

TO PLIGHT

“But the truth is that the plight of art and of society does include everyone , and imposes on all of us the same misery and therefore the same task.”¹

Making-For-Art Seeks Its Plight

And now? All about us - so much art, a seeming cornucopia! So many things – objects, texts, images, resoundings, performances, aural-visual ‘events’, spectacles, and ad-mixtures of all these and more – represented to us in and under the name of ‘art’! But where on earth is the making-process that performs making-toward-art? Gone to ground? Displaced...? Scattered? By-passed? Ignored? Aside from any recognisable ‘where’?

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'It's finished.'

'It's all over then?'

'For now.'

'For the time being?'

'For as long as it takes...'

'... to realise that what takes us over takes nothing away from us.'

'This little nothing which, once it has been withdrawn, leaves us with something less than nothing.'

'Overtaken by what distracts us...'

'...detracts from us...'

'... as we become the displacing where place is withdrawn from us.'

'We're becoming placeless then?'

'Vaguely.'

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While we have this apparent abundance of art’s ‘things’, its actual performings - the activities that constitute the making - seem almost, routinely even, incidental and all but invisible. In spite of the enormous institutional and personal investment that ensures a constant recruitment and supply of makers of candidate art-things, public attention and response (judging, valuing, placing) is focussed almost exclusively on the things and their after-life. The performances that constitute making-for-art just seem to ‘happen’, and their up-shots, the potential art-things, emerge, apparently unproblematically, from inaccessible but carefully cultivated reserved spaces. The plentiful supply of things seems to preclude any need for further exploration of the conditions and terms of the making-performance. So firmly built-in is the routine supply of things that attention to performing and its apprenticeship zones, apparently safe enough in the hands of academies guaranteeing the supply of aspirant makers, is taken to be largely superfluous, irrelevant to the cultivation of relations to the arts’ things. In any case, becoming an accredited maker is surely, in the end, a personal private matter is it not?

¹ Gerhard Richter, ‘The Daily Practice of Painting’, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p.172.

Of course the flow of ‘commentary’ (all-inclusive of written and spoken critique / theory / history / interpretation / discourse / conversation / information) that represents the arts to and for the now global culture, placing, valuing and directing them, does make occasional reference to making processes in the course of its address of the things' properties. *But this reference is always subservient to commentary's need to place and value according to terms quite alien to making.* The activities generating aesthetic judgments, independent of making's concerns, derive from quite different interests, most specifically those supporting forms of analysis (philosophical, scientific, socio-historical, in their complex cross-fertilisations). Entirely wrapped up in the practice and production of ‘theory’ (for want of a better embracing term) these sub-traditions of analysis are unable to engage art-making on its own terms for they are constitutionally bound to turn every topic/object into an *object-of-and-for-theory*. And they do this, of course, for ends utterly different to those of art-makers.

Art's things, then, are waved to and through us, seemingly to excess and without end. After making has finished with them they are borne along as routine constituents of an all-encompassing global culture (still predominantly occidental in its sources, means and interests, though necessarily now increasingly sensitive to the emergence of multiple hybrids). Situated indifferently within this global wave and, by their very presence, already inoculated with culture's bland tincture, they become, along with everything else, participants in the universal mutual penetration, the inter-penetration of each thing with the others. Each absorbed thing becomes first of all an exemplar of and representative for culture's specific interests, primarily now that of the maintenance and renewal of a common market of inter-media info-signs. Can the arts keep their promise to themselves (and thus to us (that nagging question of whether there could indeed be such an ‘us’ now...)) within this swirling storm? Is this their plight?

