

perfect way of hiding behind a mask is to be absolutely silent. And silence connects with the muteness of things present with the muteness that produces their presence. There is no emergence of meaning; on the other hand, that does not alleviate the weight of presence.

John
10/1

Epiphany/Presentification/Deixis: Futures for the Humanities and Arts

I

Let us now take a moment to see how much ground we have covered so far—before we concentrate on the future. For just as Moses was not allowed to have more than a look into the promised land, we are not able yet (for sheer lack of appropriate concepts) to enter an intellectual world of postmetaphysical epistemology—and this explains why it matters to know at least what exactly we have left behind ourselves. Derrida was right: over-coming metaphysics is certainly an uphill struggle. Less so because it is hard to forget a specific past, however, than because it requires both imagination and stamina to conquer the potential concepts of a nonmetaphysical future. At any event, instead of indulging with Derrida in the soft paradox of a situation that we do not want to bring to an “end,” although its “closure is outlined,” I would like to adopt the deparadoxifying attitude of those who trade in “futures”—that is, in “commodities or stocks bought or sold upon agreement of delivery in time to come”¹—and act as if an agreement of delivery had already been signed.

This chapter, then, is about possible (but not yet definitely conquered) intellectual and institutional “futures,” about possible future practices in the academic disciplines that we subsume under the name of “the humanities and arts.” But it is also, of

course, written with the (mostly implicit) acknowledgment that the "delivery" of such "futures" has not yet happened (or cannot really happen), and before trying to offer a more or less panoramic view of the promised land, it therefore starts with a look back.

This book began with academic memories from the late 1970s and the 1980s, memories of that (now strangely) "heroic" intention to keep alive a "theory debate" in the humanities that had begun a decade and a half earlier, in the mid and late 1960s, and that seemed to be petering out about a quarter of a century ago. The very good intention of keeping up that "theory debate," like most good intentions, produced quite an amount of boredom and repetition, but it also generated at least one prospect that looked immediately exciting to us, that is, the prospect of focusing on "materialities of communication." Trying to figure out how one could possibly define "materialities of communication" and what the most adequate tools for their analysis would be, we found ourselves obliged to think of the humanities, as they then existed (and as they still predominantly exist), as an epistemological tradition that, for more than a century, had separated us from everything that could not be described as or transformed into a configuration of meaning. Today, we may add that it was most probably the trauma inflicted by this—hermeneutically induced—"loss of world" that explains why the only value (at least the highest value) that many humanists can find in the phenomena they are dealing with is the motivation to enter yet another intellectual loop of "self-reflexivity," and this is probably also the reason why adopting anything but a "critical" attitude toward the things of the worlds in which we are living seems to be something like an original sin, at least in the eyes of the average humanist.

In contrast, trying to establish a position within the humani-

ties and arts that could mark an exception to their century-old tradition of being an institution in which hermeneutics and self-reflexivity are the law (and from being an extension, into our present, of what I have been referring to as the "metaphysical" tradition), thus breaking away from the currently dominant self-understanding of the humanities and arts and from the practices based on that self-understanding, appeared to be the one worthwhile next step to take. It then became the double experience of this book's previous (and third) chapter that, above all, there was no way of even getting close to the goal of leaving the metaphysical tradition behind (or at least of modifying it in a serious way) without going further and breaking several taboos that threatened and still threaten to be borders of intellectual bad taste; and that, even after breaking these taboos (and after "getting our hands dirty"), it was still quite a laborious undertaking to imagine and conquer any conceptual terrain that deserves to be called "nonhermeneutic."

Now, what could the promise of a disciplinary future based on a new epistemology look like? Of course, one should anticipate that all the borders of the humanistic disciplines, such as we have known them, would have to be redrawn. But as so many predictions about how exactly they might be redrawn have turned out to be (sometimes awkwardly) wrong in the past, and as my interest in the future here is an interest in intellectual practices, rather than in disciplinary maps, I shall rely, in this chapter, on a very traditional tripartition that has been and still is operational in many (although obviously not all) humanistic disciplines. I am referring to the hearteningly unsophisticated and largely self-explanatory tripartition of these disciplines into "aesthetics," "history," and "pedagogy." Of course, these three fields were never supposed to belong to the same level of practice

and abstraction or to be mutually independent—which doubly negative premise has inspired endless proposals to rethink their interrelationship. In my own very tender academic youth, for example, I imagined (together with many German humanists of my generation, I suppose) that the historical study of cultural artifacts would invariably help us to appreciate and understand their aesthetic value; that aesthetic value invariably lay in the potential of conveying an ethical message; and that therefore, and depending largely on the ethical insights that they provided, the relative aesthetico-ethical value of whatever texts or works of art we were teaching would indeed establish a basic pedagogical orientation for us.²

The way in which I understand the relationship between the fields of aesthetics, history, and pedagogy has changed quite dramatically as a consequence, not only of the growing importance that reflection on “presence” has had in my work, but of serious doubts—my own included³—about both the commentability of aesthetic experience and ethical norms and the possible role of ethical orientation in academic teaching in general. Above all, I would refrain, today, from lining up these areas or subfields in any inductive or deductive order. If I had to give priority to one of them (although I do not see any urgent need to do so), I would probably pick aesthetics, because of the specific epistemological relevance inherent to the type of *epiphany* that it can provide—without claiming, however, that exclusively aesthetic experience is capable of producing such an epiphany.⁴ What most interests me today in the field of history, the *presentification* of past worlds—that is, techniques that produce the impression (or, rather, the illusion) that worlds of the past can become tangible again—is an activity without any explanatory power in relation to the relative values of different forms of aes-

thetic experience (providing such explanations is what we used to think of as the function of historical knowledge in relation to aesthetics). But as the new conception of the field of history shares with the field of aesthetics the distinctive presence-component, and as it does not pretend to offer any immediate ethical or even “political” orientation, the program of presentification lends itself to the traditional accusation of promoting an “aestheticization of history.” My first line of defense would simply be to ask back what at all could be wrong with such an aestheticization of history. Regarding the field of teaching, finally, I have convinced myself, over the past few years, that neither aesthetic nor historical experience (at least aesthetic and historical experience as I see them) dispose of any potential that would yield superior orientation for behavior and action on the individual or on the collective level. Moreover, I doubt whether providing such orientation should really be a function of our teaching, at least on the academic level, even if it were readily available. Rather, I am convinced that it is our preeminent task today to confront students with intellectual complexity, which means that *deictic gestures*—that is, pointing to occasional condensations of such complexity—are what we should really focus on.

Epiphany, presentification, and dexis, then, would be three tentative concepts in which I try to bring together my predictions, imaginings, and desires about future forms of practice in the humanities and the arts. In this context, I want the component of “the arts” to play a much more prominent role than that of merely being a traditional part within the name for a cluster of academic disciplines. For I believe that, in their convergence, the moves of putting more emphasis on the presence element in aesthetic experience; the potential aestheticization of history; and the proposal to liberate our teaching from the obligation of pro-

viding ethical orientation may create, once again, a greater awareness of how close to actual artistic practice some of our academic activities can be. But while I will have to admit that I myself am not able to live and to exemplify this potential closeness between the humanities and the arts, neither in my own professional everyday activities nor through the following, more detailed illustrations of how I imagine the fields of aesthetics, history, and teaching to develop, I hope that I shall at least manage to keep awake the claim for their new proximity. Finally, I should also announce that the three parts of this chapter will not be of equal length. The most detailed conceptual development will be dedicated to the dimension of aesthetics. This is because I think that the part on aesthetics will contain certain arguments that may be foundational for my conceptions of historicization and of teaching, too. But it will also and simply be the case because this is the first time that I have tried to produce a written version of my thinking on aesthetics, whereas I have already published such texts on the fields of history and of teaching.⁵

2

When, a few years ago, a young colleague from the musicology department at Stanford and I were invited to teach an obligatory "Introduction to the Humanities" course for about two hundred students of the incoming freshman class, and when we had first decided on the general topic and task of exposing our prospective students to different types of *aesthetic experience*,⁶ three implications were uncontroversial between us right from the start. We just wanted to point to different modalities of enjoying beautiful things, without making aesthetic experience an obligation for our students (in other words, we wanted to offer them an opportunity to find out whether they reacted positively to the po-

tential of aesthetic experience, and, if so, we wanted to let them discover which modalities of aesthetic experience they preferred); secondly, we did not try to argue in favor of aesthetic experience by alluding to any values beyond the intrinsic feeling of intensity that it can trigger; and, finally, we wanted to open the range of potential objects of aesthetic experience by transgressing the canon of their traditional forms (such as "literature," "classical music," "avant-garde painting," etc.). This move was carried by the conviction that, today, the field where aesthetic experience actually takes place must be far more extended than what the concept "aesthetic experience" covers.

