


Institut für Kunstkritik
Frankfurt am Main
Daniel Birnbaum
Isabelle Graw

The Power of Judgment

A Debate on Aesthetic Critique

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The Aesthetic Critique of Judgment

Christoph Menke

The question that I want to address in this talk is that of aesthetic judgment. Quite often, in philosophy and in public debates, this is taken as the question for the criteria of aesthetic judgment. One can then ask questions like the following: Are there specific criteria for aesthetic judgments? Can these criteria be defined in such a way that they are universally shared? Can we thus hope and strive for a criteria-based consensus on aesthetic judgments, or are these judgments, on the contrary, merely expressions of personal ideals or even projections of private preferences? By asking questions like these, the discussion on aesthetic judgment starts too late. For they presuppose that one has already answered another set of questions—questions like: What is the role of judgment in the aesthetic field? How do we judge aesthetic objects? Why do we judge aesthetic objects? Or why do we judge at all? The question of aesthetic judgment cannot take its object for granted. It cannot assume that there actually is a specific kind of judgment called “aesthetic judgment,” and then proceed to investigate its distinctive criteria. Rather, “aesthetic judgment” is the name of a problem, even a paradox. For in aesthetic judgment, the very possibility and necessity of judgment is at stake.

I will explore this problematic or paradoxical nature of aesthetic judgment by proceeding in four steps. I will (1) briefly explain what I understand by “judgment”; this is followed (2) by three examples of difficulties in judging. I will then (3) sketch the central argument: namely, that “aesthetic critique” is the enactment *and* questioning of judgment at the same time. I will (4) end with a discussion on the question of what it means for an artwork to be judged – whether it is *possible* for an artwork to be judged.

I "Judgment"

Let me begin with a brief explanation of what I understand by "judgment".¹ To judge means to draw a distinction—a distinction of a peculiar kind, a normative distinction, a distinction of value. By judging, we do not just distinguish between different kinds or types of things; by judging, we draw a distinction that refers to the relation or attitude that we have towards something. Normative judgments do not say how things ("objectively") are, but how they are in relation to us, to subjects. The most elementary way in which we do this is by "tasting" objects: by saying whether a certain object, or more precisely, our relation to a certain object, gives us pleasure or displeasure (or even excitement or lust; or oppositely, repulsion or disgust). In a more reflective way, we judge objects by saying that they are good or bad, right or wrong, and so forth, and therefore refer to certain standards or measures that we might be able to validate for others as well. In all these cases, judgments operate with the opposition of negation and affirmation, of rejection and acceptance. And in all of these cases, this refers as much to the actual attitude of a subject towards an object—as an attitude either of acceptance or rejection—as to the future engagement with that object: judgments are about present (or past) objects, but they shape future actions. Judgments divide the infinite possibility of future behavior into two different, even opposed, types: the actions that one has to avoid and those that one should choose or prefer. One can also say that judgments *commit* to perform certain action and not to perform others. This hints at a third dimension of judgments: Judgments are not just (1) about a *subject's* attitude towards an object and (2) a determination of future modes of *action*. Judgments also (3) address

1 On the following, see Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), lectures 11–13.

others by establishing orders of commitment: judgments have a social meaning—they define what is appropriate and inappropriate in others' behavior. If I judge an object to be disgusting, then not only do I thereby say that I will try to avoid its presence, I also ask you, commit you, to spare me its presence. This shows that judgments are not just reports that a subject gives of its attitude towards an object. Judgments have a performative force: By judging, I determine the public status of an object; I shape the future possibilities of acting, my own and others', with respect to that object.

Let me summarize this once again: (1) Subjects are instances of judging; this is what distinguishes them from (their) objects—subjects can judge objects. (2) Actions are consequences of judgments: to act means to realize one's judgment. (3) Social relations are established by judgments: judgments are the (only) way communities are built. Considering these three elements together, we can also say that we *govern* ourselves through judgments; the point of judgments is self-government. By judgments, we do not just live our lives, but also direct or lead them.