Might ‘plight’, as verb-noun, help in engaging the specific terms on which making across the contemporary arts tries to ‘take place’, to make a site, a place-time, on which it can be sustained for the time being? Perhaps, too, plight might open us to the ways that art-making and its things are gathered up and permeated by interpretive practices embedded in organisations representing art to and for the culture, *though the plight of interpretation is utterly different to that of art-making.*

‘Plight’ / ‘To Plight’: a noun-verb homophone with extensions and a plurality of possible contrasting affiliations... Art may be essentially (if, that is, we can talk of essences...well, we can write of them even though we may never get to them) plight, a plighted, plighting plight. Yes, art and its things may be in a plight, have a plight or be able to plight. But how such plighting and plights are represented is dependent on where the representing is constructed. *For representing's site is not art's.* The values given to the plight(ing) and thus to the art-thing may be irreconcilable. And the difference is between *the plight as seen from within* (the plight of the experience of the making process and of the plight-endowed art-thing, patent at the moment of its release from the site of its making), *and from without* (the plight of the thing as constituted by those who take it over and give it positions and purposes - put it to work - within culture). Perhaps it is the dynamic of the irreconcilability of these very different commitments to making-for-art and its things that defines their current life-possibilities.

Art-as-plight takes us directly to the sites of art's performing, to the maker's constant struggle to offer something that might, just, be able to stand on its own (however briefly and helplessly) exemplifying the absolutely founding commitment to the making of something

autonomous, something beholden to nothing but art, about what it is to become art. The plight of art is what making-for-art is all about for the maker who hopes that the thing made will stand for nothing but itself-as-art: the before and after of all representation.

As noun, plight is both a condition (typically qualified by epithets associated with danger, sorrow, trouble, difficulty) and a pledge, a promise, a pawn (the word or thing given as surety to an other (a pawnee, a broker perhaps, one who will hold the pledge until it can be redeemed, or, failing that, sold on)). It is also intimately entangled, im-plied, with folding, with the 'pli' (remembering Mallarmé) as a pleat or a plait (the fold in a cloth made by doubling it back onto itself, hemming it to prevent its edge from fraying...or the three or more strands of hair twisted through each other to form a single plait...and plaid - the tartan cloth as well as the celtic re-gathering, banding together...).

As transitive verb, plight is typically attached to one's troth, one's truth as in pledging oneself truly to another. Plighting is promising, a performative in which the saying is simultaneously the doing (the promise of oneself as gift). Addressed to an other or others it gives itself as the present guarantor of certain future happenings. Plighting now, I seek to provide assurances about an unknowable future, to fold back (to place, to re-pledge) the future upon the present. The act of plighting is the pledge (although it may be accompanied by other things (a ring for example) intended to mark symbolically and act as a reminder of the plighting).

In gathering together all the arts on this unplaceable unmarked site of art, and qualifying this site as both condition (plight) and performing (plighting), then each thing made/performed by a would-be artist *is offered as both a diagnosis and a promise*. Plight's double (its doubling and more than doubling – its multi-ply-ing, its mani-folding...) thus gestures to a centre-less region where making is defined as a play of endless tensions between this double and between themselves and their others (their outside). Dragged hither and thither by 'forces' (inner and outer) seemingly quite independent of each other but cross-fertilising in invisible ways, art-making 'activities' stumble around in a region where the *agon* of survival, the struggle to live on through and in irreconcilable differences, is the only foreseeable prospect. Promising themselves (and thus us through their makings) to be true to their condition (plight) they can in all honesty (troth) only offer us something that bears the marks of this *agon*, the splitting tensions that define the making.

Becoming By Fragmentation

Perhaps then we cannot expect that the things of art, residues of the schizzed diffractions of their making, will emerge as singular 'whole objects' to be valued (if at all) for the sublime beautiful resolution of the tensions of their making. It may be that it is their destiny now to be loose gatherings of fragments which can no longer be re-assembled into a 'one'. Perhaps, too, it is their plight to be unable to promise us any whole but only to draw us into the tenseful ambiguating (sometimes the agon-ising) play of their differences. To try to live with them in terms of this promise will require us, in our attempted engagement, our re-vivifying of art's things, to subject ourselves to this fragmentation, to accept that, if we have been true to their pledge, we will not emerge from them unscathed nor be made whole again (or at last). We may have to abandon altogether earlier legacies of aesthetic judgment and valuation that vested the significance (meaning-as-power) of the art-thing in the beauty of its singularity, its supposed ability to merge 'form' and 'content' (and whatever else) in a oneness that could (should), eventually, be experienced in and as a unique 'all-at-once', a transcendent resolution restoring us aesthetically and temporally to a wholeness entirely absent in everyday life.