My *first* more personal concern for this class was to be a good enough teacher to evoke for my students and to make them feel specific *moments of intensity* that I remember with fondness and mostly with nostalgia—even if, in some cases, this intensity was painful when it actually happened. I wanted my students to know, for example, the almost excessive, exuberant sweetness that sometimes overcomes me when a Mozart aria grows into polyphonic complexity and when I indeed believe that I can hear the tones of the oboe on my skin. I want my students to live or at least to imagine that moment of admiration (and perhaps also of the despair of an aging man) that gets a hold of me when I see the beautiful body of a young woman standing next to me in front of one of the computers that give access to our library catalogue—a moment, by the way, that is not all that different from the joy that I feel when the quarterback of my favorite college team in American football (Stanford Cardinal of course) stretches out his perfectly sculptured arms to celebrate a touchdown pass. Quite naturally, I also want all of my students to feel the elation, the suddenly very deep breathing and the embarrassingly wet eyes with which I must have reacted to that very

beautifully executed pass and to the swift movement of the wide receiver who caught it. I hope that some of my students will suffer through that sentiment of intense depression and perhaps even of humiliation that I know from reading "Pequeño vals vienés," my favorite poem in Federico García Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York*, a text that makes the reader intuit how the life of a homosexual man was emotionally and even physically amputated in Western societies around 1930. My students should get at least a glimpse of that illusion of lethal empowerment and violence, as if I (of all people!) were an ancient god, which permeates my body at the moment of the *estocada final* in a Spanish bullfight, when the bullfighter's sword silently cuts through the body of the bull, and the bull's muscles seem to stiffen for a moment—before its massive body breaks down like a house shaken by an earthquake. I want my students to join in that promise of an endlessly and eternally quiet world that sometimes seems to surround me when I get lost in front of a painting by Edward Hopper. I hope they experience the explosion of tasty nuances that comes with the first bite of great food. And I want them to know the feeling of having found the right place for one's body with which a perfectly designed building can embrace and welcome us.

There is nothing edifying in such moments, no message, nothing that we could really learn from them—and this is why I like to refer to them as "moments of intensity." For what we feel is probably not more than a specifically high level in the functioning of some of our general cognitive, emotional, and perhaps even physical faculties. The difference that these moments make seems to be based in quantity. And I like to combine the quantitative concept of "intensity" with the meaning of temporal fragmentation in the word "moments" because I know—from

many and mostly frustrating moments of loss and of separation—that there is no reliable, no guaranteed way of producing moments of intensity, and that we have even less hope of holding on to them or extending their duration. Indeed, I cannot be sure, before I hear my favorite Mozart aria, whether that exuberant sweetness will overcome my body again. It might happen—but I know and I already anticipate my reaction of regret about this experience—that it will only happen for a moment (if it should happen at all).



But how is it possible that we long for such moments of intensity although they have no edifying contents or effects to offer? Why do we sometimes remember them as happy moments and sometimes as sad moments—but always with a feeling of loss or of nostalgia? This is the *second* question that I want to deal with, the question of the *specific appeal that such moments hold for us*, the question about the reasons that motivate us to seek aesthetic experience and to expose our bodies and minds to its potential. Without going into any detail yet, my opening hypothesis is that what we call "aesthetic experience" always provides us with certain feelings of intensity that we cannot find in the historically and culturally specific everyday worlds that we inhabit. This is why, seen from a historical or from a sociological perspective, aesthetic experience can indeed function as a symptom of the preconscious needs and desires that belong to specific societies.⁷ But I do not want to equate the motivational power of such desires, which may draw us into situations of aesthetic experience, on the one hand, with the interpretation and understanding of that motivational power as based in preconscious desires, on the other. In other words, I do not believe that such interpretations

and the higher degree of self-reflexivity that might follow from them should be considered a part of aesthetic experience. For the same reason, I prefer to speak, as often as possible, of "moments of intensity" or of "lived experience" (*ästhetisches Erleben*) instead of saying "aesthetic experience" (*ästhetische Erfahrung*)—because most philosophical traditions associate the concept of "experience" with interpretation, that is, with acts of meaning attribution. When I use the concepts *Erleben* or "lived experience," in contrast, I mean them in the strict sense of the phenomenological tradition, namely, as a being focused upon, as a thematizing of, certain objects of lived experience (objects that offer specific degrees of intensity under our own cultural conditions—whenever we call them "aesthetic"). Lived experience or *Erleben* presupposes that purely physical perception (*Wahrnehmung*) has already taken place, on the one hand, and that it will be followed by experience (*Erfahrung*) as the result of acts of world interpretation, on the other.

Now, if what fascinates us in moments of aesthetic experience,⁸ if what attracts us without being accompanied by a clear awareness of the reasons for this attraction, is always something that our everyday worlds are not capable of offering us; and if we further presuppose that our everyday worlds are historically and culturally specific, then it follows that the objects of aesthetic experience, too, must be culturally specific. Regarding the other side of the situation whose structures I try to describe, it is not clear to me whether, for the readers, spectators, and listeners who are attracted by those historically specific objects of aesthetic experience, we have to presuppose a corresponding historicity in their forms of aesthetic experience. But I do not believe that it is absolutely necessary to resolve this very large question as long as we are dealing with aesthetic experience in the context of trying

to imagine future intellectual practices for the humanities and arts. For it is my impression that if those forms of reaction and of reception undergo profound changes at all, the pace of such transformations must be much slower than the pace at which the objects of aesthetic experience are changing. What I have said so far implies, in addition, that we shall not—and perhaps should not—limit our analysis of aesthetic experience to the side of the recipient and to the mental (and perhaps also physical) investments that he (or she) may make. For it appears that these investments and their yield will depend, at least partly, on the objects of fascination by which they are first activated and evoked. This is one of the reasons why it matters, for a general description of aesthetic experience, to deal with these objects—although, perhaps, the comparatively fast pace of their historical transformation makes them resistant to integration into any general theory.



If aesthetic experience is always evoked by and if it always refers to moments of intensity that cannot be part of the respective everyday worlds in which it takes place, then it follows that aesthetic experience will be necessarily located at a certain distance from these everyday worlds. This very obvious conclusion brings us to a *third* layer in the analysis of aesthetic experience, namely, to the *situational framework within which it typically occurs*. As a central feature of this situational framework, the distance between aesthetic experience and everyday worlds is one possible reference for the explanation of the double isolation inherent in all moments of aesthetic intensity, and this is the double isolation that Karl Heinz Bohrer has so impressively described through the concepts of "suddenness" and "farewell." There is,

on the one hand, no systematic, no pedagogically guaranteed way of leading students (or other victims of good pedagogical intentions) "toward" aesthetic experience; on the other hand, there is no predictable, obvious or typical yield that aesthetic experience can add to our lives in the everyday worlds. For the general description of this situational condition, I want to use the concept of "insularity" that Mikhail Bakhtin has developed in his analysis of the culture of carnival. For "insularity" seems to carry less historically specific connotations than the concept of "aesthetic autonomy"—in which the distance from the everyday is already interpreted as a gain of subjective independence. I therefore propose to reserve the name "aesthetic autonomy" for the specific forms that the general structural condition of "insularity" developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This, of course, assumes that the insularity of aesthetic experience existed long before the eighteenth century and that it also has a place outside Western culture.

The most important consequence that follows from the insularity of aesthetic experience is the incommensurability between aesthetic experience and the institutional propagation of ethical norms—and this seems to be a central issue in Bohrer's reflection on "aesthetic negativity" too.⁹ For ethical norms are—and should be—part of historically specific everyday worlds, whereas we have postulated that aesthetic experience draws its fascination (in the literal sense of the word) from offering moments of intensity that cannot be a part of specific everyday worlds. It therefore makes sense to say that the combination of aesthetics with ethics, that is, the projection of ethical norms on to the potential objects of aesthetic experience, will inevitably lead to the erosion of the potential intensity of the latter. In other words, to adapt aesthetic intensity to ethical requirements means to normalize and ul-

mately dilute it. Whenever conveying or exemplifying an ethical message is supposed to be the main function of a work of art, we need to ask—and indeed the question cannot be eliminated—whether it would not be more efficient to articulate that same ethical message in rather straightforward and explicit concepts and forms.