The reason for reminding you of these very basic and elementary determinations of what a judgment is (Philosophy 101), is to prepare the ground for the suggestion I want to make concerning the role of judgment in the aesthetic field. The "faculty of judgment" is fundamental for understanding what a subject is, what an action is, and what a community is. Let us say: The "faculty of judgment" is fundamental for the existence of social practices. The role of judgment in the aesthetic field is different: The aesthetic field is not grounded in or constituted by judgments, which does not mean that we do not judge in the aesthetic field. Every institution and individual participant in that field—

and, of course, the market—judges all the time. The aesthetic field is different not because of an absence of judgment, nor because it necessitates a different kind of judgment—as if the aesthetic judgment were different just by being about specific objects (viz., “artworks”) or having specific criteria (viz., “beauty”). Rather, the difference lies in the questioning of judgment: In the aesthetic field, the faculty of judgment is not fundamental in the way it is in social practices because, in each of its performances, it is put into question. What we have come to call “aesthetic” is the paradoxical practice of questioning judgment itself.

II Three Examples

(1) *I read* a sentence by a German philosopher, a philosopher who has been writing about the problems of human rights for many years, a philosopher who has become an authority for anyone in this country who would like to say something about these problems, an authority—like it or not—one cannot avoid engaging with. This unavoidable German philosopher writes: “Human rights are grounded in [or justified by] reciprocity, *pars pro toto*—through an exchange” [*Menschenrechte legitimieren sich aus einer Wechselseitigkeit heraus, pars pro toto: aus einem Tausch*]. I think—that is, I judge—immediately: That simply cannot be true. Or: What nonsense! How can a trade, an exchange of goods or opportunities, which can only be motivated by “considerations of personal advantage [or gain],” legitimate human rights? It is obvious that even someone who is not able to give me anything back in exchange for my recognition still has human rights; someone, therefore, who has nothing at all; someone who is a nothing, a nobody; someone whom I could overlook and slight with no disservice to myself. Human rights, however, oblige me not to overlook and pass him by (or so I think). And *that*, I judge, is not considered in

this sentence by the well-known German philosopher; the sentence is a mistake, a failure. I have judged and have justified my judgment. There is no difference between the judgment and its reasons. The reason for the judgment did not drive me beyond the judgment. In thinking about the judgment, I wasn’t elsewhere. That means: I did not *think*, did not *have* to think, as I justified my judgment. That failure of a statement did not have the strength to make me think, nor the strength to lead me beyond my initial evaluative reaction, nor even the strength to question that first reaction. I would like to say: I have only judged, but I did not exercise critique. That, more than anything, is the grudge I hold against this well-known German philosopher.

(2) *I read* a novel by a Chilean author who, after taking part in the coup against Augusto Pinochet, was forced to flee to Mexico and, eventually, to Barcelona. The novel is about a Chilean priest who, as an old man, reminisces about his life in a night torn through with bouts of fever. The novel begins with the story of the young priest who discovers his literary gift, initiates contact with the best-known literary critic in his country, and becomes established in the Chilean cultural, albeit provincial and backwards, scene with the critic’s help (the novel even features Pablo Neruda making the rounds in a bitterly contentious scene). The novel then reports how the priest, deemed ideologically reliable after the coup, fearfully explains Marxism-Leninism to the generals of the Junta in weekly private sessions—for in order to fight Communism, the generals must have at least a basic understanding of it (yet, they are interested above all in the sexual libertinage of some Chilean female Communists). The novel ends with the narration of a tumultuous party in which the remnants of the cultural scene entertain themselves in a villa outside Santiago, a villa that is—as apparently only the angered

priest-poet notices—simultaneously a torture cell. I am reading the novel during a spring I pass in Barcelona. I do not know what I should think of it: What is the intention of this priest character, who composes verses that I imagine to be just as kitschy as Neruda's? What to think of a character who, on the one hand, seems to be fully anchored in the Catholic, provincial, authoritarian milieu of Chile, yet on the other, is the only one among the opposition's big mouths who dares to search in the villa's basement for the cause of the occasional, second-long flickering of the lights (because the power was being used otherwise in the basement)? Is that believable (or probable)? But is "believable" (or "probable") at all the appropriate category? Thus, I read the novel again one year later, this time during a trip to Chile. I ask Chilean friends about their readings. Nobody knows of the novel. As I reassess the book, I notice that the core political point around which I thought I could, or had to, depict the entire Janus-like character of the priest (and to which, because of its undesirable nature in post-dictatorial Chile, I at first attributed the unfamiliarity of the novel), perhaps comes across as weak because it was not at all the novel's own, but rather just my projection. I ask myself why the priest-poet is also a literary critic. And I ask myself why I am so certain that not only the verses that he himself writes, but also the novels and poems that he writes about are nothing more than pompous rubbish; for the novel itself gives us nothing of his work to read. Now, the character appears to me as incomprehensible, impenetrable, and abysmal. Does that make anything any better? I still do not know. Someday, perhaps, I will read the novel again.