In spite of what may appear as a surface calm in the teeth of the permeating cultural storm, it is likely that art's things, true to their pledge and seething away helplessly in their distracted fracturings, can only be engaged on their own terms by a response *that puts itself through this same self-undoing* without any expectation of emerging as a new whole. If we also recognise that a defining condition of art's modernity has been its turning itself into a questioning-probing celebration of its own possibilities, performing becoming its own subject, then its things are constituted precisely as the ambiguous upshots of this self-fracturing exploration. For art's questioning is obviously not to be confused with that of either the everyday search for pragmatic knowledge, for information, or the technoscientific quest for knowledge securely enough grounded to guide machined transformations of matters. Rather, the 'point' of art-as-questioning is precisely not to generate answers/knowledge, but *to celebrate and preserve, in and as the thing made, its and our own becoming as in question, as the essential question.*

For the modern arts what was beyond doubt was that, despite all the closures within which they struggled to live-on (and still, now, just about surviving in transformed forms), *our fundamental condition (and this is theirs too) is that of the openness, the patency, of uncertainty.* In their makings they seek to be true to, to exemplify and celebrate, this being-in-question as the possible-impossibility of redemption from the results of our self-constrictions through whose insatiable habits we so successfully hem ourselves in. Art seeks only to remind us, through enabling us to recreate it for ourselves, of our own patency. It wants (a 'want' that making-for-art seeks to satisfy without end) desperately to keep before itself and us what to it is patently obvious – *that we are nothing but becomings whose becoming is essentially in question, unfixable.*

Each would-be artist seeks to create things in which the insatiable habits enclosing her or him are opened out, turned through themselves in an intense 'conversation' with those art-things that have already drawn and seduced her/him into this play of art's 'open'. The things that may emerge at intervals from this incessant 'conversation' are way-markers. They open up temporary sites where the specific qualities of the questioner's thrall to the intensities of the shuttle between closure and opening, between being hemmed in and becoming frayed, are displayed. Any 'value' (as art) that such displays may have will depend on the ways that they have laid themselves open. Lying there in mute weakness, as nothing more (nor less) than their pledge, they aim their appeal to us at the points where we habitually protect ourselves against the disturbing unruly. They invite us, seductively, to withdraw ourselves from our better judgment and to collapse into the patency of their self-searching.

Nothing But Surfacing

All they've got (this defines their weakness) is lying right there at their surfaces. They are nothing more than their surfacings. They do not hold back (even though what they are holding up for us may sometimes be encrypted), are not reticent. They can be nothing other than forthright about the little nothings that they offer. Not, of course, that their surfaces may not be extraordinarily elaborate. But however complicated they are (whatever pleatings they move through), for them to become-as-art this complexity can never be about deception, never about pointing beyond themselves to some hidden elsewhere-truth. Such complexity is only an invitation to us to follow the twists and turns of the questing movements that constituted the making. Exploring art's possibilities through a conjoint and reciprocal questioning of self and materials generates surfaces through the closest following and

registering of responses to questioning's movements. Performing such tracking-recording is art's doing of its own truth-as-an-activity.