My fourth reflection refers to a *specific disposition* that I believe goes along, quite regularly, with the structural condition of "insularity." There are two principal ways of entering situations of insularity. The more dramatic one (so to speak) is the modality of being caught by "imposed upon relevance" (*aufgelegte Relevanz*).¹⁰ There, the sudden appearance of certain objects of perception diverts our attention from ongoing everyday routines and indeed temporarily separates us from them. Nature turned into an event often fulfills this function: think of lightning, above all, the first lightning in a thunderstorm, or remember the aggressive sunlight that almost blinds you when, coming from central Europe, you deplane at any Californian destination. Charles Baudelaire's poem "À une passante" is a literary staging of the imposed upon relevance of a female body that catches and almost overwhelms the idle flâneur's attention. Such eventness is certainly different from a classroom situation where we try to facilitate the happening of aesthetic appearance, although fully aware that no pedagogical effort will ever guarantee the coming of the actual experience. But we can point to the presence of certain objects of experience and invite our students to be composed,¹¹ that is, to be both open and concentrated, without letting such concentration harden into the tension of an effort.

The best description that I know for the moment when the

composed disposition that prepares us for the happening of aesthetic experience turns into actual aesthetic experience comes from an athlete. It was the answer that Pablo Morales, an Olympic gold medalist in swimming, gave to the question of why, after having retired from competitive sports, he had come back to qualify for the Olympics again and to win yet another gold medal. Without hesitation, Morales replied that he had made this astonishing effort because he was addicted to the feeling of "being lost in focused intensity."¹² His choice of the word "intensity" confirms that the difference that aesthetic experience makes is, above all, a difference of quantity: extreme challenges produce extreme levels of performance in our minds and our bodies. That Morales wanted to be "lost" corresponds to the structural element of insularity, to the element of distance *vis-à-vis* the everyday world that belongs to the situation of aesthetic experience. Finally, Morales called the intensity that attracts him "focused"—which seems to indicate that the disposition of composed openness anticipates the energizing presence of an object of experience to come. Now, what Morales was talking about was the challenge of participating in athletic competition on a world-class level. Some people might have reservations about subsuming such situations of competition under a concept of "aesthetic experience." But even then the question remains of what general features we can identify in those objects of experience—aesthetic or not—that attract us and push us to the state of being lost in focused intensity.



This precisely is my *fifth* question, and perhaps the most obviously relevant, the decisive question in this context: *what is it that fascinates us in the objects of aesthetic experience?* From our

second reflection, it is clear that whatever features we may identify in the object of aesthetic experience, the status of our answers will be historically specific—even if, on the side of experience, the pace of historical transformation may be extremely slow. In searching for the always more or less hidden desire that could motivate us to transcend our contemporary everyday worlds (which, of course, also means that we are looking for everyday phenomena and conditions with which we are overly saturated), I do not know of a more convincing answer than the one given by Jean-Luc Nancy in his book *The Birth to Presence*, in the opening pages of which he argues that there is nothing we find more tiresome today than the production of yet another nuance of meaning, of just "a little more sense."¹³ What in contrast we miss in a world so saturated with meaning, and what therefore turns into a primary object of (not fully conscious) desire in our culture, are—very unsurprisingly by now, in the context of my book, I admit (and I hope)—phenomena and impressions of presence.

Presence and meaning always appear together, however, and are always in tension. There is no way of making them compatible or of bringing them together in one "well-balanced" phenomenal structure. I do not want to go into a comparison and detailed discussion of different philosophical definitions of "meaning" and/or "sense" (there always seem to be too many of them anyway)—but I understand that what makes meaning, that is, the awareness of a choice that has taken place (or the awareness of possible alternatives to what has been chosen), is the very dimension of consciousness that is denied by the type of physical presence for which we are longing, or that simply does not come into play. That glaring sunlight or that lightning, when they hit me, are not experienced as "the other" of a less

luminous day or of thunder. Typologically speaking, the dimension of meaning is dominant in Cartesian worlds, in worlds for which consciousness (the awareness of alternatives) constitutes the core of human self-reference. And are we not precisely longing for presence, is our desire for tangibility not so intense—because our own everyday environment is so almost insuperably consciousness-centered? Rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin.

Now Jean-Luc Nancy does not only (and simply) point to this very layer of a desire for presence that reacts to specific conditions in our contemporary culture. He also observes—and this indeed is why he emphasizes the double movement of a “birth to presence” and a “vanishing of presence”—that those presence effects that we can live are always already permeated with absence. From an only slightly different conceptual angle, we could rephrase Nancy’s point by saying that, for us, presence phenomena cannot help being inevitably ephemeral, cannot help being what I call “effects of” presence—because we can only encounter them within a culture that is predominantly a meaning culture. For us, presence phenomena always come as “presence effects” because they are necessarily surrounded by, wrapped into, and perhaps even mediated by clouds and cushions of meaning. It is extremely difficult—if not impossible—for us *not* to “read,” not to try and attribute meaning to that lightning or to that glaring California sunlight. This may well have been the reason why Heidegger became so obsessed with (and so conceptually entangled in) the duplicity of and the relationship between “earth” and “world” in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art.” My own (modest) reaction to these observations, my answer to the

question regarding the specific features that mark the objects of aesthetic experience is, then, to say that objects of aesthetic experience (and here it becomes important, once again, to insist that I am speaking of “lived experience,” of *Erleben*) are characterized by an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects. While it may be true, in principle, that all of our (human) relationships to the things of the world must be both meaning- and presence-based relations, I still claim that, under contemporary cultural conditions, we need a specific framework (namely, the situation of “insularity” and the disposition of “focused intention”) in order to really experience (*erleben*) the productive tension, the oscillation between meaning and presence—instead of just bracketing the presence side, as we seem to do, quite automatically, in our so very Cartesian everyday lives. I think (and I hope, of course) that my thesis about the oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects is close to what Hans-Georg Gadamer meant when he emphasized that, in addition to their apophantic dimension, that is, in addition to the dimension that can and must be redeemed through interpretation, poems have a “volume”—a dimension, that is, that demands our voice, that needs to be “sung.”¹⁴ I also suppose (and again hope) that my conclusion converges with Niklas Luhmann’s thesis according to which the “art system” is the only social system in which perception (in the phenomenological meaning of a human relationship to the world mediated by the senses) is not only a precondition of system-intrinsic communication but also, together with meaning, part of what this communication carries.¹⁵

What Luhmann highlights as a specific feature of the art system is a simultaneity of meaning and perception, of meaning effects and presence effects—and if this is not too much of a subject-centered perspective to be applied to Luhmann’s philosophy,

I would venture to say that what he found to be specific to the art system may well be the possibility to experience (*erleben*) meaning effects and presence effects in simultaneity. Whenever it presents itself to us, we may live this simultaneity as a tension or as an oscillation. Essential is the point that, within this specific constellation, meaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and that the—unbracketed—physical presence of things (of a text, of a voice, of a canvas with colors, of a play performed by a team) will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension. Nor is the relation between presence effects and meaning effects a relation of complementarity, in which a function assigned to each side in relation to the other would give the co-presence of the two sides the stability of a structural pattern. Rather, we can say that the tension/oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects endows the object of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest.

There is a rule, a prescription, a convention in Argentinian culture that very beautifully illustrates why I am emphasizing so much this noncomplementarity in the relationship between presence effects and meaning effects.¹⁶ In Argentina, you are not supposed to dance a tango that has lyrics—although the often striking literary quality of tango lyrics has long constituted an object of legitimate cultural pride. The rationality behind this convention seems to be that, within a nonbalanced situation of simultaneity between meaning effects and presence effects, paying attention to the lyrics of a tango would make it very difficult to follow the rhythm of the music with one's body; and such divided attention would probably make it next to impossible that one let go, that one—quite literally—"let fall" one's body into the rhythm of this music, which is certainly necessary for who-

ever wants to execute the very complex steps of the tango, that is, the forms of a dance whose female and male choreographies are never coordinated before the actual performance begins. In other words—and this is an exact example of what I mean when I speak of a "tension" or an "oscillation" between presence effects and meaning effects: whoever tries to capture the semantic complexity that makes tango lyrics so melancholic, will deprive herself of the full pleasure that may come from a fusion between the tango movement and her body. And as I have no specific interest in arguing for a dominance of presence effects over meaning effects, it may be good to emphasize that the opposite is also true: while they are dancing, even the most perfect tango performers cannot fully grasp the semantic complexity of tango lyrics.