(3) I read once again a famous play by a famous Irish-French author, about which I wrote a text more than ten years ago. The occasion at the time was an invitation to a conference in which a panel was devoted to another essay that an equally

famous German philosopher had composed about the play. I admire the philosopher, but not this particular essay. I consider it to be weak—a mere projection of his philosophical categories onto a literary text. I want to rescue the literary text from this philosophical imposition, but I don't understand the play. I don't even know if I like it—but this, however, doesn't matter in this instance. I am entirely convinced that the play is good. Where does this conviction come from? I analyze the text not by asking what the two main characters say, but how they speak: In what way do they use language? In the process, I encounter a basic pattern, a basic opposition between two complex manners of speech, both mutually opposed to one another and presupposed by one another. As a result, the text suddenly becomes transparent: I understand what it is about, how it is structured, how it stands in correspondence with other important texts of its time. Something else arises: I like what the text says when read in this way; it fits me. Yet there is even more: I adapt myself to it. I attempt to see cultural and social structures. For example, the way that the state of the cultural and political avant-garde appears through the prism of the text's basic pattern is convincing. At one point in the play, one of the main characters says to another: "Imagine if a rational being came back to earth. Wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough?" *Voice of rational being*: "Ah, good, now I see what it is. Yes, I now understand what they're at!" I cannot get rid of the disturbing feeling that my interpretation speaks about the play with that voice.

III Aesthetic Critique

Used in a loose and thus thoughtless way, one can call "aesthetic critique" every activity of describing and analyzing that leads to a judgment on the beautiful or the ugly, the sublime or the banal, of a particular piece of nature; or to a judgment on the

successes or failures, the perfections or imperfections, of a particular piece of art. In this loose and thus thoughtless way of talking, one understands aesthetic critique from the standpoint of its result: the judgment. In this sense, one can, namely, speak of a history of aesthetic "criticism" from ancient times up to post-structuralism, from Plato to Derrida. For at least art (but not nature) has always been judged. I want to suggest, in contrast, that before the modern "aesthetic regime" of art—to reference Jacques Rancière—there was also no "critique" of art. Just as "aesthetics" is the theory of art corresponding to this modern regime (insofar as there was no aesthetics before the modern regime of art), the "critique" of art—critique in the most specific and, as it were, interesting meaning of the word—is *aesthetic* critique. This is not just a terminological question. Rather, the idea of aesthetic critique refers to a highly specific way in which the act of judgment is understood. For it is not the act, or fact, of judgment that is decisive in aesthetic critique, but rather the aesthetic critique's new understanding of the *process* of judging. Hence, it is not decisive *that* judgments are also made in aesthetic critique, but rather *how* it is that such judgments are performed.

Aesthetic critique judges in a manner that, through the "how" of its judging, the "that" of its judgment is brought into question. For this reason, aesthetic critique cannot be defined from the perspective of the judgment, the purported result: The aesthetic judgment cannot be understood as the telos of aesthetic critique from which its concept is derived, for the decisive insight of aesthetic critique consists precisely in the realization that there is a yawning, unbridgeable gap between the reason for a particular judgment and the act itself of that judgment; and accordingly, a gap between judgment as process and as result. Aesthetic critique does not just mean a judgment *about*

something aesthetic. Aesthetic critique rather means a judgment that is aesthetically performed. The term "aesthetic" refers not only to the "what" of judgement, but also to its "how." Furthermore, in its aesthetic enactment, the judgment undermines or questions itself. Aesthetically performed, the judgment of critique thus becomes a critique of judgment. The title "The Aesthetic Critique of Judgment" is therefore one of those ambiguously legible genitive forms: the aesthetic critique of judgment firstly refers to a specific kind of judging—the judgment in aesthetic matters. But since the judgment on something aesthetic has itself to be performed in an aesthetic way, the aesthetic critique of judgment means, secondly, a critique that is directed against judgment. Aesthetic critique is the aesthetic praxis of judgment that is simultaneously a questioning of judgment itself.