As nothing but surfacing, art's things by-pass all divisions between 'appearance' and 'reality', front and back, ideology and truth, and so forth. Any interpretations or explanations of art and its things which respond from within such splits as conditions of their own knowledge-production (the natural and social sciences for example) quite simply miss art's point. They end up generating only their own 'objects of knowledge', *interpretations that document their faithfulness to their own concerns (certain kinds of knowledge-making and -disseminating), and the terms agreed within their discourses for what is to count as knowledge/truth*. Doubtless forceful and convincing representations of their own ont- and epistem-ologies they can say nothing that touches or engages what artists do or the things they make. For such world-views, surfaces are only of interest for the ways they provide clues that direct the observer to the conceptualisable paradigm-specific truth lying behind them, the hidden genetic structuring processes 'at work' behind every surface.

Art's surfaces, then, *are* their truth, the making patent of their pledge to make themselves available as celebrations of the specificity of their self-questioning. And, unless the surfaces can attract and hold the wandering attentions that constitute everyday itineraries, the things will remain ungathered, far from us in their helplessness. Insofar as these everyday itineraries of thought-feeling tend to be increasingly indebted to the knowledge-discourses of the technosciences, the difficulties everyday thought faces in engaging art on the latter's own terms (by putting itself in the care of art's things through a suspension of routine modes of thought) are compounded. For all things requiring exploration and 'explanation' are approached with an attitude of suspicion that believes that what they are 'really about', 'what they mean', lies hidden behind surfaces which are nothing more than epiphenomenal and deceiving shields of their 'truth'. Apart from the cases of fashion (the presentation of pure surface display) and sport (a spectacle of surfaces of competing performances), both intimately bound up with the spectacular daily life of late-capitalism, everyday thought, practical thought, is unaccustomed to the leap into alternative modes of relating. Entertainment, the time of the interval, offers nothing other than the relaxed escape into fascinated fantasy. And how much more difficult is this leap when it demands a process of self-dispersion and a willingness to feel out broken trails across the surfaces of non-sense.

The conditions enabling our recovery of the kind of openness to wonder, to which we were prey when fairy story and 'other worlds' were routine constituents of our childhood-becoming, are external to the dialectic of work-and-leisure whose practicalities set up the parameters of our daily lives. Art's mute invitation to us to become other is, for the most part, unheard, unseen, unread. Its surfaces are indeed all around us but hedged in and re-formed by all the discourses of organised interpretation *that can only assimilate its surfaces to their own modes of responding*. These helpless surfaces are easy prey for the rhetorically violent contestations of critical appropriation defining the mediated 'life' of culturalised 'art' (art-lite...) now. Yes, its surfaces do continually proliferate but are channelled in ways which transform them into terms agreeable to commonsense and its co-opted feelings. In their weak grace, art's things can do nothing but lie there inert in the face of this take-over. It's not that they give themselves up without a murmur, but rather that, beginning and becoming only in and as their muteness (thus eschewing all such murmuring from their inception) they remain utterly indifferent to what happens to them. They can only lie in wait until their offer, their pledge, is taken up (or not) on its own terms, these latter constituting nothing less, but also

nothing more, than surfacing as an infinitely extensile plane without dimension or grounding support.

If the art-thing (gest) is deposited into 'culture' by its maker as nothing more (nor less...) than a pledge of the truth of its hope to be absorbed by Art's distant Body, then its recipients - culture's art-representing institutions - become its pawnees, the pawnbrokers who transform it from 'promise' into the 'real' values of everyday cultural exchange (the strange mingling of 'aesthetic' value with coinage). The pawnbrokers, having first bite at the cherry, represent it in the form of their own 'values' that turn around and merge both its exchangeability and, crucially, its representability. By the time it reaches its potential audiences it is already transformed by the representing valuations through which it is sent on its way. It has been positioned as a pawn whose value no longer lies just in the promise imbued in it by its maker, but in the 'aesthetic-monetary' combine that may or may not sustain its journey-to-come.

