

Nietzsche and the Future of Art

by Friedrich Ulfers and Mark Daniel Cohen

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**HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



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Among the fields of philosophical concern, aesthetics is distinguished by its having a reality test. The majority of areas of interest for the philosopher lie outside the reach of external evaluations. Ontological speculations stand as logically determined and demonstrable propositions and as presuppositions for the designing of scientific inquiries; they stipulate what must be taken for granted in order that science may be practiced without falling into an infinite regression of required proof. Ethical considerations are purposed to guide effort—they establish the standards by which actions may be judged, and so elude judgment by the actions they direct. But aesthetics engages the analysis of that which is done without the direction of philosophical texts. Artists create out of an internal motivation, and their creations are driven by impulses that resist instruction. Aesthetic theories assess what exists outside their tutelage, what is as fully given to the philosophical mind as is the reality of the world and the fact of human life. Even when an aesthetic theory is formulated in the prescriptive, even when the philosophy it delivers is devised as a recommendation to artists, it remains the case that the theory is evaluated by the degree to which artists, in fact, choose to follow its dictates. And, given the perennial difficulty in determining dependably artists' motivations, such an aesthetics can never be unambiguously claimed as the cause of a change in artistic practice and may well be more a prediction than a prescription. And so, aesthetic theories must prove themselves valid more in the sense that scientific theories must than in the sense that ontological postulations can. Aesthetics is the science of art, for art precedes aesthetics, and aesthetic philosophies must demonstrate their worth—they must survive the test of matching what they specify to what artists actually provide.

The role of aesthetics in the body of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical work is well recognized. As is familiar to virtually all Nietzsche scholars, Nietzsche founded his ontology, his sense of the philosopher's vocation, and his formulations for the future evolution of values on an aesthetic philosophy, first laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy* and rooted in his analysis of Greek tragedy, which gave him his conception of the difference between the Apollinian and Dionysian forms of artistic imagination and, with them, the Apollinian and Dionysian world views—two differing interpretations of the world. With these two forms of specifically *artistic* conception come, for Nietzsche, two essential forms of perception, which relate directly to interrelated aspects of his ontological philosophy—of his conception of the real. For Nietzsche, the Apollinian and Dionysian are capabilities of the truth, and it is art that possesses a unique capacity for insight into that truth.

¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist Antichrist*, fourth ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 10.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968) 46.

It did not take long for the appreciation of the importance of aesthetics in Nietzsche's work to be established. From the earliest reception of his thought, Nietzsche's name has consistently been connected with a valorization of art that was taken to be central to his text and so to his overall concerns. Whether this is due to such early conceptions as that of Stefan George, who saw in Nietzsche the exemplary philosopher as poetic visionary whose idea of power was understood by George in the context of his own artistic motto "*j'aime l'art comme pouvoir*,"¹ or to the recognition of Nietzsche's own artistic efforts—his musical compositions, occasional poetry, and his novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—there can be little doubt that Nietzsche has in general long been understood to be the quintessential philosopher of art.

What is not so generally recognized is that Nietzsche's views on art were reflected to a significant degree in the work of artists in the years following his death, a period of development in the arts that saw changes in artistic method and purpose that rival any that preceded it—the period of Modernism. It is the thesis of this paper that Nietzsche's conception of art, and specifically his views as laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy*, directly foresaw and established a philosophical foundation for the primary developments in the art of the twentieth century in the Western tradition, laying out a role and vision for art that characterize the developments which define Modernism. It is an alignment of imagination, and a potential range of influence, that has been ratified by numerous artists who cite Nietzsche in their writings, and it can perhaps be most clearly observed in the principal achievement in visual art of the century—the development of pure, or nonrepresentational, abstraction.

Art, in Nietzsche's conception and as reflected in the work of artists who have come since, carries the capability and responsibility of conveying the full weight of the philosopher's ontological vision. It is an art of truth-telling, and the truth it tells is of a "Dionysian" comprehension of the world: a tragic insight into a world of Becoming, a processual conception of reality in which the world is an incessant interplay of forces. There are no enduring objects, no "things." There are strictly events ceaselessly coming into being and simultaneously passing away and that are the function of oppositions of forces that never achieve equilibrium, that never come to resolution. It is a world of endless flux, of constantly incomplete, constantly open-ended experimentation, and which can be understood only through the rejection of oppositional thinking, the dismissal of all conceptions that are defined as the opposite of what they are not. Everything that can be said to exist—existing as a continual state of Becoming, of being created and being uncreated as its inherent condition—is both what it is and what it is not. It is what may be called a "chiasmic" unity—an integration of opposites, an interlacing of what the normative mind would think could not go together. This chiasmic condition is what Nietzsche called "excess"—that which is beyond definition, or limitation—and it was his claim that "*Excess revealed itself as truth.*"² What we are left with is a world of the

goalless play of forces, a ceaseless Heraclitean strife, a world in which nothing can achieve a final state, in which nothing can complete itself and accomplish a perfected stability.

Nietzschean art is that whose purpose is to reveal the nature of such a worldview, not through the art's assertions or renditions—it cannot state what inherently cannot be defined—but through simulation, through enacting this vision of the real and conveying as an aesthetic experience a sensory grasp of the truth, a truth that cannot be explained but can be achieved only through insight—a tragic, Dionysian insight—tragic in that it envisions the incessant making and unmaking of everything, including ourselves. This is the lesson Nietzsche acquired from ancient Greek tragic drama, from the beginning of our artistic tradition—a lesson lost, he felt, during the nearly 2,500 years of the dominance of logical thinking—and with no true irony, he saw it as marking the art of the future. Nietzsche saw his philosophy as a whole as a “Philosophy of the Future,”³ and the characterization of an art charged with conveying that philosophical vision as an art of the future is more than just a direct implication. The philosopher stated it openly: “The future of art (when mankind grasps its point). I could think of an art that is forward-looking, that seeks its images in the future. Why isn't there such an art? Art moves forward away from piety.”⁴

In observing Nietzsche's assertions regarding an aesthetic of the future, one should appreciate what futurity meant for the philosopher. The future, like all that occurs in the world, is intrinsically and irrevocably open-ended. Nothing can be resolved, nothing can reach a completion—history cannot end in a fulfillment, nor can any aspect or portion of the play of forces that constitute history. The future is not a promise but an endless process of goalless experimentation in all that is possible. It is directionless, and in itself, it is featureless. Nietzsche remarks on the pure and dizzying, disorienting open expanse of time, referring to the “oceans of the future”⁵ and “the abysses of the future.”⁶ Nietzsche's conception of an art of the future, an art appropriate to such a sense of the future, is distinctive in its implicit opposition to the aesthetic arguments of our time claiming we have reached the end of art. For Nietzsche, there can no more be an end for art than there can be a resolution and completion for anything else, and thus there is within his aesthetics a necessarily continuing possibility of art, and an unceasing, irrevocable, distinctive, and defining purpose to which art may be put—the continuing possibility of an art that makes an ontological claim.