To understand this requires a brief consideration of the decisive step that defines the modern aesthetic regime of art. The briefest and best summary of the modern idea of the aesthetic can be found in Hegel's definition "that Art [i.e., art understood aesthetically] does not yet contain in it the true and proper self."² The law of aesthetic art is the law of the "not yet": of not yet being the realm of the "true and proper self," of the self-conscious, rational subject. For *aesthetic* art is an act of representing that does not yet fully comprehend itself, which is not yet, in the full sense, conscious of itself. Art, as Adorno says in taking up Hegel's definition, consists in making things that one doesn't know.

Hegel's definition of art under the sign of the "not yet" describes art by virtue of an essential deficiency: it does not yet "contain

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, ed. J.N. Findlay (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1977), 444.

in it the true and proper self." In this, Hegel's definition of art is of the "aesthetic regime" of art. Moreover, the definition of art as the "not yet" is specifically aesthetic in that it defines this aesthetic deficiency—the deficiency that *is* the aesthetic—as one of knowledge, of self-consciousness: Art is an act of making that escapes the subject because it is incapable of *knowing* and *asserting* itself. Art essentially eludes itself: Its act of making is not an object of its knowing or a content of its asserting. The aesthetic law of the "not yet" states the insuperable severance between doing and knowing in the arts. For the deficiency of knowledge characteristic of art is not exterior to its doing, but rather, it defines the doing of art as an aesthetic one. In overcoming this deficiency, that is to say, in gaining consciousness of its doing, art would thus precipitate its own disappearance. The *knowledge* of aesthetic doing would no longer be a knowledge of an *aesthetic* doing. The doing that we can know because it is one by force of "the true and proper self"—a doing that is an expression of knowledge (on the part of the doing self), and can thus become an object of knowledge (on the part of the observing self)—this knowable, because self-conscious, doing is not an aesthetic one. The aesthetic doing is not knowable because it is not self-conscious. This is the positive, which is to say the aesthetic, version of Hegel's negative proposition regarding art: that art is ignorant of its doing means that the aesthetic doing is not an object of knowing because it is not grounded in knowing. Aesthetic doing eludes knowledge; it is a doing before, and therefore beyond, all knowledge.³ This is why philosophical aesthetics—which emerges with the modern aesthetic regime of art—calls this doing "dark" or "obscure" (Baumgarten).

A further and more precise explanation of what defines a process of representation as an "aesthetic" one says that the

aesthetic process of making a representation does not (and will never) contain a self-conscious subject, because the aesthetic process consists in the unfolding of "unconscious" forces (Herder). The logic of the unfolding of these aesthetic forces is the logic of play. This means that aesthetic forces realize themselves in an essentially paradoxical way. A force only exists by expressing itself—by producing something as its effect; a force is effective. At the same time, a force in the play of its realization turns against its own products. Each force dissolves what it has produced; a force is as transgressive as it is effective. The idea of aesthetic force (or the aesthetic as the unfolding of forces) thus refers to an infinite process of producing and then dissolving what it has produced. Aesthetically understood, art unfolds the play of representation as a "simultaneous process of gaining and playing down the gains. It [the aesthetic play of 'force'] thus becomes not only variable, but, in principle, also serial. Serial variability [...] would then be one characteristic of the aesthetic. What is concealed here could be illuminated by a sentence from Borges: 'The imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality.'"⁴ The aesthetic process of the playful expression of force is thus not defined by indeterminacy. Rather, it consists in producing determinations as momentary effects—determinations that cannot be established and safeguarded against their dissolution by the same force that has produced them, but which therefore momentarily gain, as long as they exist, a kind of evidence that promises a "revelation" (Borges).