If the pledge's terms are by-passed in favour of the imposition of critical rhetorics of institutional interests that are an anathema to making, then, in becoming the tools of these interests, the surface-planing will remain largely unactivated and the thing will be moved about according to institutional will and whim. Meanwhile, dormant, the plane lies in wait. And the maker knows that, however large the thing has loomed for her/him in its making, it is, in its offered plighting, minute and helpless. Rapidly diminishing as it fades from the site of making, its lot is resignation. That it is now small, and becoming patently weak, marks its virtue for the maker for whom it can still lie there in and for itself as an epitome of all that is other to the encasing culture's defining moments of becoming. The maker puts it forth as something tiny, that is, as a weightless free-floater, nothing more than the offer of the unassimilable. Only if and when it is put to work elsewhere by others will it be artificially swollen (sometimes to inordinate proportions) through their pumping machines. Made to appear big, so big, gigantic even, it may become almost unrecognisable to its maker for whom the situation of making, of performing, is all too clearly plight-full. Wherever and however it occurs performing across the arts is always in plight's mesh. Thus...

A Promising Predicament

The Arts' Plight: they are always in a predicament, stuck fast, pinned down in and on the spot by others and themselves. But it is a spot which they try to turn into their own alone while knowing all along, however implicitly, that, in the end, their spot belongs to and is controlled by others. Yes, they are stuck there... but they remain fast, sometimes just too fast for their appropriators...such speeding maybe intrinsic to performing's own plight.

The Arts' Plight: they are always promising, glued together by and bound to hope (aspirants to the elsewhere of off-and-away and time's-up), pledging their hoping to out-of-bounds, the out-and-beyond of what's to come, a howsoever distant *utopos*...performing's own plight.

For makers - would-be artists - the plight of making as performing-toward-art (of everything gestured towards in the englobing para-concept of 'practice') is to be inseparably doubled-up within this doubled plight, indebted to the entirety of the arts' past but plighted in and to the difference of the present on behalf of a 'not-yet' that is forever beyond performing's reach. And plighting oneself to art through performing emerges from and is sustained by a specific kind of love for and erotic attachment to it. It is effected by a doubled seduction and affection-affliction. It is gripped both by what has already been offered and by art's silent invitation to those who listen to its silences to continue it, to keep it going. The invitation

seems to say that the present is an unfillable vacuum desperate to be filled, while the past is so full-to-bursting that it cannot be revisited.

Flowing through this umbilical-like attachment to art is an erotic force that generates an obsessive-compulsive enthusiasm that possesses makers, pumping them up with art. Yet this is a strange possession, for it soon becomes apparent to the maker that the possessing agent, Art's Body (an idea of art-in-general crossing all media and senses), is itself propertyless, without a possession to its name. The maker is driven into a quest, one that directs the performing, for something that recedes in the face of all attempts to grasp it, to lay oneself open to its terms. The would-be artist is possessed by that which itself has nothing to possess, has no properties, no proper name, *indeed no 'proper' at all. It epitomises impropriety.* Yet, in spite of being this boundaryless vacuum, it nevertheless manages to make irrecusable demands on, to fill, sometimes beyond bursting's point, the maker.² Even more strangely this loving attachment to art, however selectively it engages what other artists have done and are doing in art's name, is irrepressibly driven by a restless dissatisfaction with art's apparent shortfall. For what art has generated, no matter how vast a storehouse it seems to be, is never quite enough. Something is always missing, something that the whole of art seems (to each who would make-toward-art) to be calling out for in order to remain what it has always been, an unending filling of the empty present with its celebration. This absolutely incompletable project seduces possible makers with its very patency, its being-open, an opening on openness.

