ONE

Introduction

Knowledge no sooner starts from scratch, by way of a stabilizing objectification, than it will distort the objects. Knowledge as such, even in a form detached from substance, takes part in tradition as unconscious remembrance; there is no question which we might simply ask, without knowing of past things that are preserved in the question and spur it.

THEODOR W. ADORNO,
Negative Dialectics

I

The first modernist work of art is a painting of death: Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat.* So claims one of our foremost historians of modernism. Taking his bait, we could develop a broad and ramifying history of modernism by beginning in 1793 and following the trail of fatalities: Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* and *The Trout;* Édouard Manet's fragment *The Dead Toreador;* Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic;* Pablo Picasso's *Guernica;* Pierre Bonnard's *Nude in Bathtub;* Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Bébé Marie);* Andy Warhol's *Saturday Disaster.* And today, the best and most serious visual artists are married to what life has fled from: Bernd and Hilla Becher, David Hammons, Ilya Kabakov, Gerhard Richter, Robert Ryman, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, and so on. *Sustaining Loss* is an effort to understand why, at this late hour, art should become bound to memorialization.

Precise historical periodization is, of course, a fool's game, so attaching a date to the birth of modernism can be no more than a bald provocation. Indeed, no provocation seems to invite derision more immediately than the identification of modernist art's origin with the advent of death as the subject matter of paint-
ing, since the Christian West is positively saturated with images of the dead Christ. However, for every dead Christ in the history of art there is a Christ resurrected, and for every resurrected Christ there is an assumption of the Virgin. Even when such pendant images are not directly displayed, they are always entailed: the image of the dead Christ is only one joint of the great Christian narrative of death and rebirth, fall and revival, incarnation and transcendence.

Death is not like this in modernist art, where the end of life is not absorbed by the beginning of the afterlife. Death now appears without a narrative of transcendence to reflect additional layers of meaning back on to it from another scene of life. But further, in losing its narrative anchoring, death ceases being mere subject matter for art; the absence of a proper sense of its consequences turns death into a formal problem of the relation between an earthly medium and a nonearthly significance to which that medium can no longer attain. Death does not stay put in the modernist image; it fatefully penetrates the very medium of art, turning that medium into the site of nontranscendence. Whereas the dead Christ was the very image of life eternal, Courbet’s trout is the image of eternal death. And even the works of those modernist artists least likely to have lingered with the dead—Henri Matisse, say, or Agnes Martin—carry with them in their practice the taint of a nonliving past that they do not quite overcome. In modernist art, death does not appear as the prehistory of the significance that will be unveiled in its wake; it simply persists.

Just as artistic modernism is born as a nullification of transcendence, so, too, is modern aesthetics. Periodization in the history of philosophy is just as perilous as in the history of art, but in and after the eighteenth century some novel feature of aesthetic reflection begs for attention that the prior history of philosophy does not prepare us to offer: the effort to provide foundations for the cognitively disreputable judgment of taste. Because a judgment of taste is a judgment, it requires foundations for its claims to extrasubjective validity, but because it is of taste, of the senses, the norms of such a justification are immensely difficult, if not impossible, to specify. In eighteenth-century aesthetics, to put the same point most directly, the apparent differentiation of the careers of cognition and aisthesis, of knowing and feeling, becomes a focal problem. For much of that century, and, indeed, right up to the present, philosophers tried to repair the breach either by making the true object of aesthetic judgment nonsensuous or by inventing a seventh sense with its own proper norms; in either case, the philosophical project aimed to re-equip cognition with the conceptual tools it needed to rein in the scandalous judgment of taste.

Immanuel Kant’s great achievement was to show that this project cannot be brought to a successful conclusion. It is from Kant’s proof that in principle there cannot be laws of taste, and that therefore judgments of taste cannot be warranted by any cognitive practice—including philosophy—that we can date the beginning of modern aesthetics. In other words, our aesthetic situation emerges with the dimming of the prospects for a theoretical understanding of judgments of taste, and of our experiences of taste’s objects (including art), that would permit us to leave behind their noncognitive and irredeemably personal aspects. Further, because after Kant it is unavoidable that we cease regarding aesthetic experience as a narrative node in the story of the transcendence of aisthesis, from that point onward we have also been burdened with the problem of the autonomy of art from other social practices in which it, or at least our understanding of it, might otherwise be firmly and properly embedded. Thus, modern aesthetics and modernist art alike are born of a perception of the finitude of sensuous life. Sustaining Loss is also an effort to understand the fateful centrality of this perception to the development of aesthetic theory.

