Like those dead stars whose light continues to reach us, Lyotard’s thought, revered by some and reviled by others, continues to exert an influence on aesthetics today, having bequeathed to us a particular way of understanding the relations between art and philosophy, and having carved out certain subterranean but nonetheless decisive fault lines within the discipline of “aesthetics.” I will begin then by setting out Lyotard’s thinking of art (“of” here being understood as the subjective genitive – thinking which is that of art), in order to identify and delimit the position he bequeathed to us concerning the meaning of aesthetics as a discipline. I will then show how what I call the “artistic paradigm of aesthetics” inherited from Lyotard is no longer the dominant mode of aesthetic thinking in France and is currently facing serious competition from another mode of understanding the relations between art and philosophy, the many variations on which all fall within what I shall call the “philosophical paradigm of aesthetics.” Finally, I will then show that, in the face of developments in contemporary art, the artistic paradigm of aesthetics no longer constitutes an appropriate response to the new kinds of works being produced.

THE THINKING OF ART IN LYOTARD

Lyotard’s thinking of art was a product of modernity. His aesthetics, which was closely integrated with the rest of his philosophy and developed

1. I use this word in the sense given to it by the history of art, in order to designate a period that began at the end of the nineteenth century and ended in the 1960s.
in conjunction with it, was strongly marked by the artistic paradigm and the theoretical debates of his time. It is situated at the confluence of three streams of thought: the aistheticization of modern art, phenomenology, and Freudian psychoanalysis.

While the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* was meant to ennoble painting and elevate it from its status as a mechanical art to that of a liberal art through the claim that it was a silent form of poetry – in other words, that it belonged to the realm of discourse [*l’ordre du discours*] – the modern period was characterized by an attempt to show that painting, and art in general, was the privileged realm of athesis. In giving itself the task of capturing a subjective and fleeting optical impression, impressionism represented the triumph of the visual sensation over perception. Manet was the icon of pictorial modernity because he brought painting back to pictoriality, freeing it from its discursive role in favor of what Bataille called “the ‘sacred horror’ of presence.” At the end of the nineteenth century, Konrad Fiedler announced that it was time to have done with the notion of a transparency of content, proposing instead a theory of pure visibility, and thereby laying the theoretical groundwork for the style of formal critique that would come to prominence with Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Clement Greenberg. This aistheticization of art was not restricted to painting alone. In arguing in his 1854 work, *Du Beau dans la musique*, that music is simply a form of sonorous architecture, a combination of “sonorous forms whose only subject is themselves,” Hanslick denied the referential character that music had thus far been understood to possess, thereby granting music an autonomy that was to be explored by Helmholtz and Stravinsky. In the literary domain, Mallarmé turned poetry into a space of essential, nonreferential language, distinct from the usual representative and communicational function of language. In this “unusual vessel of sonorous inanity”¹ the signified disappears, leaving only signifiers which, in the shock of their encounter, “light up with reciprocal reflections like a virtual stream of fireworks over jewels.”²

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¹. Translator’s note: This quotation comes from the first version of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem “Sonnet en yx,” a translation of which can be found in Roger Pearson, *Stéphane Mallarmé* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 80-81.

Lyotard’s thought belongs to the theoretical mindset that accompanied this modern moment in the history of art. *Discourse, Figure* is presented as an “apology for of the eye,”¹ and describes how, by ridding itself of the homogeneous, rationalized, and false space ushered in with the geometric perspective of the Renaissance, modern painting has thwarted the logos’s cunning at subjugating the visible. Modern painting has forced “the mind to take position in front of the sensory.”² Against this background, it is easy to see why Lyotard praises color: it is the essence of the pictorial which, since the debate between the colorists and the Rubenists, has represented a challenge for the powers of the mind. Whether he is speaking of Masaccio, Cézanne, Klee, Sam Francis, Barnett Newman, Monory, or Albert Ayme, Lyotard always focuses on the presence of matter, the coming to appearance of the sensible, and the great silence of painting. This matter, as he writes in *The Inhuman*, is “‘immaterial,’ anobjectable, because it can only ‘take place’ or find its occasion at the price of suspending these active powers of the mind.” The word “matter” means here:

This ‘*that there is,*’ this *quod*, because this presence in the absence of the active mind is never other than timbre, tone, nuance in one or other of the dispositions of sensibility, in one or other of the *sensoria*, in one or other of the passibilities through which mind is accessible to the material event, can be ‘touched’ by it: a singular, incomparable quality – unforgettable and immediately forgotten – of the grain of a skin or a piece of wood, the fragrance of an aroma, the savor of a secretion or a piece of flesh, as well as a timbre or a nuance.³

Where literature is concerned, Lyotard favors those authors who turn away from narrativity and for whom what matters is the literarity of writing, which resides, as Sartre wrote, in the “fleshy face” of words rather than in the story. Butor, Gertrude Stein, Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett are all grouped together as the successors of Mallarmé, whose *Coup de dé* is given a seminal and emblematic role in *Discourse, Figure*. The artwork, then, does not signify: it is the “singular, unexpected arrangement of the

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². Lyotard, *Discourse*, 212 [*Discours*, 218].
elements that constitute it: words in literature, and colors and forms in painting;”¹ and art is “a refutation of the position of discourse.”²

For Lyotard, to say that aistheticization is art’s triumphant response to the Western rationality that would destroy it, is not to say that the battle between the two is one of the sensible against all forms of meaning. What Lyotard rejects is the meaning of the logos, in other words, signification. What he accepts and extols is another form of meaning: that of art, the eye, and the sensible. With this affirmation of a meaning of the senses, Lyotard follows in the footsteps of phenomenology, whose approach he shared from his earliest writings in the early fifties to those of the early seventies.

The aisthetic paradigm, emphasizing as it does the importance of an attention to the phenomenality of the sensible rather than the conceptual organization of a world of objects, was bound to find in phenomenology a significant source of theoretical support. Because it constitutes a reflection on phenomenality, of what makes each phenomenon a phenomenon – its appearing, its manifestation, its revelation, its truth – phenomenology itself found in the modern conception of aesthetic experience an application of its fundamental philosophical intuition. Henri Maldiney clearly demonstrates this kinship when he writes of Cézanne that:

The “logic of the eyes,” the only one to which Cézanne gives credence, is a “phenomenology” in the sense described by Husserl when he writes: “It is only by looking that I can bring to light what it truly is to look; I can only give an adequate explanation of looking by looking.”³⁴

Lyotard says the same thing when he speaks of what the painting represents for the modern painter: “An object where the becoming-object is made visible – transcendental activity itself.”⁵ For him, just as for Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s work heralds the birth of this phenomenological painting: the space of his paintings is no longer representative, but enacts “the deconstruction of the focal zone by the curved area in the periphery of the field of vision.” The painter “manifests Mount Sainte-Victoire in

². Lyotard, *Discourse*, 7 [Discours, 13].
⁵. Lyotard, *Discourse*, 24 [Discours, 28].
the process, as it were, of making itself visible,” or, in other words, “the landscape . . . such as one can see it before looking at it,” and in so doing “makes us see what seeing is.”¹ The aesthetic experience of art is thus an application of the phenomenological reduction, which brings about a suspension (epokhe) of all judgment concerning things and facts in order to see the world as a pure phenomenon. We find this thinking of the “there is” (“il y a”) throughout Lyotard; as he writes as early as the Inhuman: “A painting by Newman is an angel. It announces nothing; it is in itself the annunciation.”²

In place of the logocentric project summed up by Claudel’s expression, “The eye hears,” phenomenology substituted a project of “seeing the invisible.” Lyotard departs from this school of thought, however, when he stops conceiving the invisible in phenomenological terms, and begins to view it in Freudian terms: those, namely, of drive, desire, and the unconscious. Alongside sensible meaning, there also exists a form of libidinal meaning. Phenomenology had turned away from the “I” toward the “one;” but even if it was no longer a first-person philosophy, it remained a philosophy of the subject. It was necessary, then, to go further, deeper: to go from “one” to “it.” Merleau-Ponty’s mistake was to believe that the body was the site of the event, that it was that which disturbs language, but that it was nevertheless potentially a “language of coincidence, a manner of making the things themselves speak.”³ That, for Lyotard, was an illusion. Merleau-Ponty did not see what definitively resists language and fell into the error of believing in the all-powerful nature of thought; he believed it was possible to go “over there while remaining here.”⁴ Phenomenology, then, like all Western philosophy, was found guilty of having sought to obliterate desire, to “recuperate the Other into the Same.”⁵