The present time-space of performing is always marked by its recognition of the need for supplementing art's things, for the would-be artist sees this time-space as always being a vacancy lying in wait and an invitational absence, a siren summoning making to respond to art's empty plight. Makers, even novitiates, know full well (the arts' histories show them nothing less) that their things, even if ordained as art-things through the ensuing social rituals of judgment and placement, are destined to fall away immediately behind us, showing what was possible and reminding us of art's perennial destiny – its presencing of its own absence, its withoutness and impropriety. Of course the rituals of placement, being consumed by the performance of powers in maintaining their own trajectories, have nothing to do with the utter weakness of art's patent absence; they simply take advantage of it for their own ends – the ends of representation to which the arts are now in thrall and by which they are universally mediated to us through non-art practices and interests. The arts only appear before us now by courtesy of these complex systems of representation whose exorbitant productivity of imaging-texting-discoursing - their interpretive tactics and dissemination of the arts - has

² Michael Brodsky, a writer whose extraordinary oeuvre spirals without cease through delirious explorations of what might be involved in trying to 'tell' a 'story', recurs across his writings upon the word 'nisus'. This names the 'core' unnameable condition (species-specific?), a striving-endeavouring, that seems to require species members to perform certain species-defining activities. By implication he invites us to consider what this might be, not only for his own writing but also for performing across the arts. See, for example, his 'Three Goat Songs', *Four Walls Eight Windows*, New York, 1991, p. 88. The O.E.D. offers the following quotations to exemplify its use: "When the nisus of web-spinning dominates the spider, when the nisus of nest-building dominates the bird." (Allbutt's Syst. Med. viii, 248.), and, "Species and their varieties seem to have been produced by an inward nisus." (Sir F. Palgrave, Norm. and Eng., i. 39.). In addition we can note that 'nisus' is the past participle of 'nitor' – 'to strive for, make one's way with effort, to climb or fly towards something'; according to Virgil, 'Nisus' was also the name of the father of 'Scylla' who cut her father's purple hair (on which the safety of his kingdom depended) in order to gain the love of Minos; after which Nisus was changed into a sparrow-hawk... making-for-art thus as a fast flying climbing hunting searching - plight-flight?

set up the arts, allocated them to their places in society, supposedly on our behalf long before we even reach out for them.

Yet, in spite of the massivity of this pre-interpretation of the arts, some of their things, resistant to the metamorphosing veils of interpretation, do manage to withhold something of the intensity of their making's difference, keeping its offer subtly, if equivocally, open. Plighted by their erotically charged inclination and force of external circumstances to be forever in tension with their encasing surroundings, they offer some kind of, often difficult and convoluted, access to a melancholy joy. For this is the plight of performings that are simultaneously in and out, shackled but still free-floating, of their cultural space-time. The offer's call clearly has a strange but resounding attraction, for there is never any shortage of recruits to the sites of making. Something touches and moves in ways that pull tyro-performers towards the propertyless sites of performing. Art is still see-able as an opening where the hope for a becoming-differently can be essayed. It summons, seemingly endlessly, new recruits to search out and follow making's unpredictable pathways towards the unutterable.

But recruitment occurs in the face of a confusing profusion of signals and messages sent in performing's direction. Entreaties, suggestions, attractions, promises, rewards, hints, caveats, threats, sanctions, surround and penetrate the situation of the contemporary would-be artist. Irrespective of chosen medium (media), to enter as a desiring and hopeful maker into the routine conditions of making is to cast oneself into the play of irresolvable tensions and conflict: *art becomes the site where the culture's own uncertainties about art and itself work themselves out*. Many of the rhetorical discourses seeking to define the terms of art's making and to pull the maker in specific directions ring with certainties grounded in a seemingly unassailable authority of professional-technical expertise. And the auras of such authorities are often supported by the assertion of real economic and political power, for the means of representing the arts are stitched ever more tightly into the institutional fabric of global techno-capitalism.