3 On the following, see Christoph Menke, *Kraft. Zu einem Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2008). For an English summary, see "The Dialectic of Aesthetics: On the Strife between Philosophy and Art," in *Aesthetic Experience*, eds. Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin (Abingdon/New York: Routledge 2008), 59–75; and "Not Yet: The Philosophical Significance of Aesthetics," in *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* (forthcoming).

With this tentative definition of the "aesthetic" character of a process of representation, we can now come back to the question of how the aesthetic critique deals with the question of judgment. Aesthetic critique is the judgment of aesthetic objects. However, if aesthetic objects are aesthetic processes (or performances) of representation that cannot be traced back to self-conscious subjectivity, but rather to unconscious forces, then no judgment of an aesthetic object is possible without participating in those processes at the same time. Thus also, the aesthetic judgment *on* an aesthetic object is a move *in* an aesthetic process; the judgment on an aesthetic object is itself an aesthetic act. Accordingly, in the beginning of modern aesthetics, Jean-Baptiste Dubos described aesthetic "apprehension" as a "sudden impression" or "sudden sentiment" that is able to recognize and judge the state of an object "prior to all examination" and "before any discussion." The act of aesthetic apprehension escapes the control of self-conscious subjectivity; it is a sudden, emerging determination.

In Dubos, this is directed against the concept of a "method" that rationalist philosophy had developed from the epistemological paradigm of modern science. A method consists of a generally defined series of steps, the observance of which is able to guarantee the validity of the judgment that is achieved. Dubos rejects this idea of a method, and opposes it with the idea of an aesthetic sensibility whose judgments emerge suddenly, without reflection and discussion—not guided by reason, but as an expression of force. This move, however, should not be

4 Wolfgang Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Anthropologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991), 409. (The passage is absent from the existing English translation, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1993].) For the quotation from Borges, see J. L. Borges, "The Wall and the Books" (1950), in *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth Simms (New York: Simon and Schuster 1965), 5.

understood as aiming to substitute one kind of secure ground for another: The aesthetic, sensuous way of judgment is not meant to replace the concept of method in order to guarantee the same certainty of judgment. Dubos' substitution of the rationalist procedure of method by aesthetic sensuality is not another way of furthering Descartes' reform project of "building upon a foundation wholly my own." The theory of judgment inscribed into the concept of aesthetic critique instead puts into question the assumption that I can ever be such a foundation for myself, questioning if there can be such a secure ground for judgment at all. For if the aesthetic judgment is itself an expression of an aesthetic force—the force of aesthetic sensibility—it is beyond the knowledge, hence the control, of the subject: It is not a determination *by* a subject, but *of* a subject, because the subject will be forever unable to entirely appropriate it, unable to make it its own or render it the methodologically established conclusion of transparent premises.

The aesthetic character of the act of judging on an aesthetic object is one side: The aesthetic act of judging is itself a move in the playful unfolding of a sensuous force that is not yet, and will never be, the subject's own deed. The other side is that, in the moment of proclaiming a judgment, the subject splits from the aesthetic play of unconscious force: By judging *about* the aesthetic process, turning it into an object, the subject breaks with (or steps out of) the aesthetic process. The act of judging is thus the act of the conscious, rational subject's self-constitution. In judging, the subject suspends the power of the aesthetic apprehension and asks for reasons. (This is why, for Nietzsche, being able to suspend or withhold judgment is an essential virtue of the critic. Through this virtue, the critic will be able to immunize and anesthetize himself against the type of art—of which Euripides and Wagner are Nietzsche's prominent ex-