Nietzsche's devising of his aesthetic philosophy occurred at a particularly propitious moment in the history of the arts, and not just of the arts. He wrote and had his first influence in the heart of a time of profound ferment, a time of notable innovators and innovations, a time of foundational change in not only philosophy but also in the sciences and in the arts. Much of the most

³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, Basic Writings of Nietzsche* 179.

⁴ Nietzsche, ksa 8.187. (translation by the authors)

⁵ Nietzsche, ksa 6.393. (“Das Feuerzeichen” Dionysos-Dithyramben, translation by the authors)

⁶ Nietzsche, ksa 11.24. (translation by the authors)



Above:
Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral, the West Portal and Saint-Romain Tower, Full Sunlight, Harmony in Blue and Gold*, 1893

At right, from top:
Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889

Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892

Otto Dix, *Machine Gunners Advancing*, 1924



innovative work developing then in the arts was involved in what can be termed a break with fidelity to appearances. Symbolist poetry as devised by Stéphane Mallarmé was already turning away from the depiction of a material world occupied with substantial objects. He instructed poets to render, “for example, the horror of the forest, or the silent thunder afloat in the leaves; not the intrinsic, dense wood of the trees.”⁷ In the avant-garde painting of Nietzsche’s lifetime, the first forays were being made into the deliberate break with mimesis, the break with the faithful representation of observable reality, through the projects of the Impressionism of Claude Monet and the Post-Impressionism of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. Such developments align with Nietzsche’s own rejection of material, enduring objects that appear to populate the world and seek a more mysterious, Dionysian realization.

⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Arthur Symons, “On Stéphane Mallarmé,” *The Symbolist Poem*, ed. Edward Engelberg (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967) 326.

With such developments, a trajectory of experimentation in art was being inaugurated that would lead through increasing divergences from the authentic reproduction of appearances and would culminate, 20 years after the philosopher’s death and most evidently, in the achievement of pure abstraction in the visual arts. As visual artists pushed further into the departure from apparent reality in the first decades of the twentieth century, the number of references to Nietzsche in their writings and in the writings of the commentators on the new art makes it clear that Nietzsche served a role as an inspiration, if not a guide, to the new artistic experimentation, and he did so to a degree that no other philosopher, no other thinker from any field, could match.

Many artists remarked on the importance of Nietzsche’s writings to them—the Expressionist artist Otto Dix, for example, noted that he carried a copy of Nietzsche into battle during World War I. Numerous artists did portraits of the philosopher, including two busts of Nietzsche by Dix, done in 1904 and 1914, a bust by Max Klinger in 1902, and a painted portrait by Edvard Munch, done in 1906. What is of the greatest significance, however, is the testimony of Nietzsche’s relation to the most important developments leading toward pure abstraction, toward the complete dismissal of the artistic recognition of the world of material objects: the creation of Analytic Cubism by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque and of the first experiments in abstraction by the generally acknowledged creator of the mode: Wassily Kandinsky.

In the case of Analytic Cubism—the first and best-known form of Cubist painting, which was devised simultaneously by Picasso and Braque—the principal statements of artistic intent come from Guillaume Apollinaire, a French avant-garde poet and friend of many of the Cubist painters who served as something of a theoretician for the movement. In his book “The Cubist Painters,” published in 1913—in which he attempts to lay out in fairly systematic fashion the methods, history, and objectives of the movement in painting that had begun six years earlier—Apollinaire mentions Nietzsche by

⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters," *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1968) 224. Compare with Nietzsche, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 19, *Twilight of the Idols, The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) 526.

⁹ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 224.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," section 19, *Twilight of the Idols* 525.

¹¹ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 222.

¹² Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 227.

¹³ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 222.

¹⁴ Apollinaire, "The Cubist Painters" 222.

name, assigning to the philosopher not the origination of the impulse to the new art but the ability to have "divined" the opportunity for its arrival—to have foreseen the possibility and necessity of Cubist Art. According to Apollinaire:

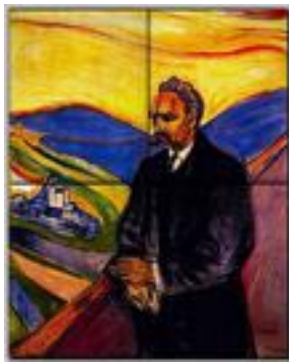
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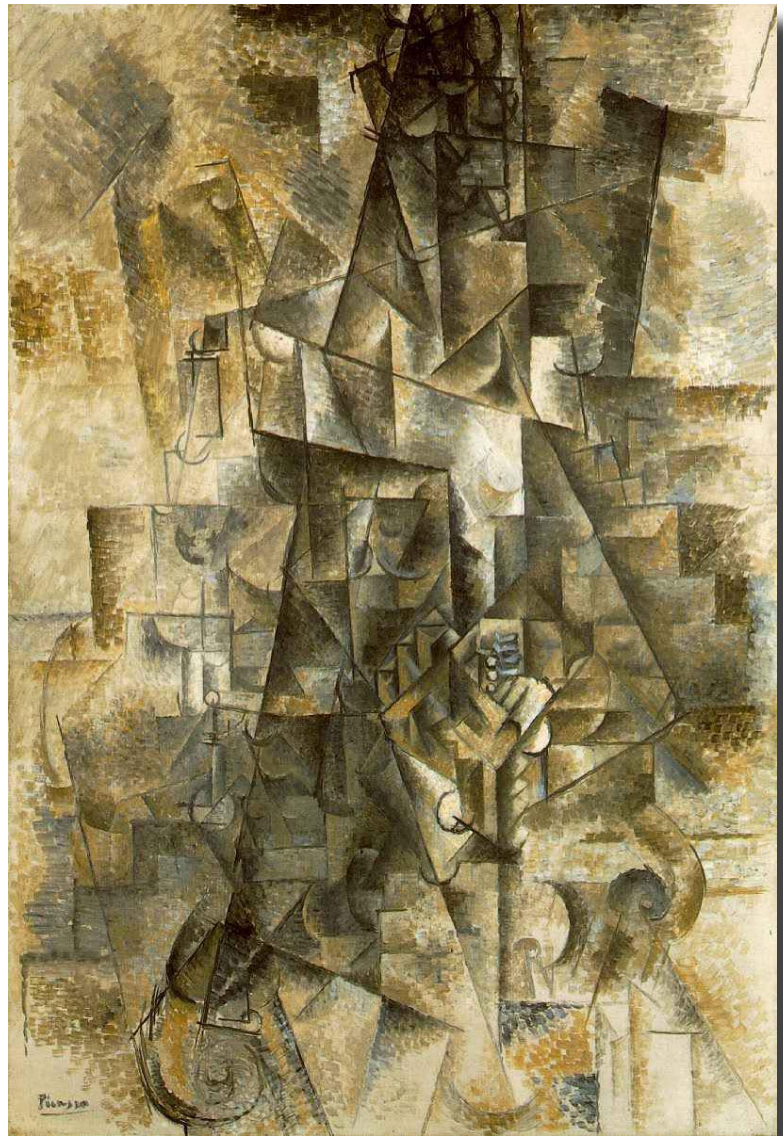
Nietzsche divined the possibility of such an art:

“O divine Dionysus, why pull my ears?” Ariadne asks her philosophical lover during one of the celebrated dialogues on the *Isle of Naxos*. “I find something pleasant and delightful in your ears, Ariadne; why are they not even longer?”⁸

The quotation indicates that Apollinaire was conversant with Nietzsche’s criticism of beauty as an Apollinian attribute, as an attribute and thus an invocation of the world of distinct objects rather than of a Dionysian flux of forces. Within the context of Apollinaire’s essay, Nietzsche’s brief anecdote of Ariadne and her lover serves to demonstrate his prescience regarding the Cubists’ rejection of the ideal of beauty, an ideal that Apollinaire identifies specifically as “Greek,” and as “a purely human conception,” an ideal that he condemns in that it “took man as the measure of perfection”⁹ and thus served human vanity rather than the purpose of truth. In this, Apollinaire agrees thoroughly with Nietzsche’s assessment of the psychological function of beauty. As Nietzsche put the same thought: “In the beautiful, man posits himself as the measure of perfection; in special cases he worships himself in it. . . . At bottom, man mirrors himself in things; he considers everything beautiful that reflects his own image: the judgment ‘beautiful’ is the *vanity of his species*.”¹⁰

The rejection of beauty and its underlying human vanity serves to justify and illuminate the value of the compounded perspectives and the distortions in Cubist paintings. According to the French poet, for Cubist painters, “real resemblance no longer has any importance.”¹¹ Instead of duplicating appearances, and with them the supposition of human “perfection” implicit in beauty, these then-young painters sought to create an art “not from the reality of sight, but from the reality of insight.”¹² Apollinaire makes clear the aspect and objective of this art of “insight” rather than “sight”—it possesses the artistic nature of music (“Thus we are moving towards an entirely new art which will stand, with respect to painting as envisioned heretofore, as music stands to literature. It will be pure painting, just as music is pure literature.”¹³), and it is committed to the service of “truth,”¹⁴ the end to which all efforts to paint resemblances are to be sacrificed. In this, it is clear that the purpose of the distortions in Cubist painting is precisely what Nietzsche saw as the purpose of the Dionysian quality of Greek tragedy: to mitigate





Above:
Pablo Picasso, *Accordionist*, 1911

At left, from top:
Georges Braque, *Man with Guitar*, 1911

Max Klinger, *Nietzsche*, 1902

Otto Dix, *Bust of Nietzsche*, 1914

Opposite page:
Edvard Munch, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1906

¹⁵ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," *The Birth of Tragedy* 17.

¹⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. with an introduction by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977) 14.

¹⁷ Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?" *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994) 103.

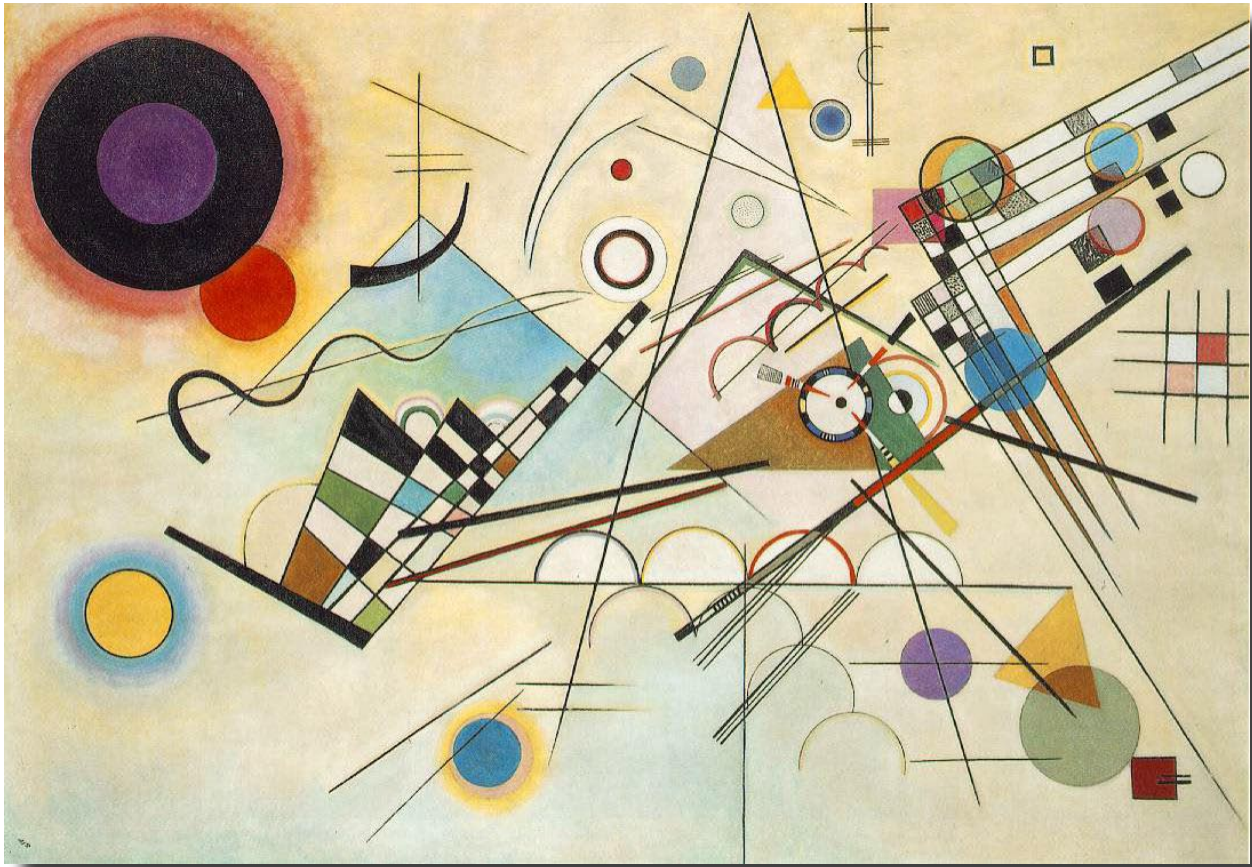
¹⁸ Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?" 98.