In saying that every human contact with the things of the world contains both a meaning- and a presence-component, and that the situation of aesthetic experience is specific inasmuch as it allows us to live both these components in their tension, I do not mean to imply that the relative weight of these two components will always be equal. On the contrary, I assume that there are always specific distributions between the meaning-component and the presence-component—which depend on the materiality (i.e., on the mediatic modality) of each object of aesthetic experience. For example, the meaning-dimension will always be dominant when we are reading a text—but literary texts have ways of also bringing the presence-dimension of the typography, of the rhythm of language, and even of the smell of paper into play. Conversely, I believe that the presence dimension will always dominate when we are listening to music—and at the same time it is true that certain musical structures can evoke certain semantic connotations. But however minimal the participation

of one or the other dimension may become under specific mediatic conditions, I think that aesthetic experience—at least in our culture—will always confront us with the tension, or oscillation, between presence and meaning. This is the reason why an exclusively semiotic (in my terminology, exclusively metaphysical) concept of the sign cannot do justice to aesthetic experience. We need, on the one hand, a semiotic sign-concept to describe and to analyze its meaning-dimension. But, on the other hand, we also need a different sign-concept—the Aristotelian coupling of “substance” and “form,” for example—for the presence-dimension in aesthetic experience. And if it is true, as I have argued, that the two dimensions will never grow into a stable structure of complementarity, then we must understand that it is not only unnecessary but indeed analytically counterproductive to try and develop a combination, a complex metaconcept fusing the semiotic and nonsemiotic definitions of the sign.

One might object that this juxtaposition of two types of sign-concepts that will not be brought together in a semantic structure of higher complexity is a symptom of failure; more precisely, one could say that it proves that we have not yet really overcome the ontological duplicity characteristic of metaphysics. From a certain perspective, from the perspective of a truly new epistemology, for which we may long, I have no major objection to such an objection. On the other hand, however, my answer to the question of what it is that fascinates us in situations of aesthetic experience was meant to be a historically specific answer. The desire for presence that I have invoked is a reaction to an overly Cartesian, historically specific everyday world that we at least sometimes wish to overcome. It is thus neither surprising nor embarrassing that in this context—that is, in our own historical situation—the conceptual tools with which we try to

analyze the traces of this desire for presence, in their environment charged with meaning, are also partly meaning- and partly presence-oriented.



I shall now concentrate, as a *sixth* step of my argument, on the specific mode in which the oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects presents itself to us in situations of aesthetic experience. *Epiphany* is the notion that I want to use and unfold in this context.¹⁷ By “epiphany,” I am not referring again to the simultaneity, tension, and oscillation between meaning and presence but, above all, to the feeling, mentioned and theorized by Jean-Luc Nancy, that we cannot hold on to those presence effects, that they—and with them the simultaneity between presence and meaning—are ephemeral. More precisely, I want to comment, under the heading of “epiphany,” on three features that shape the way in which the tension between presence and meaning presents itself to us: on the impression that the tension between presence and meaning, when it occurs, comes out of nothing; on the emergence of this tension as having a spatial articulation; on the possibility of describing its temporality as an “event.”

If we assume (as indeed I have) that there is no aesthetic experience without a presence effect, and no presence effect without substance in play; if we further assume that a substance in order to be perceived needs a form; and if we finally assume (as I also have in the previous reflection) that the presence-component in the tension or oscillation that constitutes aesthetic experience can never be held stable, then it follows that whenever an object of aesthetic experience emerges and momentarily produces in us that feeling of intensity, it seems to come out of nothing. For no

such substance and form were present to us before. With certain ontological implications that I find fascinating but that one does not necessarily have to accept in order to agree with his description, Heidegger makes exactly this point: "*Art then is the becoming and happening of truth.* Does truth, then, arise out of nothing? It does indeed if by nothing is meant the mere not of that which is, and if we here think of that which is as an object present in the ordinary way."¹⁸

As that which seems to emerge out of nothing has a substance and a form, it is unavoidable for its epiphany to require a spatial dimension (or at least an impression thereof). This is another motif in Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art," mainly developed in relation to the concept "earth" and in the famous passage about the Greek temple: "The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and come to appear as what they are. The Greeks called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things *phusis*. It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*."¹⁹ Within Western culture, we find a particular sense of this spatial dimension of epiphany in Calderón's drama, specifically in the genre of the *auto sacramental* whose performance was reserved to the day of Corpus Christi, the Church holiday that celebrates the Eucharist. Calderón's scenographic instructions abound with dispositions for material forms to "emerge," to "rise," or to "vanish," and for bodies to "come close" to the spectators and then to "recede." Likewise, in No and Kabuki, the traditional staging forms of Japanese theater, the spatial dimension of epiphany seems to be

the central element of the performance. All actors come to the stage across a bridge that cuts through the audience, and as a complicated choreography of steps back and forth, this coming to the stage often occupies more time (and more attention among the spectators) than the actors' actual play on the stage.

Finally, there are three aspects that give the epiphany-component within aesthetic experience the status of an event. In the first place (and I have already mentioned this condition earlier on), we never know whether or when such an epiphany will occur. Secondly, if it occurs, we do not know what form it will take and how intense it will be: there are no two bolts of lightning, indeed, that have the same form and no two orchestra performances that will interpret the same score in exactly the same way. Finally (and above all), epiphany within aesthetic experience is an event because it undoes itself while it emerges. This is obvious, up to the point of being banal, for lightning or for music, but I think it also holds true for our reading of literature and even for our reactions to a painting. No single meaning structure and no single impression of a rhythm pattern, for example, is ever present for more than a moment in the actual reading or listening process; and I think that, similarly, the temporality under which a painting can really "hit" us, the temporality in which we feel, for example, that it comes toward us, will always be the temporality of a moment. There is perhaps no other phenomenon that illustrates this eventness of aesthetic epiphany better than beautiful play in a team sport.²⁰ A beautiful play in American football and baseball, in soccer and hockey, that one element on whose fascination all expert fans can agree, independently of the victory or defeat of the team for which they are rooting, is the epiphany of a complex and embodied form. As an epiphany, a beautiful play is always an event: for we can never

predict whether or when it will emerge; if it emerges, we do not know what it will look like (even if, retrospectively, we are able to discover similarities with beautiful plays that we have seen before); and it undoes itself, quite literally, as it is emerging. No single photograph could ever capture a beautiful play.



For some readers at least, my *seventh* question will follow quite naturally, after the brief reference to team sports. It is the question of whether aesthetic epiphany, the way I have now tried to describe it, necessarily involves *an element of violence*. For other readers, at least for those who do not watch sports, I should explain this question by specifying what exactly I mean by "violence." My question presupposes two presence-based definitions of "power" and of "violence" that I launched in the last part of the previous chapter. I had proposed to define "power" as the potential of occupying or of blocking spaces with bodies, and "violence" as the actualization of power, that is, power as performance or as event. Referring back to our discussion of the epiphanic character of aesthetic experience, and according to the observation that epiphany always implies the emergence of a substance and, more specifically, the emergence of a substance that seems to come out of nothing, we may indeed postulate that there can be no epiphany and, as a consequence, no genuinely aesthetic experience without a moment of violence—because there is no aesthetic experience without epiphany, that is, without the event of substance occupying space.

But will this conclusion not inevitably provoke the politically correct objection that by such an "aestheticization of violence," we are contributing to its possible legitimization? Can aesthetics and violence go together at all? The first, obvious answer to such

a critique would be that there is a difference between labeling an act of violence as "beautiful" (this might well be a way of "aestheticizing" violence) and postulating that violence is one of the components of aesthetic experience. I am not simply saying that "violence is beautiful" (it can be beautiful, but it is not beautiful in principle), and I exclude any necessary convergence between aesthetic experience and ethical norms. Subsuming certain phenomena under the heading of "aesthetic experience" will therefore not interfere with any negative ethical judgment on their behalf. Seen from this perspective, then, my main response to the objection that I might be promoting the "aestheticization of violence" is that, by insisting on a definition of aesthetics that excludes violence, we would not only eliminate warfare, the destruction of buildings, and traffic accidents but also phenomena such as American football, boxing, or the ritual of bullfighting. Allowing the association of aesthetic experience with violence, in contrast, helps us understand why certain phenomena and events turn out to be so irresistibly fascinating for us—although we know that, at least in some of these cases, such "beauty" accompanies the destruction of lives.

