the relation between the aesthetic and the social.
25. See J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 9-16.
26. Jacques Derrida, *Specters de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 56.
27. Even though Derrida does not specifically discuss the junction between aesthetics and politics, I find the reference to *Hamlet* significant. It is, however, far from unproblematic: on the one hand, Derrida leaves uninterrogated the question of Shakespeare's aesthetics and its relation to the "spectral" conditions of experience, on the other, the invocation of the story of Hamlet in the context of politics almost begs a feminist response. The use of the text that bases its formation of the modern subject on a patriarchal scenario of duty and revenge, especially in the context of the critique of Eurocentric conceptions of history, certainly requires a further investigation.

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