That modernist art and modern aesthetics both grapple with the failure of transcendence could be told as two separate but parallel stories. Nothing forbids writing a history of either one cleansed of all reference to the history of the other. Indeed, in the face of the ever greater eccentricity of the paths of cognition and aisthesis since the eighteenth century, it might well be argued that their respective disciplines—philosophy and art—necessarily have progressively less to do with one another both historically and conceptually. As artists veered away from the Renaissance ideal of the roundly cultured humanist, modern aesthetics grew ever more preoccupied with the art of the past; a knowledge of Kant would be a gaudy bauble in a study of Cézanne, while the understanding of Friedrich Schiller, G. W. F. Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche would be better supported by a study of Greek art. This might be a bit of an exaggeration and, following the critical writings of Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno, a misleading characterization of contemporary practice. It is, however, sufficiently true for the historical period traversed by this book that the effort to conjoin modernist art and modern aesthetic theory in one story needs an initial apology.

From the side of the history of art, the apology is reasonably easy to craft. With the breakdown of the academic and aristocratic control of artistic creation and reception, art lost its straightforward connections to its traditional social bases. A gap opened between the practice of art and its functions, and so between the work of art and its meaning. With the eruption of this instability at the heart of artistic practice, art for the first time floated free of contexts in which its meaning could be normatively determined and thereby became unable to sustain proper standards of judgment. The loss of social mooring is the background both of the birth of artistic modernism and of the emerging problem of the judgment
of taste (judgments of beauty that cannot be grounded in given social norms). In the absence of a stable social context, or, put more precisely, in the aesthetic context of the absence of a stable social context, the judgment of art came to demand theoretical reflection in order to lay any claim to extrasubjective validity at all. In this way, the problems of aesthetic theory can be seen to have arisen at the center of an artistic practice that is already on its way to its modernist fate.

From the point of view of aesthetic theory, however, the apology is more complicated. After all, eighteenth-century aesthetic theory was preoccupied first and foremost by problems connected with beauty and sublimity as natural phenomena and not with problems of art. The ultimate philosophical thesis of Sustaining Loss is that the thought of the failure of transcendence that comes to be at the center of aesthetic theory only confronts aesthetic theory with its savage force when aestheticians try, as they must, to extend the philosophy of natural beauty to include the unmoored beauty of art. Art, which ought to articulate the boundary between nature and culture, between the divinely ordered and the freely fabricated, instead makes that boundary impossible to stabilize, because art, set free from the academic and aristocratic norms, appears now as asocial. In the face of that difficulty, the traditional hierarchy of nature and art which was, of course, still active in eighteenth-century aesthetics, grows wobbly, and so, too, the traditional aims of culture. Under such conditions, the task of aesthetic theory as the proper ordering of cognition and aisthesis necessarily undergoes a mutation. It is, in short, in the effort to bring autonomous art under its wing that aesthetic theory, and through it ever broader swathes of philosophy, find their own limits. Exactly how this happens is the story of this book, but the consequence of its happening is that aesthetic theory takes on a new shape as a reflection on the lack of an afterlife, the necessary nontranscendence of history, of sensuous existence. And as the nontranscendence of the finitude of sensuous life becomes the central problem of modern aesthetics, modern aesthetics becomes a philosophy of art, a discipline devoted to the problem of the persistence of the past, its nonovercoming by narratives of redemption, and, so, of the traumatic persistence of death in a secularizing age. In this light, modernist art appears as the historical truth of the history of modern aesthetic theory.

In treating the nontranscendence of death as, so to speak, the indigestible grain of sand buried invisibly at the core of aesthetic theory, Sustaining Loss aims to be an exercise in materialist aesthetics. The specificity of "materialism" will become clearer as the argument unfolds, but I can comment briefly now about the specificity of its motivation. Whereas most histories of aesthetic theory, for the sake of analyzing art and aesthetic experience more perspicaciously, aim to tell developmental stories in which aesthetic concepts become clearer, sharper, per-
own fashion this contemporary effacement of art’s transmissive function, by searching for timeless definitions of art and thereby treating art as in essence disconnected from and no longer emerging from living histories. Art, it seems, has grown mute about its own past, and theorizing about art in turn has grown deaf. This discontinuity in the history of art, as it appears in both art and systematic reflection on it, is the puzzle at the center of this book.