Even in those forms of aesthetic experience, however, where—from a strictly physical point of view—the effect of violence is but an illusion because there is neither substance nor three-dimensional space in play (for example, when we get addicted to the "rhythm" of a prose text that we read silently,²¹ or when painting "catches" our attention), we know that their effect on us can still be "violent," almost in the sense of our initial definition, that is, in the sense of occupying and thus blocking our bodies. It is surely possible to develop an addition to a certain type of text (not only for its semantic layers) and to suffer from it; and there are certain pictures that some of us need to see over

and again—however difficult and expensive this may turn out to be. After all, aesthetic experience has long been associated with welcoming the risk of losing control over oneself—at least temporarily.



My *eighth* question has everything to do with this feeling of losing control. If there is nothing edifying in aesthetic experience, nothing positive to be learnt, *what is the effect of getting lost* in the fascination that the oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects can produce? Once we understand our desire for presence as a reaction to an everyday environment that has become so overtly Cartesian during the past centuries, it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and the bodily dimension of our existence; it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world, in the sense of being part of the physical world of things. But we should immediately add that this feeling, at least in our culture, will never have the status of a permanent conquest. Therefore, it may be more adequate to formulate, conversely, that aesthetic experience can prevent us from completely losing a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension in our lives.²² Using a Heideggerian intuition once again, we can establish a categorical difference between this recuperated dimension of self-reference, the self-reference of being a part of the world of things, and that other human self-reference that has been dominant in modern Western culture, above all, in modern science: the latter is the self-image of a spectator standing in front of a world that presents itself as a picture.²³

Some of Federico García Lorca's poems give their readers an impression of where the opposite self-reference, that of being

part of the world of things, may end up taking us.²⁴ In "Muerte" from *Poeta en Nueva York*, for example, Lorca makes fun of all the humans (and even of all the animals) whom he sees trying so ambitiously to be something different from what they are. Only the plaster arch, he writes at the end, is what it is—and somehow happily so: "But the plaster arch, / how vast, how invisible, how minute, / without even trying!" The existentialist thought that Lorca's poem suggests is obvious: only our death, only the moment in which we become pure matter (and nothing but matter), will truly fulfill our integration into the world of things. Only our death will give us that perfect quiet for which—sometimes in our lives at least—we long.

What this answer to the question about the effect of aesthetic experience is pointing to can also be described as an extreme degree of serenity, composure, or *Gelassenheit*. *Gelassenheit* figures as both part of the disposition with which we should open ourselves to aesthetic experience and as the existential stare to which aesthetic experience can take us. In order to avoid any possible confusion of this existential state with certain hypercomplex forms of self-reflexivity (of which we intellectuals are only too fond), I have come to describe, with a deliberately colloquial formula, that specific serenity as the feeling of *being in sync with the things of the world*. What I mean by "being in sync with the things of the world" is not synonymous with a world picture of perfect (or perhaps even eternal) harmony.²⁵ Rather than corresponding to an ideal cosmology, the expression "in sync" refers to a situation that is very specific to our contemporary culture, that is, to the impression of having just recuperated a glimpse of what "the things of the world" might be. This may be exactly what, from an existential point of view, the self-unconcealment of Being is all about—self-unconcealment in general and not

only self-unconcealment as aesthetic epiphany. Experiencing (in the sense of *Erfahren*, that is, more than *Wahrnehmen* and less than *Erfahren*), experiencing the things of the world in their pre-conceptual thingness will reactivate a feeling for the bodily and for the spatial dimension of our existence.

Coming back to some of the classical concepts of philosophical aesthetics, we can say that unconcealment of Being may happen both in the modality of the beautiful and in the modality of the sublime; we may say that it can transport us into a state of Apollonian clarity or of Dionysian rapture. Independently of these (otherwise crucial) distinctions, I believe that we are always—deliberately or unknowingly—referring to epiphanies when, in our specific cultural situation, we use the word “aesthetic.” We are referring, with this word, to epiphanies that, for moments at least, make us dream, make us long for, and make us perhaps even remember, with our bodies as well as with our minds, how good it would be to live in sync with the things of the world.

3

Now while humanists during the past two centuries have been mostly vague—and often even proud of their vagueness—whenever the question of what things of beauty might be good for came up, the practical usefulness of the study of the past has never been seriously doubted. The very concept of “history” is indeed inseparable from the promise that, once studied, the past can be “a teacher of life” (*historia magistra vitae*).²⁶ It is easy to show, however, how the price attached to this expectation has been growing so dramatically over the past few centuries of Western culture that, today, there is nothing more left of this expectation than some stale Sunday morning rhetoric. In the

Middle Ages, every action and every event from the past were considered to be potential orientations for the shaping of the present and the future—because the human world was not yet believed to be in permanent transformation. Therefore, every narrative about the past that people believed to be true could be turned into an “example.” Renaissance culture, in contrast, would only take into account, very schematically speaking, “half of its past” for the orientation of the present. The humanists of the early modern centuries were hoping to find “examples” of relevance for their own lives in Greek and Roman antiquity—but not in the immediately preceding medieval world (which they were the first to describe as “dark”). From the late seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, a time construction emerged that we have since come to call “historical time,” and that established itself so firmly that, until recently, we tended to take it as the only possible chronotope. Historical time set the bar for “learning from the past” dramatically higher. For it implied the need to identify the “laws” that had informed historical change in the past and to extrapolate their movement into the future if one wanted to anticipate the developments to come. But even this very costly (and, as Marxists used to say, very “scientific”) way of learning from the past did not survive our present-day skepticism. The latest development is not that we reject any prognostication of the future as being absolutely impossible. Rather, we anticipate it to be so complicated (and so costly) that we prefer to perform calculations of risk,²⁷ that is, we prefer to figure out how expensive it would be for us if certain developments that we expect to happen do not come about. Once we know the price, we can buy insurance—instead of trying to gain ultimate certainty about what the future will bring.

Another way of viewing the same development is to reevaluate

the good old debate about whether our present is (still) "modern" or (already) "postmodern," which generated so much intellectual excitement only ten years ago. Today, we begin to understand that those discussions were a symptom of the chronotope of "historical time" coming to an end and that, regardless of whether we want to call our present "modern" or "postmodern," this process of exiting historical time now seems to lie behind us.²⁸ "Historical time" (and our concept of "history," which refers to a specific historical culture whose historicity we have only recently come to recognize) was based on the assumption of an asymmetry between the past as a "space of experience" and the future as an open "horizon of expectations." Historical time implied the assumption that things would not resist change in time but that, while the present and the future could not help being different from the past and while we were therefore constantly leaving the past behind ourselves, there was a way to "learn from the past," precisely by trying to identify "laws" of historical change and by developing, based on such "laws," possible scenarios for the future. Between that past and this future, the present appeared to be merely a short moment of transition in which humans shaped their subjectivity and used their agency by imagining and choosing among possible futures and by trying to contribute to the realization of the specific future that they had chosen. What we seem to have lost, only recently, is the self-attribution of that active movement through time ("leaving the past behind" and "entering the future") that had permeated historical time. Replacing prognostication through risk calculation, for example, means that we now experience the future as inaccessible—at least for all practical purposes. At the same time, we are more eager than ever (and better prepared, on the level of knowledge and even technology) to fill the present with artifacts from

the past and reproductions based on such artifacts. Proofs are the subsequent waves of "nostalgia cultures," the unprecedented popularity and the new exhibiting styles of our museums, and the debates about the inability of societies to exist without historical memory that are so particularly intense in Europe these days. Between the "new" inaccessible future and the new past that we no longer (want to) leave behind ourselves, we have begun to feel that the present is becoming broader and that the rhythm of time is slowing down.