amples—that is calculated towards the mere excitement of sensations.) This is the moment, the space and time, of aesthetic critique. The aesthetic critique is about this small but infinite difference: between judgment as an expression of a sensible force and the reasons with which the subject tries to guarantee its validity—the difference between aesthetic sensuality and self-conscious rationality. The aim of the aesthetic critique of judgment is not to abolish this difference, either by its reconciliation or by an act of decision for either side. It is rather to unfold this difference, to keep the gap open between the judgment as an effect of aesthetic force and as a result of a rational procedure. The aesthetic critique both conceives of and carries out judgment in such a way that it is characterized by an irresolvable contradiction: the contradiction between the sudden act of the intuitive apprehension of an object *and* the methodological deduction of a judgment from transparent reasons; between the momentary identification by one all-determining position *and* the endless unfolding of connections; between the sensible evidence of “thus it is” (*So ist es*, in Alex Düttmann’s words⁵) *and* the rational reflection on preconditions and results. Judging aesthetically means unfolding this contradiction, not resolving it; to understand every judgment as both equally urgent and premature. The critique of judgment is thus a reciprocal operation: the critique of the aesthetic, sensual apprehension by rational reflection (for the sensual apprehension is always premature) and the critique of the rationally reflecting judgment by aesthetic apprehension (for rational reflection is always taking too long). The aesthetic critique of judgment unfolds this double movement of mutual critique: the aporia of judging.

5 Alexander García Düttmann, *So ist es. Ein philosophischer Kommentar zu Adornos 'Minima Moralia'*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2004).

This is different, then, from declaring or hoping for the “end” of judgment; the aim of the aesthetic critique of judgment is not (in Deleuze’s formula) “to have done with judgment.”⁶ For to hope for an end of judgment would presuppose a judgment about judgment: the “critical” judgment that judgment is bad and should and can be left behind. The aesthetic critique instead does not judge judgment, but exhibits its structural impossibility: the impossibility of ever overcoming its inner contradiction. Furthermore, the aesthetic critique shows that it is precisely, and only, this impossibility of judgment—of being able to either overcome the internal split of judgment or decide in favor of either side—that makes a different, alternative praxis of judgment possible. Aesthetic critique is a praxis of judgment that makes the aporia of judgment its defining form. Herein lies the exemplary nature of aesthetic critique: It demonstrates, through the practice of its judgments on art, how one should judge in general.

That it is impossible to abandon judgment follows from its fundamental role in social practices. As we have demonstrated above, judgment is constitutive for practices in a threefold sense: The faculty of judgment constitutes subjectivity, for subjects are essentially instances of evaluation; it defines agency, for actions are the realization of subjective evaluations; and it establishes community, for by judging we commit ourselves and others. In performing the aporia of judgment (instead of doing away with it), aesthetic critique transforms social practices in all of these three dimensions: The aporetic practice of aesthetic judgment exhibits the split of the subject between aesthetic force and methodological reason, and it understands actions as events of the improbable overlapping of force and

6 Gilles Deleuze, “To Have Done with Judgment,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 126–135.

reason. But above all, the aesthetic practice of judgment redefines community because it also addresses others and claims their recognition: it aims at agreement. But this aesthetic agreement is as aporetic as the act of aesthetic judgment; it cannot be established by reason. Thus, the aesthetic community does not consist of agreement in judgments. To have an aesthetic *sensus communis* does not mean attaining the same judgment as everyone else. The aesthetic community is rather defined by an agreement on agreement—an agreement on how to judge and agree. Aesthetic agreement is thus an agreement of the necessary limitation and fragmentation of any agreement. If there is anything “political” or “ethical” in aesthetic critique, it does not lie in the content of its judging, but rather its form.⁷

IV How (Not) to Judge an Artwork: Neo Rauch, *Amt*

One can put the decisive point of the preceding argument at calling the normativity of aesthetic critique a normativity of a second order. As any act of judgment, aesthetic critique claims an object to be bad or good, to be rejected or affirmed. However, first and foremost, aesthetic critique claims the goodness of a certain way of judgment on whether an object is good or bad—namely, a performance of judgment that unfolds its inner aporetic structure. But this poses a further question: *Can one*

⁷ There is especially one decisive trait of political judgment that is absent from aesthetic critique: Political judgments are different from all other forms of judgment—*aesthetic, theoretical, and moral*—because they are accompanied by the claim that they must at least be tolerated by those who do not agree with them; that is, they bring with them the claim to be forcefully asserted if necessary against those who do not share those judgments. This constitutes the seriousness of political judgment and differentiates it from judgment in aesthetic critique. That neither a work of art nor art criticism can judge politically is therefore not simply based on the Platonic reason that artists, like critics, are merely experts in representation, and that they are not experts in that which is represented (for who would then say that politics is not about representation?). Rather, the reason is that the work of art, just like art criticism, is not burdened by the question of legitimate power, and accordingly, the question of violence with which all political judgments are confronted.