the beauty and idealism of the Apollinian image and instill an insight into the mysterious depths of truth through the ecstatic, intoxicated Dionysian quality of music—"the music of tragedy"¹⁵—the music out of which, Nietzsche had argued in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian, tragic insight initially arose.

Cubism was the first artistic gesture in the substantial movement away from the reproduction of appearances, rather than merely the emotionally expressive alteration of still-recognizable appearances that characterized such earlier artists as Gustave Courbet, Monet, van Gogh, Gauguin, Egon Schiele, and many others. The complete step away from any fidelity to appearance was taken only a few years after the devising of Cubism—in 1911, by Kandinsky. Kandinsky's reliance on Nietzsche's thought can be more deliberately estimated than can Nietzsche's effect on the ideas behind Cubism, for Kandinsky had a carefully contrived program behind his artistic revolution, a body of ideas worked out more systematically than Apollinaire had managed to do in his apologies for Cubism.

Kandinsky's references to Nietzsche are made more for the sake of emphasizing the radical nature of the change he wished to bring to art and to civilization than for the purpose of helping to define the objectives of the new art of total abstraction. In his principal book and, in essence, manifesto, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, written in 1911, Kandinsky cites Nietzsche to mark the fundamental change in civilization already underway in his time. "When religion, science and morality are shaken, the two last by the strong hand of Nietzsche, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself. Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt."¹⁶ In the same year, the artist wrote a paper, "Whither the 'New' Art?" in which he again compliments Nietzsche for being a causal agent in a groundbreaking change in cultural values and ideas: "Consciously or unconsciously, the genius of Nietzsche began the 'transvaluation of values.' What had stood firm was displaced—as if a great earthquake had erupted in the soul."¹⁷

Despite this vagueness of stated affiliation, there are substantive similarities between Nietzsche's thought and Kandinsky's artistic program, as laid out in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. In Kandinsky's estimation, civilization, at least Western Civilization, had over the last several centuries passed through a period of what he called "materialism," a time which was then only beginning to pass. The period was marked by a faith in material reality, a belief in only the things of physical presence, as a result of which, the sense of "the inner meaning of life"¹⁸ had been lost. However, due to the shaking of "religion, science and morality," the realization of inner meaning had just begun to return. "Our minds, which are even now only just awakening after years of materialism, are infected with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal. The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe



Above: Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VIII*, 1923



Left above: Luigi Russolo, *Nietzsche and the Madness*, 1907-08

Left bottom: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Red Stone Dancer*, 1913

Below: Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913



¹⁹ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 1-2.

²⁰ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 4.

²¹ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 4.

²² Kandinsky, "Whither the 'New' Art?" 99.

²³ Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* 11.

into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip. Only a feeble light glimmers like a tiny star in a vast gulf of darkness."¹⁹ To respond to the renewed need and to spur the return to a sense of inner meaning, an art must be developed that would dispense with the reproduction of the appearances of the material world and that would evoke subtler, more refined emotions than had been elicited by the realistic painting of the past. As painting developed the means for initiating increasingly finer, subtler emotional responses, it would eventually gain the strength to convey the experience of "the spiritual life,"²⁰ the life "to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements."²¹ The majority of Kandinsky's book makes clear that his new art, the art of pure abstraction, was devised to be just such an art, an art to evoke his "spiritual life," and Nietzsche is one of the few extra-artistic thinkers, and the only philosopher, to whom Kandinsky is able to append commendation for contributing to his cause of broad cultural, spiritual evolution.

Kandinsky's assault on materialism, carried out in his work through the complete break with fidelity to the representation of a world of objects, bears distinct similarities to Nietzsche's criticism of the conception of the world as constituted of material, enduring, substantial objects, as well as to Nietzsche's rejection of classical causality, which is rooted in a naïve materialism. Furthermore, there is a Nietzschean quality to Kandinsky's assessment of the cultural, psychological inheritance of the time of materialism—his sense of the inner meaning of life as having been lost, leaving us "with the despair of unbelief, of lack of purpose and ideal," leaving us in a spiritual vacuum, in which we ask, "Where is the meaning of life? Where lies the aim of life? And the surrounding silence answered: There is no aim in life."²² This sounds much like Nietzsche's own critique of fatalism. Even more specifically, Kandinsky attributes the beliefs and the psychological implications of materialism to the positivistic worldview—in speaking of those who are "blind atheists" and who acknowledge the existence of nothing more than they can physically observe, Kandinsky wrote, "In science these men are positivists, only recognizing those things that can be weighed and measured."²³ The roots of this assessment can be found in Nietzsche's evaluation of the psychological weakness that positivism, and its secret motivation to establish a metaphysics, represents and evokes. In *The Gay Science*, he observed:

“

Metaphysics is still needed by some; but so is that impetuous *demand for certainty* that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form. . . . Actually, what is steaming around all of these positivistic systems is the vapor of a certain pessimistic gloom, something that smells of weariness, fatalism, disappointment, and fear of new

disappointments—or else ostentatious wrath, a bad mood, the anarchism of indignation, and whatever other symptoms and masquerades of the feeling of weakness there may be.²⁴

For Kandinsky, of course, the antidote to this state of affairs, to the cultural legacy of materialism, is to be found in art—in the dark times of such fatalistic, positivistic despair, “nobody needs art.”²⁵ Or so it seems, for in the final analysis, the entire universe acts to refine and sensitize the human soul, touching it with subtle implications and sensitivities that are like unorganized musical sounds. “A force is required to put these fortuitous sounds of the universe into systematic combinations for systematic effect on the soul. This force is art. . . . Art is spiritual bread.”²⁶ Despite the artist’s references to a spirituality that Nietzsche would never have acknowledged (and it is worth noting that nowhere does Kandinsky define what he means by “spirituality”), there is a clear alignment between his belief in art as the antidote to an age of materialistic illusions and Nietzsche’s thought, as there is between Kandinsky’s sense of the universe as necessarily tuning the human senses and Nietzsche’s conception of an art necessarily and perennially of the future. For neither of them can art become obsolete.

It is specifically Nietzsche’s idea of the world as a confluence of opposing, interdependent forces that influences and is reflected in the work of many of the subsequent innovators of abstraction in the visual arts. In the space available here, only a few can be mentioned. Various commentators have observed the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy on, most notably, the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the Futurist painters such as Umberto Boccioni and Luigi Russolo, and the initiator of Constructivist sculpture, Naum Gabo.²⁷

Gaudier-Brzeska, a young sculptor who died on the battlefield in World War I, was the principal figure in the Vorticist movement, which was defined by the poet Ezra Pound as heralding an art that depended on an image more determined by an intrinsic dynamism than by a stabilized and static meaning, an image that “is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”²⁸ The Futurists, among whom Boccioni and Russolo are exemplary instances, sought to create between the two world wars an art that celebrated the rush and sheer force of the new machine age, an art of the future in their sense of what was to come, and they found their inspiration as much in Mussolini’s dubious and tendentious misreading of Nietzsche as in Nietzsche’s own texts. In the new Constructivist art movement, based on the Suprematist movement of Kasimir Malevich, Gabo sought to explore and reveal the new conceptions of space and time that “are reborn to

²⁴ Nietzsche, section 347, *The Gay Science*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 288.

²⁵ Kandinsky, “Whither the ‘New’ Art?” 99.

²⁶ Kandinsky, “Whither the ‘New’ Art?” 102-3.

²⁷ On Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, see *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1992) 160. On the Futurist painters, see Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977) 18, 32, 55, 89.

²⁸ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions Books, 1970) 92,



Above: Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956

Above:
Adolph Gottlieb, *Brink*, 1959

Barnett Newman, *Stations of the Cross 1*, 1958

At right:
Naum Gabo, *Linear Construction #4*, 1962



us today,” as he explained in his statement of artistic purpose, *The Realistic Manifesto*, written in 1920. To do so, Gabo observed that the artist must recognize that all things are “entire worlds with their own rhythms, their own orbits,” and to reveal them in their true nature, the artist must work so as to leave “only the reality of the constant rhythm of the forces in them.”²⁹

It can be argued readily that the last significant period of development and achievement in abstract painting was that of Abstract Expressionism, which flourished in New York from the 1940s to, at the latest, the early 1960s. All the most recognizable names in the movement wrote sufficiently to make their artistic intentions verbally clear, and the commitment to an art of truth-telling, an art of an ontological claim, was general and unmistakable. The most overt assertions came in an article written by three of the Abstract Expressionist artists—Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman—published in 1943, in which they argued that this new art, for them, “is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take risks,”³⁰ and that they painted “flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”³¹ The issue of formalism—of the exploration of painted form for its own sake—was addressed, and they claimed a presence and importance of subject matter in their work: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.”³² In another essay, “The Sublime is Now,” published in 1948, Newman goes so far as to raise the issue of “the desire for sublimity” in the new art, opposes it to beauty, and claims that the objectives of the sublime are being reasserted: “Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or ‘life,’ we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.”³³ Despite the fact that no confessions are made regarding an influence of Nietzsche or an alignment with his thought, the Nietzschean cast of these ideas is clear.

That Nietzschean cast in Modernism was not ghettoized to the visual arts. In music, Arnold Schönberg, who devised the mode of atonal music, claimed that the unique qualities of music eluded verbal expression or explanation. Like Nietzsche’s art of the future, which makes its ontological claim in forms that are, ultimately, inexplicable, conveying a sense of the mystery of the Dionysian insight, for Schönberg music is “the language of the world, which perhaps has to remain unintelligible, only perceptible.”³⁴ In any attempt to translate the details of musical language “into concepts, into the language of man, which is abstraction, reduction to the visible, the essence is lost.”³⁵

In Modernist literature, the most salient example of an evident practice of the Nietzschean aesthetic is in the work of Robert Musil, for Musil does acknowledge Nietzsche’s influence via the philosopher’s criticism of material

²⁹ Naum Gabo, “The Realistic Manifesto,” *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* 328.

³⁰ Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, “Statement,” *Art in Theory: 1900 - 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* 562.

³¹ Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman 562.

³² Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman 563.

³³ Gottlieb, Rothko, and Newman 574.

³⁴ Arnold Schönberg, “The Relationship to the Text,” *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, ed. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1974) 92.

³⁵ Schönberg 92.

³⁶ Robert Musil. *Gesammelte Werke in zwei Bänden*, Hrsg. v. A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, Bd. 1, 1882. (Zitiert als Musil-2 Bde.) *Collected works in two volumes*, ed. by A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, vol. 1, 1882. (quoted as Musil-2 vol.) (translation by the authors)

³⁷ Musil. *Gesammelte Werke in neun Bänden*, Hrsg. v. A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, Bd. 1, 250. (Zitiert als Musil-9 Bde.) *Collected works in nine volumes*, ed. by A. Frise, Reinbek, 1978, vol. 1, 250. (Quoted as Musil-9 vol.) (translation by the authors)

³⁸ Musil-9 Bde, 1978, Bd. 8, 1334. Musil-9 vol., 1978, vol. 8, 1334. (translation by the authors)

³⁹ Musil-9 Bde, 1978, Bd. 1, 16. Musil-9 vol., 1978, vol. 1, 16. (translation by the authors)

⁴⁰ Musil-9 Bde, 1978, Bd. 8, 1029. Musil-9 vol., 1978, vol. 8, 1029. (translation by the authors)

⁴¹ T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," "Four Quartets," *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems: 1909 - 1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 175.