But what has this development (provided that mine is a plausible account of our contemporary historical culture), what has all of this to do with the concept of "presence" and its possible impact on our ways of teaching history and doing historical research? One possible answer is based on the impression that our eagerness to fill up the ever-broadening present with artifacts from the past has little, if anything to do with the traditional project of history as an academic discipline, with the project of interpreting (that is, reconceptualizing) our knowledge about the past, or with the goal of "learning from history." On the contrary, the way in which some museums organize their exhibits calls to mind the *son et lumière* shows that some historical sites in France began to offer in the late 1950s, as well as the appeal of historical novels like *The Name of the Rose* and films like *Radio Days*, *Amadeus*, or *Titanic*. All of this points to a desire for presentification—and I have certainly no objections. Short of always being able to touch, hear, and smell the past, we certainly cherish the illusion of such perceptions. This desire for presentification can be associated with the structure of a broad present where we don't feel like "leaving behind" the past anymore and where the future is blocked. Such a broad present would end up accumulating different past worlds and their artifacts in a sphere of si-

multaneity. Another, supplementary (rather than alternative) possibility to explain our changing relationship with the past would suggest that a new historical culture—corresponding to this new chronotope—has not yet emerged, and that a very basic (and perhaps metahistorical) level of our fascination with the past is becoming visible.²⁹

If we want to better understand this basic (in the German tradition one would say “anthropological”) fascination with the past, a good starting point is the phenomenological concept of the “life world.” Under “life world,” Edmund Husserl proposes to subsume the totality of those intellectual and mental operations that we expect all humans of all cultures and times to (be able to) perform. Historically specific “everyday worlds” can then be analyzed as multiple selections from the range of possibilities offered by the life world. One of the more astonishing features of the life world—at least from our angle of argumentation—is the general human capacity to imagine mental and intellectual operations that the human mind is *not* able to perform. In other words, it belongs to the content of our life world to imagine—and to desire—abilities that lie beyond the borders of the life world. The predicates that different cultures have given to their different gods—like omniscience, eternity, omnipresence, or almightiness—are a reservoir of such imaginations. If, based on this reflection, we claim that what we imagine to lie beyond the borders of the life world will constitute—metahistorically stable—objects of desire, we can further speculate that different desires to cross the borders of the life world in different directions may generate different basic streams of energy that will carry all historically specific cultures. The double temporal limitation of human life by birth and death, for example, will produce a desire to cross these two borders of the life world, and one half of this

desire will be, more specifically, the wish to cross the border of our birth—toward the past. As an underlying force this very desire will motivate all historically specific historical cultures. The object of this desire lying under all historically specific historical cultures would be the *presentification* of the past, that is, the possibility of “speaking” to the dead or “touching” the objects of their worlds.

To say, as I have done, that such “deep” life world layers of human culture may become visible in historical moments that lie between historically specific everyday cultures—for example, between the demise of “historical time” and the emergence of a historical culture that would correspond to our broad present—by no means implies that the techniques that we develop in satisfying those basic desires—one of them being the desire for presentification—must be rudimentary. There is no reason why historical novels or historical films that provide effects of presentification should be less complex than novels and films that try to demonstrate that we can learn from history. But in which general ways are the techniques that we use in presentifying the past different, say, from the techniques of learning from the past? To judge from contemporary fascinations and practices, the techniques of presentifying the past quite obviously tend to emphasize the dimension of space—for it is only in their spatial display that we are able to have the illusion of touching objects that we associate with the past. This may explain the growing popularity of the institution of the museum and, also, a renewed interest in and reorientation of the historical subdiscipline of archaeology.³⁰ At the same time, the trend toward spatialization makes us more aware of the limitations of historiography as a textual medium in the business of making the past present.³¹ Texts and concepts certainly are the most appropriate medium for an interpretative

approach to the past. But even the most basic intellectual moves of historicization seem gradually to change as soon as they begin to cater to the desire to make the past present, and such changes oblige us to revisit some basic requirements and presuppositions of the historian's profession.

The key sensitivity expected from a historian is the double capacity of, firstly, discovering objects in his own everyday worlds that have no obvious practical use in this context (that are not "ready to hand," as Heidegger would have said) and, secondly, the willingness to refrain either from finding a practical function for them or from withdrawing one's attention (leaving them as "present to hand").²³ Only this double operation of discovering objects without any practical use and refraining from finding such a use for them will produce "historical objects" and give them a specific aura—at least in the eyes of the historian and of the historically sensitive beholder. But instead of asking, at this point, what exactly such objects turned into historical objects may "mean"—which is the adequate question if we want to view them as symptoms of a past that will ultimately enable us to better understand our present—instead of asking for a meaning, presentification pushes us in a different direction. The desire for presence makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects (rather than ask what those objects "mean") if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds. Once we feel how this play of our historical imagination can be appealing and contagious, once we lure other persons into the same intellectual process, we have produced the very situation to which we are referring when we say that somebody is capable of "conjuring up the past." This is the first step toward "dealing with the things of the past," and I am quoting from the preface to the thirteenth-century Castilian

Cronica general here, "as if they were in our own world." One benefit of the capacity to let ourselves, quite literally, be attracted by the past under these conditions may lie in the circumstance that, by crossing the life world threshold of our birth, we are turning away from the ever-threatening and ever-present future of our own deaths. But for our new relationship to the past, it is even more central than turning away from death that, on a general and on an institutional level, we reject the question of what benefits we might expect from engaging with the past. A good reason for leaving this question open, for letting the conjuring up of the past just happen, is that any possible answer to the question of practical benefits will limit the range of modalities through which we can indulge in the past—and simply enjoy our contact with it.

4

And what consequences, finally, could such a concentration on historical presentification and on aesthetic epiphanies have for our teaching, that is, for university teaching in the cluster of disciplines that the Anglo-American academic tradition calls the "humanities and arts"? Let me insist that the problem is not, at least not primarily, how we can accommodate that desire for presence in the classroom. What I want to discuss is whether those modified conceptions of "aesthetics" and "history," as the two main frameworks within which I propose to approach cultural objects, might—and should—have an impact on the ways we think about our teaching and go about fulfilling our pedagogical commitments. Between these two frameworks I can see a double convergence that promises to have a certain relevance for questions of pedagogy. The first such convergence is the affirmation of a marked distance from our everyday worlds, which

both the happening of epiphanies and the act of historicization seem to imply and to require. Aesthetic experience imposes upon us both a situational and a temporal insularity, whereas historicization presupposes a capacity to discover and a willingness to acknowledge the dysfunctional status that certain objects of our attention have in their environments. The second convergence that I want to mention here is a double hesitation *vis-à-vis* our habit of interpreting, that is, of attributing meaning to, the objects of our attention. In the long run, it may be impossible for us to refrain from attributing meaning to an aesthetic epiphany or to a historical object. But in both cases (and for different reasons), I have argued that our desire for presence will be best served if we try to pause for a moment before we begin to make sense—and if we then let ourselves be caught by an oscillation where presence effects permeate the meaning effects.

As both the distance from the everyday world and the moment in which we suspend meaning attribution are conditions that we traditionally associate with aesthetics rather than with historical culture, my insistence on them may produce the impression that I want to go in the direction of an “aestheticization” of history and perhaps even of our teaching practice. But while I insist that there is nothing necessarily wrong with aestheticization, I have, on the other hand, no vested interest in it (at least not in the context of this argument).³³ What I find much more interesting is the possibility of associating the distance from everyday situations that is implied in both our conceptions of aesthetics and history with the classic—and mostly self-critical—self-reference to the academic world as an “ivory tower.” For if aesthetic experience and historicization impose the distance of the ivory tower upon us, they also oblige us to acknowledge that this very distance opens up the possibility of riskful thinking,³⁴

that is, the possibility of thinking what cannot be thought in our everyday worlds. What cannot be thought in the everyday world are, firstly, contents, hypotheses, and options whose appearance in the everyday worlds would imply the risk of producing undesirable consequences. For example, the question must be allowed in an academic discussion of whether “Martin Heidegger could have become such an important philosopher without having been so close to National Socialist ideology”³⁵—but I definitely think that one should not launch this discussion on a junior high school level and probably not even in the cultural sections of the daily press. The other type of problems that can normally not be dealt with in our everyday worlds are those whose discussion promises neither solutions nor any practical yield. To concentrate on them is often considered to be too time-consuming (and therefore too costly).

If adequately understood, the ivory tower-status of the academic world enables us to dwell precisely on such topics, problems, and questions, without cutting off any possible feedback into society. For, to stay with the metaphor for a moment, this tower is remote from society and very different from it, but it certainly has windows and doors. That we can analyze riskful topics thanks to the tower’s distance from society, and that we can work them through under conditions of low time pressure, means that, rather than being obliged to reduce their complexity (as we invariably have to do in everyday situations because we have to come up with quick solutions), we may expose ourselves to their complexity and even increase it. This is where “lived experience,” the second of the two convergences between our conception of aesthetics and our conception of history comes in. If, however, confrontation with complexity is that which makes academic teaching specific, then—instead of obsessively attrib-

uting meaning and thereby providing solutions—we should seek to practice our teaching, as much as possible, in the modality of lived experience (*Erleben*).³⁶ For good academic teaching is a staging of complexity; it is drawing our students' attention toward complex phenomena and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems and how, ultimately, they must deal with them. In other words, good academic teaching should be *deictic*, rather than interpretative and solution-oriented. But how will such a deictic teaching style not end in silence and, worse perhaps, in a quasi-mystical contemplation and admiration of so much complexity? For an analogy that helps to clarify this point, we can turn to the—emphatic—new concept of “reading” that probably comes from the specific experience that readers have had with certain types of modern literature. Such “reading,” both reading books and reading the world, is not simply meaning attribution. It is the never-ending movement, the both joyful and painful movement between losing and regaining intellectual control and orientation—that can occur in the confrontation with (almost) any cultural object as long as it occurs under conditions of low time pressure, that is, with no “solution” or “answer” immediately expected. This is exactly the movement that we are referring to when we say that a class or a seminar “broadened” our minds.