actually judge an object in this way? For it seems that this does not depend only on the judging subject; it's not a matter of that subject's arbitrary decision. It rather depends on the engagement of the subject with the object, and this in turn depends on the object too. This suggests a thesis that may sound either tautological or paradoxical: namely, that the normativity of the second order that defines aesthetic critique—being about the goodness of the aporetic way of judgment—also establishes a second-order criteria for the goodness of aesthetic objects. Any object that allows for aesthetic critique is thereby good. Or the goodness of an aesthetic object consists in nothing else than making possible its aesthetic critique. (The tautological version of this thesis reads: Any aesthetic object is good; to be *aesthetic*—that is, an object of aesthetic critique—means to be aesthetically *good*. The paradoxical version of this thesis reads: Any object that can become the object of an aesthetic judgment about its being good *or* bad, *is* good.) In closing, I want to defend this thesis by giving a further example: a critique of a painting by Neo Rauch.

In Rauch's painting *Amt* (2004),⁸ three different spaces are violently abutted against and built on top of one another. In the upper portion of the painting, a rocky, snow-covered peak, slightly offset to the right, projects into a black sky crisscrossed with white lines. The bottom portion of the painting is dominated by a scene stretching from the rear on the left side towards the front on the right: hunched-over men in motion beneath two lamps looming upwards are dragging something appearing amorously organic out of a mineshaft. In the extreme foreground of the painting's lower edge, there is a still life consisting of four books, one of which is open; a bone-like thing that, at

⁸ Oil on paper, 268 x 200 cm, Kaufmann Collection, Berlin

one of its ends, appears to be a sort of tool; and an unidentifiable object to the right, which reveals a crystalline structure. A pronounced tension dominates between the wild dynamism of the sky (which can also be seen, as if through an optical illusion, as a nighttime sea with quietly lapping waves) up above or to the rear, the middle section with people, and the organisms and dead things far below or in the foreground. Yet simultaneously, between the picture's three different spaces, one can make out ambiguously decipherable figures and zones that seem to belong not only to one portion of the picture, but to another as well. This ambiguity makes them puzzling, transforming them into objects that can be viewed in a twofold, reversible manner: A man seems to be climbing out of the scene in front of the mineshaft, directly onto the snow-covered mountain; another is sitting in the mountain snow, yet seems to be keeping watch over the carriers; a house on the side of the mountain seems to simultaneously belong to the ensemble of buildings surrounding the shaft; upon a closer look, a fir tree on the opposite edge of the mountain resembles Caspar David Friedrich's sailboat stranded in the ice.

And there is a second, quite different level on which the painting is organized, a level at which its three fields and worlds are linked to one another through the sparingly utilized, yet highly effective coloration of individual elements on the otherwise predominately black and white surface: Yellow is used for one of the books at the bottom, the light in the middle, and a spot on the mountain; red for the crystalline structure at the bottom right, the shirt of the man kneeling in the middle, and the little sailboat/fir tree; and finally, violet for the pants of the man kneeling and the short coat of the man climbing onto the mountain. Then there are traces of green dully shining through here and there. As Gottfried Boehm has stressed, the colors in Rauch's

paintings unfold a "complex and tension-filled play of exchange, which directs the entire structure of the image on a hidden level."⁹

Yet engaging all of this effort and refinement has left us in the cold. You see it and shrug your shoulders. Yes, yes, one can see that this is all supposed to be very puzzling. But the perturbation of the fantastic that first appears on the scene when one no longer knows if the world of the image, and thus the world itself, makes sense does not come out at all. Rauch's paintings are as distressing as postcards of Roger Corman film stills; nothing about his picture-puzzles puts one in a state of unrest or haunts one's dreams. And maybe they don't even want to do that; perhaps it is not at all Rauch's intention to challenge and anguish us. Mysteriousness can only unsettle those who still, or already, attempt to understand. In contrast, Rauch's paintings seem to just pass on their receptivity to the incomprehensible: a miracle, not a problem; amazement and wonder as the end, not the beginning, of thinking.