The principles of psychoanalysis provided Lyotard both with a set of tools with which to critique phenomenology and, more positively, with the basis of the vision of art he developed in this period, one which remained important for his enduring theses on art. Art thus came to be conceived by him as the surfacing of desire: “[It] stands in alterity as plasticity and

¹. Lyotard, Discourse, 197 [Translator’s note: Translation modified] [Discours, 204].
². Lyotard, The Inhuman, 79 [L’Inhumain, 90].
⁴. Lyotard, Discourse, 14 [Discours, 19].
⁵. Lyotard, Discourse, 17 [Discours, 21].
desire, a curved expanse against invariability and reason, diacritical space.”\textsuperscript{1} It bears witness to the unpresentable, signaling toward “something that remains outside the sphere of consciousness in the phenomenological sense of the term.”

But how is it possible to present the invisible if it is unpresentable? This is where the key term \textit{figure} comes in. The figure – which refers both to sensible form in painting and style in literature – is that in which an exterior pulsation is manifested, an energy that is irreducible to discourse. This is why “the figure enjoys a radical complicity with desire.”\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Discourse, Figure} emphasizes the analogy between creative work and dream work: both enact the same deconstruction of coherent discourse. Cézanne’s figurable space is thus the plastic equivalent of the unconscious: worked over by primary and secondary processes, it is a space that “oscillates, allowing many vanishing points to coexist, a space of nonlocality.”\textsuperscript{3} The work bears the traces of all the processes that brought it into being: displacements, inversions, the unity of contraries, indifference toward time and reality. It is therefore “the displayed workshop of the primary process.”\textsuperscript{4} The poetic artwork, for its part, is “a text worked over by the figure,”\textsuperscript{5} that is, by those stylistic figures which transgress the usual lexical and syntactic rules. Primary processes surface when, in \textit{Hamlet}, Shakespeare invents the adjective “mobled” in order to describe the queen (“The mobled queen;” translated by Gide as “\textit{La reine encaouflée}”). Produced via the condensation of the words “mother,” “mob,” and “motley,” “mobled” is interpreted by Lyotard as “a fragment of the space of the primary unconscious that has left its trace within discourse.” When Henri Pichette writes of a beloved, “I print you,” “I swim you,” or “I music you,” his use of incongruous terms testifies “to the fact that there lies underground not a system but forces, an energetics that disrupts the ordering of the system.”\textsuperscript{6} Poetics does not construct meaning but deconstructs it; in so doing, it does not speak the truth, but “forms a work of truth.”\textsuperscript{7}\

\begin{enumerate}
\item Lyotard, \textit{Discourse}, 7 [\textit{Discours}, 13].
\item Lyotard, \textit{Discourse}, 268 [\textit{Discours}, 271].
\item Lyotard, \textit{Discourse}, 232 [\textit{Discours}, 238].
\item Lyotard, \textit{Discourse}, 277 [\textit{Discours}, 281].
\item Lyotard, \textit{Discourse}, 140-141 [\textit{Discours}, 145].
\item Lyotard, \textit{Discourse}, 389 [\textit{Discours}, 386].
\end{enumerate}
Such is Lyotard’s libidinal aesthetics. The question of the artwork is one of intensities, mechanisms, displacements, and energy. Galvanized by Kant’s treatment of the question of the sublime, Lyotard’s thinking of art developed further during the eighties. The sublime experience is a form of pleasurable suffering (“The pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept”\(^1\)). This is the pleasure offered by the experience of colors: not a simple, retinal pleasure, but the simultaneity of pleasure and suffering, because it is the anamnesis of the abyssal or, as Lyotard writes regarding the paintings of Sam Francis, the “contradictory bouquet to the glory of what seeing can and cannot do.”\(^2\) Art is thus no longer the space of the indirect, unexpected, diverted representation of the unpresentable, but the space in which it is made manifest that there is the unpresentable. The sublime points to the brilliance of the absolute which shows itself at the same time as it conceals itself: “The ‘subject’ of painting is that instant itself, the flash of light which dazzles the eye, an epiphany.”\(^3\) Postmodern art is interpreted by Lyotard as the space of this negative presentation. Gertrude Stein’s work is thus more suited to expressing the inexpressible of the Shoah than Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man*, or Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. From *Discourse, Figure* to the late aesthetic texts, then, Lyotard maintains that art bears witness to a cavity at the heart of representation, to an originary nonsense which he first called “figure” and then the “different.”