Almost inadvertently (but by no means randomly), in this discussion of the consequences that a presence-oriented conception of aesthetics and of history may imply for our teaching, we have arrived in the intellectual vicinity of some of the classical authors on the subject of academic teaching and the academic institution. Niklas Luhmann, for example, used to characterize the university as a “secondary social system,” that is, as a social system whose function should be the production of complex-

ity—in distinction from and in reaction to most other social systems, which Luhmann saw as being oriented toward the reduction of the complexity offered by their environments.³⁷ Thanks to the complexity generated by the combination of academic research and teaching, societies dispose of alternatives to what they are at each given moment and can thus survive the challenges of transition. Max Weber, in his famous 1917 essay *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, had emphasized that academic research and teaching should primarily focus on whatever “unpleasant facts,” counterintuitive insights, and improbable findings it could get a hold of. The courage that it takes to expose oneself to unresolved problems and unpredictable intellectual trajectories was, for Weber, what distinguished the true “aristocracy of the mind.”³⁸ Both Weber and Luhmann thus espoused a tradition that had been founded as early as in 1810 by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who argued that academic teaching should above all be characterized by the “enthusiasm produced by the free interplay of professors and students” concentrating on “unresolved problems,” in their different intellectual styles, and only secondarily dedicated to the task of conveying “stable and unquestionable knowledge.”³⁹

This last distinction has become crucial for the future of the university in an age in which, on the one hand, the cost of higher education in its traditional form is growing almost exponentially while, on the other hand, new technological possibilities of transmitting knowledge through electronic media have become very sophisticated and surprisingly cheap. With the obvious and necessary question of whether, under such conditions, at least some of the traditional face-to-face situations of teaching and learning will (and should) survive at all, the concept of presence ends up acquiring an immediate importance for the discus-

sion about the future of academic teaching. Of course, most of us are truly romantic about teaching—and how could anybody be strictly against teaching face-to-face (even if only because its survival offers a better prospect for the future of the university as a workplace)? Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that most of the classes strictly limited to the transmission of standard knowledge will—and should—soon be replaced by a variety of technological devices that do not require the physical co-presence of students and teachers.⁴⁶ Even if we academic romantics are ready to make a realistic concession and give up the purely information-centered sector of academic teaching, we probably have still to admit that it is not completely obvious what really makes bodily co-presence so necessary for other types of teaching. Given the economic pressures, it is thus difficult to hold the line of our argument here. Going back to Humboldt's view of the sociability specific to academic institutions ("the enthusiasm produced by the free interplay of professors and students") and to the concept of "risky thinking" may help us to sharpen our arguments in favor of real classroom presence. For the staging of risky thinking (i.e., walking our students "towards the doors of complexity without walking through these doors with them," as the German classicist Karl Reinhardt once remarked)⁴⁷ should not just leave students and teachers in an attitude of silent awe. There should be (and there normally will be) different reactions from the students' different individual encounters with complexity, and if the initial complexity that they meet is not yet tamed, interpreted, or reduced, these reactions will have the status of (mini-)events, because they will be truly unpredictable—and therefore decisive for the further development of the interaction between teacher and students. At this point in a class, the main task of the teacher lies in keeping those reactions afloat

and in channeling them into a conversation among the students, and with the students that goes further than any individual reaction to complexity could have possibly gone. At the same time, the other key task of the teacher must be to keep these debates close to their objects of reference (mostly texts, of course), not to let them take off into boundless and uncoordinated speculation. However difficult it may be to describe this process with some precision, everybody who has ever attended a good university will know what I am talking about and what kind of pedagogical gift I am alluding to. It is the gift, above all, of remaining alert and absolutely open to the others, without falling into the trap of becoming absorbed by their intuitions and positions, and it is the gift of intellectual good taste that stays focused on those very topics that do not allow for quick and easy solutions. Such openness and such focus define the teacher as a catalyst of intellectual events—and I associate the function of the catalyst with the condition of physical presence. It is not completely unthinkable, of course, that such an event-driven, open-ended conversation, "emerging toward an unknown goal," might be organized in an electronic medium—for example, in a chat room (although chat rooms have not yet achieved simultaneous writing and reading, and their name does not seem to promise much intellectual excitement).⁴⁸ But we know from experience, at least from the experience of contemporary generations of media users, that discussions under these conditions are hardly ever as intense and as productive as even an average conversation will be in real presence.⁴⁹ Why exactly this is so and whether it has to remain like this forever are, of course, questions open to speculation.

Personally and for the time being, I am certainly determined to offer some resistance (in the quiet form of inertia) to the furor of replacing every bit of real-presence interaction that is left with

those deplorably hygienic computer screens. Other than that, it seems almost inevitable (although it somehow feels strange) that I should conclude this chapter by saying that it was perhaps necessary to go through such a relatively complicated development of the concept of "presence" in order to realize that our own teaching profession, very specifically and in not yet completely thought through ways, has always been about real presence. But there is no guarantee that this will continue. The future of presence needs our present commitment.

To Be Quiet for a Moment: About Redemption

I

"I can see how you are fascinated by the concept—but what do you really get out of 'presence'?" a friend asked me when I was on the final stretch of the previous chapter.¹ Struggling with the pages about the possible future of academic teaching, I told him, with the guarded friendliness of a corporate answering machine, that what he was bringing up was exactly one of my big points, that a reflection on presence would show how hopeless it was for the humanities to try and justify their existence by pointing to some "social function" or "political yield." This was not, however, what my friend had wanted to know, as I understood from his reaction, which also showed me that he had not intended his words to be a mildly aggressive rhetorical question. Could it be all about me, specifically and, so to speak, existentially about me, not just about my book and the world? It was, I assume (and fear), about me—about me as my friend's obnoxiously verbal senior colleague who cannot refrain from reading any text he sees (including, for example, do-it-yourself instructions for gadgets that I have no interest in), and it was about me as the unbearable pop psychologist who cannot help interpreting every tiny movement on the faces of the people he is talking to. It was about a fifty-five-year-old professor of literature who would be lonesome

54. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

55. This exactly is the point that I failed to make, many years ago and on behalf of the rhetorical trope of the hyperbole in medieval texts, in my doctoral dissertation, Funktionswandel und Rezeption: Studien zur Hyperbolik in literarischen Texten des romanischen Mittelalters (Munich, 1972).

56. What follows in the final pages of this chapter has previously been formulated in "Four Ways to See (or Bite) a Body in a Text," Internet Diskussionsforum des Romanischen Seminars der CAU Kiel, ed. J. Dünne, A. Arndt, and U. Rathmann, Impulstext Wintersemester 1998/99 (<http://ikarus.pclab-phil.uni-kiel.de/romanisc/IDF-FRAM.htm>).

57. See my "Wie sinnlich kann Geschmack (in der Literatur) sein? Über den historischen Ort von Marcel Prousts *Recherche*," in Volker Kapp, ed., *Marcel Proust: Geschmack und Neigung* (Tübingen, 1989), pp. 97–110, and "Eat Your Fragment?" in Glenn Most, ed., *Collecting Fragments / Fragmente sammeln* (Göttingen, 1997), pp. 315–27.

58. For historical examples of such behavior, see Miguel Tamen's chapter on iconoclasm in id., *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, pp. 28–49.

59. See my "Ausdruck," in Karlheinz Barck, Martin Fontius, Dieter Schlenstedt, Burkhard Steinwachs, and Friedrich Wolfzettel, eds., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 2000), pp. 416–31.

Epiphany/Presentation/Deixis: Futures for the Humanities and Arts

1. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston, 2000), s.v. "futures."

2. See my "The Consequences of an Aesthetics of Reception: A Deferred Overture," an essay first published in German in 1975 and reprinted in translation in Gumbrecht, *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, pp. 14–29.

3. See Karl Heinz Bohrer, "Die Negativität des Poetischen und das

Positive der Institutionen" (Stanford Presidential Lecture, 1998), *Merkur* 98 (1999): 1–14.