Even more problematically for the would-be maker, the current phase of techno-capitalism's accelerating hyper-'development', has co-opted those activities broadly gatherable under the term 'aesthetics' and insinuated them, injected them in ever-increasing doses, into the flows constituting its unstoppable production-and-consumption chaos-cycles. Artists perform in a world already in thrall to a continually expanding and already massively realised project of aestheticisation. Aesthetics and consumption (the constant renewal of which techno-capitalism takes as its means to long-term survival) coalesce in the transformation of vital desires into routine needs through a continual remodelling of 'taste'. The immense project of aestheticised consumption is formed in the innumerable ceaseless but barely noticeable remodelling metamorphoses in which 'life' (the vague but very real rhythmic pulsing intensities, energies and sensual imaginings providing for our daily 'living') is set up on others' terms. Our shaped and force-fed desiring is confronted with utterly specific context-bound options and itineraries within whose network of invitations, seductions, persuasions and compulsions we struggle to find our ways.

The tissue of everyday life, how it materialises for us on and as tangential or tangible surfacings through which we have to pass, is a texturing thoroughly impregnated by aesthetics: living in the midst of the means of productive consumption is to live through continual engagement of the terms of this aesthetic infiltration. The possibilities of our present, how we might continually reconstitute it and ourselves in ways which satisfy, are

mediated and represented to us as always at least in part aesthetic matters. At every point, ‘to live’ is shown as a question of taste. For ‘taste’ (how we shape our relations to the affects and intensities permeating all our surfaces), with all its gustatory visceral-vital connotations, is through and through sensual: it is stimulated, pleased, delighted, comforted, soothed, by the appearance, the coming-to-presence, the e-venting, singly or together, of surfaces, sounds, touches, scents, in all their multiple pulsing reverberations. It is these reverberations, which we gather almost without noticing in largely familiar linguistic categories (the beautiful, the harmonious, the rhythmic, the exciting, the shocking, the frightening, the calming, the charming, the pretty, the pleasant, the sublime even, and so on), which point to ways in which, however slightly and temporarily, something has moved us out of the steady state of our everyday reasoning. Many of the categories seem to act as intermediaries between our ‘moved’ surfaces and the ‘mood’ evoked in the course of our ‘tasting’.

The emergence ‘through’ our surfaces of this taste-dynamic, on-rolling and on-rushing at unpredictable velocities, is registered most explicitly in the inter-twining of taste and fashion, for taste is culturally generated, kept alive and on the move, through the fashioning of everything consumable. Making goods and services attractive through constant re-shaping (design) work is powered in ever more complex ways through the alliance of the exorbitant ingenuities of technoscience and representing media. For the superficialities of appearances (what immediately attracts, appeals to and demands a response from us) are increasingly grounded in and presented through a technique of ‘performance’. It seems that when ‘faster’, ‘further’, ‘briefer’, and ‘more’ are combined with the undeniable surface attractions, then the things become irresistible ‘spiritualised’ combines severing all ties with some assumed ‘original’ ‘natural’ world. The attractions of the things cannot be traced back to ‘natural’ properties of any material things lying there independent of but waiting to satisfy our own ‘natural’ needs. We are forced to confront the possibility that indeed there may never have been such a world lying in wait for us humans.

The consumables of late-modernity leave us in no doubt about their status (how they ‘become’ for us) as complex combines of mattering image-text-information-matter. They are the way we have developed to perfection (that is, we are absolutely brilliant at doing this) of making every matter matter to and for us. These combines are continually being taken apart and re-assembled according to projections of patterns of consumption and market-performance. They are made to move, to circulate, scintillate, dance, perform, briefly, among us through the image-info-texts that constitute their passing public lives and their appearing-disappearing reputations. What we quickly learn, under the rule of productive consumption, is that the satisfaction they give, the moods they generate, are both performance-dependent but simultaneously reproducible by more of the similar, but always slightly ‘improvable’, affect-performers.