⁴² Eliot 199.

substance and discrete enduring objects and his valorization of the world as Becoming. Musil makes the influence on his work evident in the figure of Ulrich, the protagonist of his novel *Man Without Qualities*, who, following the insight, inspired by Nietzsche, into the "ungroundedness of the world and the self,"³⁶ into the absence of any eternal, unchanging foundation underlying the world of incessant change, develops a radical skepticism towards an understanding of time in which the present is a punctual "now." Such a skepticism has its foundation in Nietzsche's conception of the eternal recurrence of the same, which under a rigorous logical analysis renders the Moment of ontological temporality as not a point in flowing time but as the source of the phenomenon of linear time. Musil's skepticism of the conventional conception of time leads to the rejection of the punctual present as "nothing but a hypothesis, which one hasn't gotten beyond yet."³⁷

Musil puts his rejection of present and substantive presence into literary practice, in what he calls "essayism," meaning thereby the literary essay as "momentary snapshot" that "grasps" the contingent, non-teleological moments that constitute the world. The art of "essayism" is performative in that it is like a sheer event in "not striving towards a goal if one understands by the term 'goal' a judgment with a claim of truth. For in this domain there is no truth."³⁸ In short, there is no possible final answer regarding the meaning or nature of the world—there are only changing, experimental postulations, reflecting the endlessly changing nature of the real. It is a truth of a different order.

Musil practices "essayism" via the form of *Man Without Qualities* by breaking radically with the principle of teleologically oriented development. In the novel, he abandons the continuum of classical narrative in favor of discontinuous, nomadic fragments that serve as parts of a non-totalizable "whole," one which allows no determinate meaning or closure but only infinite allusion. In this way, the referential function of language is suspended, a suspension that gives way to what Musil calls the "sense for potentiality" (*Möglichkeitssinn*),³⁹ which enables the author to render the non-teleological structure of the real by allowing the discovery of "ever new solutions, connections, constellations, variables."⁴⁰

The moment that exists apart from the flow of linear time is an often-ignored trope of literary Modernism. It is a central motif in T. S. Eliot's final poetic work "Four Quartets," which opens with as close to a direct presentation of its nature as one would think is possible: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past. / If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable."⁴¹ What Eliot elsewhere in the work calls "the moment in and out of time"⁴² can be taken to be unredeemable in the very sense Nietzsche would recognize—that it is not a mere illusion behind which stands a different, metaphysical, changeless reality. Such a moment that is the fountain of time but is not subjected to the flow of

time can be recognized also in the epiphanies that occur in James Joyce's stories in *Dubliners* and in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as well as in Virginia Woolf's moments of being, Marcel Proust's memory, and William Faulkner's moments of heightened perception, particularly in *The Sound and the Fury*.

The Nietzschean profile of thought can be found throughout key works of Modernism in the arts, and Modernist Art can be and has been characterized as art that makes the ontological claim. Yet, it is generally accepted that the Modernist Period in the arts extended only through the early 1960s, and that we now inhabit a time in art history that follows a different protocol. Evident most clearly in the field of the visual arts, we are presumed now to be in a time in which the Modernist formalities, and in particular abstract art, have been exhausted or have been transformed into mere formalisms; the "art" of the artwork is located in the idea behind the work and not in the accomplished execution; and Conceptual Art, Installation Art, and New Media Art all orient on issues less ambitious (or, it is argued, pretentious) than ontological insight. What constitutes art is taken to be defined by contextualization, by the cultural conventions that determine what is seen as art and what is not, rather than by an intrinsic and indispensable function that can be fulfilled in no other way, and artistic experimentation is concerned with pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a work of art. Art's issue is not with the truth of the world but with the "truth" of art—under a Duchampian protocol of thought, artists seek ever new possibilities of what can be viewed as acceptable within a gallery space.

Within such an intellectual environment, it is possible to argue the case for the end of art. That case is made nowhere so powerfully or influentially as in the writings of Arthur C. Danto, the principal proponent of the idea. Danto makes clear his source for the thought: Hegel, the philosopher of the end of history, the philosopher of the culmination of the world in an ultimate synthesis and of a cessation of Becoming that Nietzsche could not countenance. There is a key sense in which no two philosophers could be as opposed as Nietzsche and Hegel.

Danto defines the precise meaning of the end of art by quoting Hegel directly:

“

. . . he claimed, it must have seemed prematurely, that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.'

Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place . . . The philosophy of art is therefore a greater need in our days than it

⁴³ Arthur C. Danto, "Narratives of the End of Art," in *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 341-342.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" 20.

⁴⁵ Danto 343.

⁴⁶ John Cage, *For the Birds* (Boston and London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1995), 201.

⁴⁷ Cage 80.

⁴⁸ Cage 80-81.

⁴⁹ Cage 80.

⁵⁰ Cage 186.

⁵¹ Cage 95.

⁵² Cage 79.

⁵³ Cage 94.

⁵⁴ Cage 46.

⁵⁵ Cage 147-149.

⁵⁶ Cage 73.

⁵⁷ Cage 119.

was when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again but for knowing philosophically what art is.

It is with regard to this sort of consideration that I had meant to say not that art had stopped, nor that it was dead, but that it had come to an end by turning into something else—namely, philosophy.⁴³

This position effectively turns Nietzsche's aesthetics on its head, for Nietzsche can be said to have desired a philosophy that functioned like art (in his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," which served as the preface for the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the "tongue" that voiced the book "should have sung, this 'new soul'—and not spoken"⁴⁴). Danto describes an art that functions like philosophy, and it is a philosophy oriented on art rather than the world. Danto exemplifies its key moment with the instance of Andy Warhol:

“

. . . when he exhibited, in 1964, those marvelous Brillo boxes, relevantly so precisely like the cartons of Brillo in the supermarket, raising the question acutely as to why something should be a work of art while something altogether like it should not. And that, I thought, was as far as art could go, the answers to the question having to come from philosophy.⁴⁵

Nietzsche's propositions concerning an art of the future, an art of the ontological claim that is incapable of passing out of pertinence, are immediately at risk here. But it is not philosophers who make art, or who determine what art is, it is artists who do—that is a point not at issue in either camp. So, it becomes an imperative matter to determine whether the Nietzschean aesthetic continues to be practiced, or whether it has gone entirely out of circulation, no longer being ratified by any contemporary artists.