4. I am reacting here to a discussion with Ursula Link-Heer, who argues that Heidegger's epistemological interest in what I am referring to as aesthetic experience must lead, of necessity, to an "apotheosis" of literature and art. My double response is that (a) Heidegger never explicitly claimed, to my knowledge, any exclusive epistemological status for the work of art, and that (b), even if he had done so, it should be possible to use some of his concepts without following him in this.

5. With respect to historicization, I refer to my *In 1926*. As regards pedagogy, see my "Live Your Experience and Be Untimely! What 'Classical Philology as a Profession' Could (Have) Become," in Glenn W. Most, ed., *Disciplining Classics / Altertumswissenschaft als Beruf* (Göttingen, 2002), 253–69, a revised version of which appeared as the final chapter of my *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Champaign, Ill., 2003).

6. The title of the course that we ended up teaching (twice) during the fall quarters of the academic years 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 was "Things of Beauty," and the paradigms for aesthetic experience that we dealt with were Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the glass and steel architecture of the Crystal Palace, Garcia Lorca's collection of poems *Poeta en Nueva York*, athletic beauty (exemplified through footage from the 1936 Olympics), and paintings by Jackson Pollock and Edward Hopper.

7. This was the central thesis of Franz Koppes's book *Sprache und Bedürfnis. Zur sprachphilosophischen Grundlage der Geisteswissenschaften* (Stuttgart, 1977). I disagree, however, with Koppes's proposal that "making us aware of situations of collective need" should be considered as the main and genuine function of aesthetic experience (Koppes, by the way, speaks of "Vergegenwärtigung von Bedürfnissituationen," but he does not understand *Vergegenwärtigung* in the sense that I try to give to the word "presentification").

8. From this point on, I shall use the phrase "aesthetic experience"

only in the sense of *ästhetisches Erleben* although—for purely stylistic reasons—I shall mostly skip the word “lived” in “lived experience.”

9. See Bohrer, “Negativität des Poetischen und das Positive der Institutionen.” Bohrer has never completely severed ethical norms from aesthetic experience, however: see his “Das Ethische am Ästhetischen,” *Merkur* 620 (2000): 1149–62.

10. I derive this concept from Alfred Schuetz and Thomas Luckmann, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt* (Neuwied, 1975), pp. 190–93.

11. The allusion to Heidegger’s notion of *Gelassenheit* (“composure,” “serenity”) is deliberate. *Gelassenheit* is mentioned here as an attitude that can facilitate the happening of aesthetic experience as a moment of intensity; I shall return to the concept when I try to describe the possible effects of aesthetic experience on our psyches.

12. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Ted Leland, Rick Schavone, and Jeffrey Schnapp, “The Athlete’s Body Lost and Found,” preface to *The Athlete’s Body*, *Stanford Humanities Review* 6.2 (1998): vii–xii.

13. Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, p. 6.

14. Gadamer, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*.

15. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a/M, 1995), esp. pp. 30f. and 41.

16. See my essay “Die Stimmen von Augeniniens Leichen,” *Merkur* 499 (1990): 715–28.

17. This is one of the aspects where my own reflection on aesthetic experience comes the very closest to Seel’s *Ästhetik des Ersehens*.

18. Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 71 (emphasis in original).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 42 (emphasis in original).

20. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “On the Beauty of Team Sports,” *New Literary History* 30 (Spring 1999): 351–72, and *id.*, “A forma da violência: Em louvor da beleza atlética,” in *Mais!* cultural supplement to *Folha de São Paulo*, March 11, 2001, the basis for a short book on athletic beauty entitled *Lob des Sports* (Frankfurt a/M, forthcoming).

21. Regarding the violent impact that the rhythm in a printed text can have on its readers, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Louis-Perdi-

and Céline und die Frage, ob literarische Prosa gewaltsam sein kann,” in Rolf Gimminger, ed., *Kunst Macht Gewalt: Der ästhetische Ort der Aggressivität* (Munich, 2000), pp. 127–42.

22. Georges Baraillet was addicted to this structure of argumentation. See “L’Apprenti Sorcier,” in Denis Hollier, ed., *Le Collège de sociologie (1937–1979)* (Paris, 1979), pp. 36–59, esp. pp. 40, 59.

23. Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *id.*, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York, 1977), pp. 115–54.

24. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Präsenz. Gelassenheit: Über Federico García Lorca’s ‘Poeta en Nueva York’ und die Schwierigkeit, heute eine Ästhetik zu denken,” *Merkur* 594–95 (1998): 808–25.

25. I am reacting here to a discussion with my colleague Hermann Dösch.

26. Reinhart Koselleck traces the rise and the decline of this promise since the late seventeenth century in “Historia magistra vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte,” in *Vergangene Zukunft zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt a/M, 1979), pp. 38–67.

27. See Niklas Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity* (Stanford, 1998), pp. 44–62.

28. My argumentation here strongly relies on the work of Reinhart Koselleck. See his books in English translation: *Future’s Past* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991) and *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, 2002). For my own attempts to further develop Koselleck’s thought, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Die Gegenwart wird (immer) breiter,” *Merkur* 629–30 (2001): 769–84; “Space Reemerging: Five Short Reflections on the Concepts ‘Postmodernity’ and ‘Globalization,’” in Hermann Herlinghaus, ed., *Postmodernidad y globalización* (Pittsburgh, 2003); and, above all, the chapter “After Learning from History,” in Gumbrecht, *In 1926*.

29. For a more detailed version of the following argument, see “Historical Representation and Life World,” pt. 2 of Gumbrecht, *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, pp. 33–75.

30. See Milke Pearson and Michael Shanks, eds., *Theater/Archeology* (New York, 2001); the concept of "theater" stands for the spatial dimension of relating to the past.
31. In this spirit, my book *In 1926* was meant to be an experiment in the identification of such limits.
32. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Take a Step Back—and Turn Away from Death! On the Moves of Historicization," in Glenn Most, ed., *Historization/Historisierung* (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 365–75.
33. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1961), p. 142, suggests that there is a systematic relationship between aesthetics and the dimension or *Erleben* ("lived experience")—which dimension, in the phenomenological tradition, corresponds to the interval between (physical) perception and experience as meaning attribution.
34. For this concept, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Riskantes Denken. Intellektuelle als Kalysatoren von Komplexität," in Uwe Justus Wenzel, ed., *Der kritische Blick: Intellektuelle Tätigkeiten und Tugenden* (Frankfurt a/M, 2002), pp. 140–47.
35. This was a question asked by Jacques Derrida at a seminar at the University of Siegen (Germany) in 1988.
36. For a more extended discussion of this aspect, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Live Your Experience—and Be Unimely! What 'Classical Philology as a Profession' Could (Have) Become," in Glenn Most, ed., *Disciplining Classics / Altertumswissenschaft als Beruf* (Göttingen, 2002), pp. 253–69. The specific concept of *Erleben* that I try to promote here (in full awareness of a widely shared prejudice against it in contemporary philosophy) is *not* Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of *Erleben*, in the sense of a "retranslation of objectifications of life into that spiritual liveliness from which they emerged." As mentioned earlier, I use *Erleben* to refer to the interval between the physical perception of an object and the (definitive) attribution of a meaning to it; unlike Dilthey, I am not recommending that the reading of a poem, for example, should bring us back to the poet's (lived) experience that first motivated it.

37. See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a/M, 1990).
38. Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (1919; Munich, 1921). See my detailed analysis of Weber's text in "Live Your Experience," pp. 253–60.
39. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin," in id., *Studiendaugabe*, vol. 2, ed. Kurt Müller-Vollmer (Frankfurt a/M, 1971), pp. 133–41.
40. This was also the prediction of the former Stanford President, Gerhard Casper, in "Eine Welt ohne Universitäten?" (Werner Heisenberg Vorlesung, Munich, July 3, 1996), whose line of argumentation I follow in the final section of this chapter.
41. See Gumbrecht, "Live Your Experience," p. 263.
42. I borrow the concept of "emerging toward an unknown goal" from Martin Heidegger.
43. See, for the documentation of an early—and hardly encouraging—experiment of this kind, the electronic conversation among French intellectual luminaries in *Les Immatériaux*.
- To Be Quieter for a Moment:
About Redemption
1. This friend was, again, Joshua Ländy, without whose demanding encouragement I would indeed have abandoned the project of this book. Disappointed readers should therefore turn to him with their complaints.
2. The question of what I really get out of presence obviously became the beginning of this chapter. If one could individually dedicate chapters of books that are already otherwise dedicated in their entirety, I would dedicate this one to Robert Harrison, who at some point was honest enough to tell me that he had hoped that I would write a "more poetic book" than what these pages are now turning into. I fear they will frustrate his expectations. For these pages may only show what a