**AFTER LYOTARD**

The field of aesthetics in France today is varied, complex, and full of contrasts. The various approaches which make it up are closely tied to the prevailing philosophical paradigms, with works being inspired by, variously, analytic philosophy, phenomenology, French philosophy, the history of philosophy – or more broadly the history of ideas – and the philosophy of mind and cognitive science. A line can be drawn through this diverse field

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which quite neatly separates those who accept Lyotard’s legacy and those who reject it. I shall consider each of these positions in turn.

Lyotard’s Legacy or the Artistic Paradigm of Aesthetics

Lyotard’s analysis of art renders the status of aesthetics, and philosophy more broadly, extremely problematic. For Hegel, aesthetics as philosophical reflection on art is possible and necessary because art is not self-sufficient and because meaning is only found in the logos. Philosophy is therefore required in order to express the truth of art. But when art is conceived as the realm of a form of the sensible that language cannot grasp, of a libidinal meaning that precisely escapes the logos, of a meaning that conceals itself at the same time as it grants itself, and when theory is held to terrorize and destroy singularities and intensities, whither the philosophy of art?

One response to this question consists in giving art the task of philosophy. The idea is not new: the Jena Romantics believed in a philosophy of Art, not in the form of a philosophy that would speak of Art or that would reflect on Art, but a philosophy that would emanate from Art, that would proceed from Art, and that would be superior to philosophy as it had classically been conceived. For Novalis, the task of poetry was to perfect philosophy. Friedrich Schlegel, for his part, conceived his philosophy of Art as the comprehension of the whole universe by Art. French philosophy has also seen art as animating thought and has accorded it a key role in its exploration of difference. As Lyotard stated in a 1985 interview with Bernard Blistène, “Art is somewhat philosophical.” In its way – which, for Lyotard, is the only effective way – it erects a metaphysical edifice, stupefies philosophy, undermines the beliefs and knowledge of understanding, and puts us in contact with the principle of things – so much so that, in modern painting, the picture “should be able to stand in for all of philosophy” and that “Gertrude Stein, Joyce, and Duchamp seem to be greater ‘philosophical’ minds than Nietzsche and Heidegger.” Alain Badiou, who gave a collection of his texts on art the title Handbook of Inaesthetics [Petit manuel d’inesthétique (1998)], wishes to replace discourse

1. Lyotard, Discourse, 24 [Discours, 28].
on art with a discourse of art – art being itself a “truth procedure.” Mikel Dufrenne described this self-renunciation of philosophy as early as 1959: as he wrote, it is “as though philosophy, struggling to maintain its self-sufficiency while claiming to be the thought of the unthinkable, felt the need to be replaced or revived by a nonphilosophical form of knowledge, or perhaps by a discourse located beyond knowledge.”

A second response consists in doing aesthetics nonphilosophically. Here too, the idea is not new. During the period in which he wrote the Gay Science, Nietzsche, who had destroyed the ideals of truth and science under the hammerblows of his critique, saw in the illusions of art a model for a world that had rid itself of truth, and called for the philosopher-artist who favors intuition and vision over the system, and who thinks via aphoristic meditations. Even while opposing, in The Inhuman, the ponderousness of conceptual discourse to the sublime lightness of the artwork, Lyotard continued to write on art. But his aesthetics could not remain a philosophy of art without contradicting itself: it could only gain legitimacy by itself becoming artistic. It did so by renouncing method, argumentation, reasoning, and truth; by making its sole task that of drawing attention to the ineffable that escapes it: “The nothing demands that thought be expressed not as the product of a critical argument but as the style of a reflexive writing.”