There are, however, significant artists of the period after Modernism who practice a decisively and recognizably Nietzschean aesthetic, regardless of whether they acknowledge Nietzsche as a direct influence on their practice. There are artists who continue Nietzsche's art of the future, demonstrating that his aesthetic possesses what it claims: a future beyond the Modernist period. Only a few can be mentioned here, but even those few are sufficient to dispute the claim of the obsolescence of art's function of revealing the truth of the world—a truth that is distinctly what Nietzsche proposed in his ontological philosophy.

Such a purpose is precisely what the composer John Cage claimed for his music. He characterized his music as a “music of reality,”⁴⁶ capable of revealing the world as it is. Cage argued, “Before we wished for logical experiences; nothing was more important to us than stability. What we hope for is the experience of that which is. But ‘what is’ is not necessarily the stable, the immutable. We do know quite clearly, in any case, that it is we who bring logic into the picture. It is not laid out before us waiting for us to discover it. ‘What is’ does not depend on us, we depend on it. [...] And unfortunately for logic, everything we understand under that rubric ‘logic’ represents such a simplification with regard to the event and what really happens, that we must learn to keep away from it.”⁴⁷ This is precisely matched to Nietzsche’s thought of the inexpressibility of the truth of the world, to its Dionysian mystery that defies encapsulation in conceptual thought. And for Cage, as for Nietzsche, art can convey what concepts cannot grasp: “The function of art at the present time is to preserve us from all the logical minimalizations that we are at each instant tempted to apply to the flux of events. To draw us nearer to the process which is the world we live in.”⁴⁸

As with Nietzsche, the world is “not an object. It is a process.”⁴⁹ There is for Cage a “fluidity of all things,”⁵⁰ a simultaneity of their presence and absence: “Appearing, changing, and then disappearing . . . coming and going, this presence and absence, together.”⁵¹ Cage put this sense of the world as it is into his music through the use of a “network of chance operations.”⁵² The oxymoronic aspect of the term “chance operations” alludes simultaneously to all that exceeds or escapes our designs (“chance”) and to the reasoned process by which a design is put into effect (“operations”). What this means in terms of Cage’s practice is the escape from “precise cause-effect relationships” and “exclusions, radical alternatives between opposites.”⁵³ Chance operations, because they free the artwork from the straightjacket of cause and effect, will also bring about “interpenetration and non-obstruction.”⁵⁴ In other words, Cage views his chance operations as a kind of emancipation, dissolving structures that immobilize, restoring them to what he calls “openness”: “the opening up of everything that is possible and to everything that is possible.”⁵⁵ An example of this openness is Cage’s practice of allowing music “a structure based on rhythm or time ... [to] be hospitable to noises as to so-called musical sounds.”⁵⁶ From this perspective, Cage characterized art as the “ultimate ‘experimental’ situation,”⁵⁷ “ultimate” in the sense of being paradoxically without “ultimacy”: a futurity without end. Cage’s “music of reality” is the art that Nietzsche looked towards, an art intrinsically oriented to an open-ended, horizonless future.

Whereas Cage’s alignment with Nietzsche’s thought is overt but lacks any evidence of direct influence, Milan Kundera’s connection with the philosopher is openly admitted. His literature is clearly and confessedly Nietzschean. His best-known novel in English, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, opens with



Performance of John Cage's 4 minutes 33 seconds

⁵⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984) 8.

⁵⁹ Kundera 5.

⁶⁰ Kundera 5.

⁶¹ Kundera 28.

⁶² Kundera 88.

a rumination on Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence. For Kundera, the eternal recurrence implies a quality of weight to existence, of significance that cannot be possessed by that which would occur once and once only. Tomas, the main character of the novel, realizes that "*Einmal ist keinmal* . . . What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all."⁵⁸ The absolute end to life gives it the unbearable lightness, whereas the weight of the recurrence is the significance due to an open-ended future, a futurity without end. The text refers to Nietzsche's claim that the eternal recurrence is "the heaviest of burdens"⁵⁹ and then asks "is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?"⁶⁰

This reversal of values is the mark of the most Nietzschean aspect of Kundera's art. Kundera deals with sets of polar opposites that are continually shifting in their symbolisms and their attributions. The lightness / weight opposition of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* indicates the model for Kundera's oppositions: opposing values are subjected to a process of perspectivalism that leaves the situations or figures to which they are applied ambiguous and open-ended in their artistic implications. The opposition of weight and lightness in the life of Tomas is represented, respectively, by the characters Tereza and Sabina: "Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable, yet equally appealing."⁶¹ But Kundera ultimately unsettles the simplicity of the initial assumption that Sabina represents lightness and Tereza represents weight, as well as the notion that lightness and weight are "separate and irreconcilable," as Tomas believes. Below the opposition-laden surface, Kundera exposes and moves beyond the limitations of Tomas's original thinking, detailing through the lives of the women themselves an unsettling or deconstruction of the opposition Tomas has such trouble seeing through. Indications of symbolic value are matched to indications of the opposing symbolic value for the same character—Sabina, for example, initially the image of lightness, is aligned with the imagery of recurrence, in her bowler hat that returns "again and again, each time with a different meaning,"⁶² and with the implication of the weight carried by the recurrence.

Kundera's art is an art of the Nietzschean, chiasmic unity of oppositions, an art of plural perspectives that continually recast the aligning of opposing values, showing them to be interdependent, not hierarchical, never to settle into a synthesis but ceaselessly in a Heraclitean eternal strife: an endless play of opposing forces. His work stresses the need to abandon mutually exclusive (either/or) positions in favor of a (both/and) balance in which neither pole is dominant but in which a whole spectrum of possibilities is allowed within only a provisional field of equilibrium. Kundera may propose no revolutionary alternative to the binary structure he critiques, but in the exposure of oppositional thinking and its consequences, it is clear that Kundera aims

beyond a clarity of established, unchanging oppositions, in an attempt to expose oppositional extremes and deprive them of their power and appeal.