As for us, super-saturated by their rhetorics with their excess of supposed seductive ‘information’, we perceive-feel (sense) the thing-constructs only through sensually overloaded persuading interpretations. In the guided chaos of their whirling amongst us they seek to suck us into their orbits so that we become hypnotised partners in their dervish dance-without-cease. But though we may be driven to distraction (just the place they have in mind for us) and exhaustion by this dance of consumptive aesthetics, it has, of course, nothing to do with art. *Propertyless art is somewhere else entirely.*

Thus, as long as we continue to approach art and its gestures as ‘works’ that are generated through activities which we assimilate to our conventional understanding of ‘work’ (what it

'is', where and how it 'takes place'), we will miss completely the elsewhere of art's propertylessness – its otherwise-becoming. Perhaps it is precisely the arts' attempts to undo these ties to work and place³ that define the terms of their plight - pledged, tasked, to struggle to begin again and again, but always disastrously in their inevitable falling short, in the face of the surrounding infiltrating disaster. This is making-for-art's promising predicament. Perhaps this is the general plight to which the painter Gerhard Richter is pointing now that we 'have lost the great ideas, the Utopias'. In the absence of secure grounds for 'faith' and 'meaning' we are left, for him, 'hopeless to the utmost degree, we roam across a toxic waste dump, in extreme peril'. Yet anyone who would make-toward-art cannot interpret 'the abject plight of art as the result of social conditions, and thus as an all-pervading environmental factor that stamps the character of art and defines its task and its content'. For that would be to live and place art under the illusion of an all determining generalised ideology. Rather, as the quotation from Richter at the head of this text says, the plight imposes a common task on all of us: 'our sole hope', is to proceed through the gropings of 'self-doubt... the scepticism that stands in for capacity'.⁴ One might add that the self-questioning demanded by self-doubt has, in the difference that cuts off making-for-art from 'culture', to affiliate itself unequivocally with, to allow itself to be called away by, and to cast itself off and away toward Art's lonely Body way beyond culture's boundaries.

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'We've made a disastrous start.'

'I'm afraid it's too late to do anything about it.'

'Yes, we'll just have to live with it.'

'But how can we live with this without repeating it, without going over it endlessly? It's as if we haven't learned our lesson. Living with it seems to require us to live through it again and again forever. What a fate!'

'Worse than death you mean? One lesson might be that we make ourselves responsible for the inopportunity that our constant repetition shows the start-up to be.'

'But surely the inopportune is pure accident. We can't spend our lives taking responsibility for that which is way beyond us, beyond our control.'

'Unless this spending, as you call it, is precisely the drive to bring the uncontrollable under influence.'

'If we are driven to do it then surely we can't be held responsible.'

'But, if you remember, what made the start the disaster it was and still is, was that we were put unequivocally in the driving seat.'

'So, recognising ourselves as drivers is the inescapable memory, a living memory of the disaster that we are constantly becoming.'

'I'm afraid there's no way out.'

'And going round the bend always brings us back to the folly of the beginning, our sourcing ...' ... which, if the journey is this unceasable circularity, we pass right through without ever being able to grasp it.'

³ The question of making-for-art's relation to both 'work' and 'place' is addressed recurrently across the texts constituting 'Art's Plight'. Agamben, writing about the celebratory character of the 'feast' (the time-out of the festival), remarks that on such occasions 'human activities are simply neutralised and rendered inoperative during the feast'. This inoperativity (he cites the gestures of dance with its 'liberation of the body from its utilitarian movements') is precisely what characterises making-for-art - while looking almost the same as the 'work' of everyday life I am suggesting that it is the performing of a not-work, a de-working (or de-creation...) of work. See G. Agamben, 'Nudities', Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011, p.112 and p.111.

⁴ Gerhard Richter, op. cit., extracts from pages 171 – 173.

'You're right; it seems within our reach, very approachable, just over there. We seem to feel its contours but, moving at the speed we do, its perfect stillness eludes us. It turns out to be beyond our grasp.'

'Aye, we're great graspers.'

'Gargantuan! But only of what our reach can measure. We only touch what we measure and our speeding-measuring will by-pass forever the grace of stillness, the perfect separation of our beginning.'

'Whereas we are condemned to reach out beyond measure.'

'I won't say 'Exactly!', but ...'

'... having said it you repeat your own condemnation.'

'Just so.'