Just as a painting is not to be read but, in Klee’s words, “to be grazed on,” so aesthetic discourse that contains in itself “trembling, movement, and energy [force],” is also to be grazed on rather than comprehended. Requiring as it does a form of discourse that is more expressive than significatory, Lyotard acknowledges that aesthetics can only be a weak discourse, one which admits its “powerlessness [impouvoir].” Lyotard aims to escape accusations of sophistry, relativism, and nihilism by substituting the idea of aletheia for that of truth: “Truth in no way passes through a discourse of signification: its impossible topos cannot be determined through the coordinates of knowledge. Instead, it makes itself felt on the surface of discourse through effects, and this presence of meaning is called expression.”

According to a logic of complete reversal, aesthetics as a methodical and coherent discourse is false because it does

3. Lyotard, Discourse, 9 [Translator’s note: Translation modified] [Discours, 15].
4. Lyotard, Discourse, 12 [Discours, 17].
not enact a deconstruction. Conversely, only an uncertain, fragmented, incomplete discourse can reach the truth. Philosophy’s strength becomes its congenital weakness; its weakness becomes its greatness.

Clearly, these two proposals (art as philosophy and philosophy as art) are closely connected. One aspect of what is being carried out in France today under the banner of aesthetics is aligned with what I call the *artistic paradigm of aesthetics*. Unsurprisingly, it is particularly prevalent in art schools, is well represented in university art departments, and crops up in a range of broader discourses. In a recent volume of *L’Observatoire*, for example, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix appealed to us to take up the opposite view to those who wish “that philosophy have the last word on art,” and also for art to “take over the most eminent task that philosophy set itself from its beginnings, which is to lead human beings to truth, freedom, and happiness.”¹ Today, the esoteric lexicon has largely been replaced by a hermeneutic lexicon: artworks are conceived less in terms of bringing the invisible and unpresentable to presence, or of the monstration of the impossibility of monstration, than in terms of “interrogating,” “questioning,” “challenging,” “stimulating reflection,” “giving pause for thought”: formulations which all gesture toward the Socratic foundations of philosophy.

### Against Lyotard: The Philosophical Paradigm of Aesthetics

Alongside the dissemination of Lyotard’s thought, a form of aesthetics rooted in analytic philosophy developed in the Anglo-American world that defined itself in opposition to the great speculative tradition of the nineteenth century. The proponents of this method adopted Russell’s formula, according to which the task of philosophy is not to construct systems but to undertake analysis, that is, to break down a concept, a fact, or an entity into its component parts, and to clarify vague and confused notions by examining the manner in which they are used. Analytic aesthetics developed as a reaction to the great speculative systems, such as that of Hegel, and to Romanticism broadly conceived, but it equally

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attacked the most varied and modern variations on and developments of these forms of thought. Whether it was a matter of Hegel’s absolute spirit, of being and beings in Heidegger, or of Lyotard’s unpresentable, all such postulates were judged obscure, confused, and fruitless.

The growth of analytic thought in France has acted as a powerful counterweight to the artistic paradigm of aesthetics and has contributed, alongside many other studies of a more classical inspiration, to bringing aesthetics back within the purview of philosophy. Today, a wide variety of projects are being pursued within the relegitimated boundaries of philosophical aesthetics, from investigations of a clearly analytic stamp, such as those of Jacques Morizot or Roger Pouivet, to those rooted in the continental tradition of the history of philosophy or the history of ideas. Having reinvested the logos with legitimacy, the thinkers pursuing such projects now feel able to address precise and determinate questions in a conceptual manner. This may take place in an analytic mode, by posing such questions as: Is aesthetic experience sui generis? How does representation function symbolically? How can we be moved by what we know to be fictional? And so forth. Or it may take the form of a history of philosophy and ideas (for example, the invention of the notion of taste, Kantian aesthetics, the history of the idea of catharsis, and so forth). Or it may combine both methods in a historico-conceptual approach which poses questions of general interest (in the sense in which we speak, in French, of *philosophie générale*), all the while taking into account the fundamental historicity of art.