The similarity of the work of Cage and Kundera to Nietzsche's idea is obvious—they adopt positions and tenets stated openly by the philosopher. However, the sculpture of Kenneth Snelson relates to Nietzsche's philosophy in a manner that is not immediately self-evident but, once recognized, is undeniable. Nietzsche's rejection of a worldview of enduring material objects constitutes a fundamental shift of paradigm in the conception of reality: a shift from particle theory to field theory. In essence, particle and field theories are necessary alternatives as models for conceiving the world—either the world is conceived as discrete objects interacting when they come into contact, or it must be seen as an arrangement of flowing forces related by some quality of distance or, more fundamentally, intensity. Put simply, either the world is envisioned essentially as broken into pieces or it is not. It can be argued readily that Nietzsche is the first philosopher to re-conceive the world along the lines of field theory, departing from the particle model that had dominated physical theory for millennia.

In this, Nietzsche foresaw a similar shift in conception conducted by Einstein's 1905 Special Theory of Relativity. He also, in this regard and in a more precise way than has been suggested here so far, foresaw the development of pure abstraction in art, for it can be argued that the move to abstraction is nothing more than the reduction of the figure / ground relation in representational painting—the relation of foreground to background—down to pure ground. Abstraction is merely the flattening of the picture image through the elimination of the figure, leaving a background only, which is nothing more than field—the elimination of the discrete object and the retention of the extensive space, across which colors play in much the way forces would.

In Snelson's sculpture, there are literally forces at play. His works are borderline scientific experiments that test the intricacies of actual and intrinsic spatial structuring. Each sculpture is an assembly of aluminum rods that do not touch and that are held in place by a network of steel cables. The form of the sculpture is stabilized by the internal forces of tension and compression, meaning that everything must be in precisely the correct place, or the entire assembly will simply fall down. It is as if, and more than "as if," each work were testing the organizing principles of spatialization—the laws by which forces interact and apparent things—which are nothing more than the arrangements of those forces—hang together in the void. The aluminum rods illuminate a portion of the invisible netting of available systems of balance, systems built into sheer extensiveness. In short, were the void truly chaotic and opposing forces incapable of interacting harmonically, nothing would hold together—and something does.



Above:
Kenneth Snelson, *New Dimensions*, 1977

Below left:
John Powers, *Roe 1 #2*

Below right:
Stephen Talasnik, *Cenotaph*, 2005



Like Kundera, Snelson is a currently functioning artist, one of the premier sculptors of our time, and he has extensive influence among many younger sculptors, among many of the more accomplished of them, such as John Powers and Stephen Talasnik, who conduct their own experiments in the interaction of forces within the geometric organizational principles of the field. These are but a very small number of the many examples that could be cited of a recognizably Nietzschean aesthetic currently being practiced, but they are sufficient to argue the point, because they are sufficient to engage certain logical necessities. If Nietzsche's proposition of the function of art being the telling of the truth of the world, a truth that can be approached by no other means, were ever capable of being put to practice, then such art could not come to its end, either through obsolescence or through a goal achieved and a project completed, which is more precisely Danto's evident point. The open-endedness of futurity, the impossibility of the completion and stabilization of any process, is a logical implication of Nietzsche's philosophy. Thus, according to the *Modus Tollens*, for Nietzsche's conception of the quality of futurity to prove false, his entire philosophy, and with it his aesthetics, would have to be false—if the conclusion is proved inaccurate, the premise must be inaccurate. Put simply, if there cannot now be an art of the ontological claim as Nietzsche conceived it, then there never could have been, for the Nietzschean aesthetic implies a ceaseless capability. More bluntly still—History, even the history of art, cannot terminate. If it could reach an end, then there never was History.

Of course, there is no one arguing such a case with regard to art. And so, the only possibility of our having reached an end of art is the chance that its purpose has been fully achieved, that the ontological claim which art practiced under a Nietzschean aesthetic seeks to convey has been fully conveyed. However, such a completion is not possible, and not merely because of Nietzsche's stipulations of the open-endedness of futurity and of the ceaselessness of all processes, but because of a logical inevitability of his aesthetic. The ontological claim, the Dionysian tragic insight, is not a piece of conceptual thinking. It is not an element of knowledge that can be learned and retained, and finally no longer needs to be repeated. In a proper sense, the Dionysian insight is not knowledge at all, and there is nothing to learn. It is a quality of experience, a state of illumination that one must undergo—as Schönberg put it, the insight is, of necessity, perceptible and otherwise unintelligible. It can be known only by being known directly. And thus, it is in principle inexhaustible. The experience of the Dionysian insight must be continually re-invoked for it to be known at all. And so, the pertinence of the Nietzsche aesthetic cannot be fully accomplished, and the need of it cannot be extinguished. It remains a continual possibility, and a continual requirement of the only possible "knowledge" of the truth of the world.

Thus, Nietzsche's aesthetic conceives an art of the future that continues to today. It is a contemporary possibility of an art of the sublime—the term that

Newman employed, as did Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. His aesthetic idea departs from both the Platonic conception of art as portraying the world of illusory objects and from the Aristotelian aesthetics of reinforcing ego structures through dispensing the balm of catharsis, the purpose of which is to psychologically medicate and recuperate individuality. Rather, it aligns more closely with and significantly augments the Kantian aesthetic. The capacity of art to deliver a Dionysian insight is categorically akin to the “supersensible faculty” of Kant’s mathematical Sublime in *The Critique of Judgement*, in that it appeals to and exploits for an aesthetic, non-rational form of receptivity and awareness, so as to remit an apprehension of a truth otherwise unavailable, unavailable as a form of human expression outside the precincts of art—only the awesome and awful quality of sheer magnitude in Kant has become the Nietzschean excess of the chiasmic unity of opposing forces, and the thing-in-itself is no longer a thing but an apprehension of the continual making and unmaking of the entire world. Such art offers a different “mimesis” of the real, not through its images but through its manner as art, not through its representations but through its simulations of the processes of the real. And it stretches before us, in both senses of the word, into an indefinite future.

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