And the colors? This is perhaps the most surprising (and least satisfying) aspect of the painting. The play of colors does not change anything; it merely confirms and reinforces the indifference called forth by Rauch's mystification. The coloration of this picture set in black and white does not manage to create a second and different kind of level of interrelations in tension with the first level of the things, figures, and scenes depicted. This second level appears merely on the side. Even in this most basic relation of the painting, the relation that defines it as a painting, between the "what" and the "how" of the painting, between its object and its appearance, the logic of mere indifference

⁹ Gottfried Boehm, "Plötzlich, diese Übersicht. Farbe und Imagination bei Neo Rauch," in Neo Rauch: *Neue Rollen. Bilder 1993-2006* (Cologne: DuMont, 2006), 35.

dominates; hence the avoidance, the cessation of conflict. The arrangement of colors does not manage to create any distance between the world and the painting. The colors lack precisely that crucial aspect whose attainment was the greatest concern for modernist painting: force.

In an interview by Holger Liebs for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Neo Rauch says of his painting: "Unenlightened zones are necessary, because otherwise, the painting dries out since it's totally disinfected. I have to continually decide at which stage of pushing forward with the painting I will impose this rupture, and posit the regions of disturbance. It always happens when the feeling arises that the parts that are spelled out are overly weighty." Thus, it sounds like Rauch has taken Wolfgang Iser's theory of the "gap," an empty space in which Iser saw the aesthetic potential of literary texts a little too literally: as the mandate to distribute a few empty spaces throughout the painting. Rauch understands the aesthetic gap of indeterminacy spatially: as something aside or between spaces of fullness, of determinacy (those spaces in which one can recognize something), and thus also as something that he can just decide to add, from outside, onto whatever he has already painted in a figural way. Yet Iser intended an emptiness, a *negativity* whose aesthetic quality consists in hollowing out all determinacy from the inside.

Since Rauch's work does not allow this very hollowing out of all determinacy from inside to emerge, one thing never happens when looking at his objectively considered, ludicrous figural arrangements; in fact, it never happens at all when viewing his paintings: laughter. A manifest meaning is never replaced by a latent one lurking, springing forth in a lightning flash. For this same reason, the very impression of what his paintings try to be will never emerge—there is no impression of a secret. Just as

one has nothing to laugh about in front of his paintings, one also has nothing to ask about, to wonder and think about. *This is it* (the opposite of *thus it is*) seems to be all that Rauch's paintings want to say to us.

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Henning Ahrens's novel *Lauf Jäger lauf* (Run hunter run) has accomplished in literary form what the best of Rauch's pictures (those from the mid-1990s, such as *Leitung* or *Sucher*) aim to do: namely, to turn the interpenetration of figuration and dream into an artistic principle by unfolding the dreamy, unidentifiable aspects of figuration and the figurative, non-subjective aspects of the dream. Accordingly, Ahrens published a second novel in 2007, titled *Tiertage* (Animal days), in which the following short scene involving Neo Rauch is narrated:

The conversation jumped from one glass of beer to the next. Emmi, who drank very little, withdrew into herself. With ears half open, she heard her husband fighting with Asta, who, without mincing words, accused the entire Leipzig School, including its poster boy Neo Rauch, of cultivating a cryptic self-love, and she watched as Viktor, as he always did when something was weighing upon him, scratched open a mosquito bite. Finally, she laid her hand on the spot now oozing with pus. Emmi moved forward as things became heated, and then Rudolf suddenly got loud.

"Kiss my ass!" he screamed at Asta, taken aback. "There's enough abstract junk in the world, we've seen it all before. What did it do for us? Besides," he added a little more quietly, after having taken a look around the bar, "I'm certainly not offering people [Rudolf is himself a still life painter] sharks made of jelly à la Damien Hirst, no anemic crap, no grandiose emotional ideas without content. [...]"

The recipient of this tirade looked across at him, her fork still in the potato that she had just pressed into the remains of the sauce. She swallowed; she blinked.

"Asta," whispered Emmi conspiratorially.

Viktor giggled, his forehead resting on both of his fists.