**Aesthetics Today**

This historico-conceptual approach is the one that I myself adopt. It consists in posing determinate and explicit questions (Can art redeem the disgusting? Is ethical criticism legitimate? What is the relation between the artistic and the aesthetic? And so forth) and in responding to these with arguments. In contrast to analytic aesthetics, however, where necessary it

invokes the history of art and the history of ideas – and first and foremost, the history of the idea of art – in order to address these questions. Aesthetics has rightly been reproached for its ignorance of the works it discusses, and it is quite true that a knowledge of and familiarity with artworks of both the present and the past is a prerequisite for a legitimate discourse on art. In contrast to modernist aesthetics’ focus on painting and its modern and contemporary metamorphoses, however, such a discourse also requires a wider interest in the other arts, particularly sculpture, architecture, and literature – art forms that have remained strangely and unfortunately absent from the usual fields of aesthetic investigation, but to which aesthetics is beginning to pay greater attention. Without aesthetics, the history of art is blind, for it is not only comprised of artworks, but also of the words that discuss them, the concepts that categorize them, and the theories that reflect on them. But equally, aesthetics without the history of art (comprising both the history of artworks and the history of conceptual reflection on art) is empty. So much, then, for method. Yet, as any discipline is also defined by the objects it deals with, what are the questions that aesthetics ought to address?

Lyotard’s thought, which was perfectly in step with the modern moment in the history of art, contributed to building a conception of late modernist art and the forms of postmodernist art that chimed with it. As a product of modernity in the sense we have described, it was in harmony with such an idea of art, one which was embodied by avant-garde art forms that were mindful of their specificity (of the picturality of paint, the literarity of literature, the musicality of music, and so forth), that were concerned by form rather than content, and that laid claim to an autonomy and autotelicity. For Lyotard, it was in such qualities that the depth and revelatory force of this idea lay. But we have now moved on from this modern moment in the history of art, and even from its postmodern phase. Though the latter rejected the militant purity of the avant-garde, replacing it with an eclecticism and with historical references and making use of quotation, humor, and mockery, Lyotard still saw in it a pursuit of the modernist project: “The postmodern is that which, in the modern, thrusts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which refuses to present beautiful forms . . . which enquires into new forms of presentation, not for the pleasure of doing so, but in order to bring out more fully that there
is the unpresentable.”¹ Even postmodernity is now behind us. Art is no longer either modern or postmodern, and Lyotard’s thought is ill suited and inapplicable to contemporary art. The latter can be characterized on the basis of three traits, which I shall call de-definition, deautonomization, and deartification.

**De-Definition**

In the eighteenth century, beauty came to be seen as the highest value of art, as was attested to by the invention of the fine arts; the nineteenth century and a large part of the twentieth century inflected this aestheticization into an aestheticization by stressing the very sensibility of the sensible and by promoting an idea of aesthetic experience as attention to the purely aspectual qualities of the artwork. The dissolution of art into the aesthetic was in a sense built in to this evolution. Cage achieved it within the very midst of art. In his piece, “4’33,” he placed the audience in conditions identical to those in which they would usually listen to a musical performance, in order to make them hear extra-artistic sounds and thus open up to the sounds of the world. According to a twentieth-century school of thought, of which Cage was in many respects the forerunner, the ultimate mission of art was to teach us to do without art. As Cage wrote in his journal, “It seems to me that the effect of the modern art of the twentieth century has been to change our way of seeing, to such an extent that, wherever we look, we are able to look aesthetically.”² This constitutes the end of a difference in kind between art and nature. It is the most radical form of what Harold Rosenberg referred to as de-definition.

**Deautonomization**

When art outlives itself, it comes to take on unexpected forms. The formalist and autotelic period in art is now well behind us. Many artists

2. Translator’s note: Quotation translated from the French-language version of this article.
are now politically engaged, whether in issues concerning solidarity, fraternity, or the ecological future of the planet. Wodiczko protested against war by projecting the moving image of a war veteran onto the statue of Lincoln in New York’s Union Square, accompanied by words spoken by the veteran. Rick Lowe renovated abandoned row houses in Houston. Felix Gonzalez-Torres launched a billboard campaign denouncing homophobia. At the 2005 Venice Biennale, on the occasion of World Water Day, Jorge and Lucy Orta presented equipment for filtering stagnant water, along with vehicles designed to transport this equipment cheaply, under the title *Drinkwater!*. The *Moral Imagination* exhibition staged at the Kunstmuseum in Torgau (Switzerland) in 2009 celebrated the progress of green art. Thousands of other examples could have been chosen, but this selection testifies to the way in which de-definition and deautonomization are being combined within contemporary artistic activity. The very antithesis of the idea of autotelicity, these works are no longer presented as auratic objects serving aesthetic experience; they are intended to act on the extra-artistic world and, in order that they might do so, are given a directly functional form.

**Deartification**

This translation of Adorno’s expression, the “*Entkunstung der Kunst,*” refers to the transformation of the artistic into the cultural and of the cultural into mass art. Contemporary art is a tiny, isolated island within the vast ocean of the culture industry. The mass arts (that is, those that are distributed through mass technologies – CDs, DVDs, television, the Internet – that are shared throughout the planet, and that are universally accessible, irrespective of culture or educational background) make contemporary art, the heir of the avant-garde, seem like a lost, arcane canton – one that is both ambitious and anxious.

These developments have opened up new fields of investigation for aesthetics. De-definition has encouraged it to leave the modernist confines of the philosophy of art and to look to the environment and the landscape, as well as to design and arts of living. Due to its etymology, the discipline of “aesthetics” has two basic orientations. Baumgarten, who bequeathed
this name to history,¹ saw aesthetics as both a form of poetics and—as its etymology (aisthesis) indicates—a reflection on the sensible and the experience of the sensible. Posthury, however, has not accorded these two orientations equal status. The word aesthetics soon came to be determined as “the philosophy of art.” Aesthetics was thus for a long time almost exclusively concerned with the artistic. In the book he wrote on aesthetics for the “Que sais-je?” series in 1998, Denis Huisman affirmed what he had earlier written on the subject: “Aesthetics must be considered as the philosophy of art, and nothing else.” Paradoxically, however, it is due to developments in contemporary art itself that we are now under pressure to develop an extra-artistic aesthetics. To explore and sense the sensible (a project which is sketched by Jean-Marie Schaeffer in his Les Célibataires de l’art) is to open aesthetics to all forms of sensation, whether its object be a work of art, a natural or artificial object, an event, or an experience. It is to make the objects of aesthetics both a very particular kind of relation between human beings and the world (the aesthetic relation, with its cognitive, affective, and evaluative aspects) as well as the objects of this experience (aesthetic qualities and the objects in which they inhere). Current developments in research into design, landscape, the decorative arts, and arts of living, under the headings of environmental aesthetics or the aesthetics of the everyday, testify to this spreading of aesthetics beyond the artistic field. Likewise, the end of the formalist period in art has made it possible for the artistic side of aesthetics to reengage with certain questions that had been outlawed, such as those concerning the relation of art to the emotions or to ethics. Deartification encourages us to look to those mass arts that have been little studied but which are of enormous social and anthropological importance (such as TV series, blockbusters, video games, popular music, promos, and so on).

In France, the end of the twentieth century gave rise to a serious interrogation of the role of aesthetics. As we have seen, this interrogation was not uniform. It was comprised of two diametrically opposed accusations. On the one hand, the defenders of the artistic paradigm of aesthetics accused aesthetics of wishing to dominate art, subjecting its marvelous subtlety to the authoritarian and oppressive workings of the logos—we

¹. But who did not himself give it its modern meaning as the science of art; this only occurred with Sulzer.
might think here of Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (published in French in 1998); on the other, the defenders of the philosophical paradigm of aesthetics accused aesthetics of making oracular pronouncements, thereby burdening art with unjustified speculative theses – here we might think of Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s *L’Adieu à l’esthétique* (2000).

The choice was thus between an *inaesthetics* and a philosophical aesthetics; in other words, between a philosophical aesthetics or nothing. The Lyotardian *inaesthetic* moment now seems, with the benefit of a degree of historical distance, to have been both important for the theoretical hold it exerted over prevailing *doxa* and conspicuous for the detrimental consequences it had for aesthetics. But all in all, its limitations are now apparent: it seems to represent a parenthesis in the history of philosophical aesthetics, which, long before the invention of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Europe, had from its beginnings in antiquity concerned itself with the arts, the beautiful, and the sensible as such.

Aesthetics suffered much damage in the crossfire between the two camps, but it has picked itself up from the crisis constituted by this open battle between two models. Returning to its traditional subjects and engaged by new questions which have arisen through the de-definition, de-autonomization, and deartification of art, in France today aesthetics constitutes a solid and promising field of philosophical enquiry.

**Carole Talon-Hugon**