There are two central claims I will be pressing. In my first three chapters I shall argue that the intimate binding of art and reflection around the matter of generational transmission did not disappear quietly. By discussing three figures from modern (as opposed to contemporary) philosophical aesthetics, I will try to show that the efforts to understand the nature of art that constitute the surprisingly coherent history of that reflective practice are in fact efforts to understand the concrete workings of art in an age of transmissive crisis. Kant, Hegel, and Freud in particular will be investigated as theorists of a crisis of the relation of past and future who recognized the central role of art in making vivid—in experiencing—that crisis. Their theories of art will be interpreted as efforts to continue to inherit what art transmits and fails to transmit by means of a rethinking of the nature of artistic creation and aesthetic attention.

In my last two chapters I turn my attention from philosophical aesthetics to specific practices of contemporary art. I will try to show that at least some of the radical transformations of artistic form characteristic of modernism can best be understood as efforts to keep art’s transmissive possibilities alive in the age of transmissive crisis. Ilya Kabakov and Gerhard Richter are the two artists I will discuss, since the relation between a lost inheritance and the slender possibility of experiencing that loss is formative for their work. Through a detailed critical analysis of some of their works I hope to show how our noninheritance of the struggles of previous generations is figured as a living fact for us. In those works, in other words, the past is presented in its nonanimacy, its mortification, such that that nonanimacy can be grasped as a relation to a still active past. Informing my analyses will be my second claim, that the experience of nontransmission and noninheritance, the experience to which the phrase “sustaining loss” refers, is the experience to which a reflective philosophical aesthetics must now be beholden. Philosophical aesthetics, therefore, will be portrayed as a mode of historical reflection the contemporary possibility of which depends on its capacity to sustain, to keep active, the loss sustained or suffered by art.

A certain peculiarity in my procedure requires immediate acknowledgment. The thinkers on whom I will focus are from a tradition of reflection which, in the second paragraph of this subsection, I identified as largely finished. Indeed, since the text of Kant with which I open my theoretical discussion, the *Critique of Judgment*, is often regarded as the founding text of German absolute idealism, and the texts of Freud with which I close it are equally often regarded as the last effort to compose an overarching narrative of European identity, it would not be unreasonable to say that my theoretical discussion is entirely of the distant nineteenth century. Yet when I discuss art, my focus is on late-twentieth-century artists whose work can only be understood in light of the disasters produced by the nineteenth century’s obsessive focus on identity. Is this conjunction arbitrary, or deliberately anachronistic? In the end it will be up to the reader to decide whether my defense is adequate, but it is this: the tradition of modern philosophical aesthetics from the mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, in which Kant, Hegel, and Freud are the central figures, is the site of an extended critical interrogation of identity in the age of the crisis of inheritance. Put both more and less simply, in Kant, Hegel, and Freud the problem of post-traditional identity, the problem of enlightened modernity, receives deep investigation, and it is in this context that the specific fate of art becomes uniquely burdensome. Neither this problematic context nor the crisis of art it generated have disappeared. To the contrary, one might say that the disasters of our time to which Kabakov and Richter respond with their search for innovative forms are produced over and again not by too much concern with modern identity, but by its inadequate attainment. To the extent that reflection on the crisis of art was a way of coming to grasp the nature of identity in enlightened modernity, the concerns informing the themes and arguments of the nineteenth century are still our concerns. From this point of view, the idea that the critical orientation of nineteenth-century philosophical aesthetics is somehow behind us and that we have moved on to something new and better contributes to our difficulty in grasping the problem of noninheritance; it threatens to consign to historical oblivion those resources left to us through which we might grasp our present condition. Paradoxically, then, the reception of Kant, Hegel, and Freud—their reception of the problem of historical transmission—has become even more pressing for us directly in proportion to its increased difficulty.

How, though, are we to try to inherit them—to understand them—in our present moment? It might not be the only way, but one possibility is to inherit them through contemporary modernist artists whose work can only be grasped in light of the problem of sustaining loss. Kabakov and Richter are great artists whose achievements, I will argue, can best be comprehended in light of the question of what art can do when it can no longer forthrightly transmit the struggles of previous generations to future ones. If I am right, then the effort of understanding they impose on us can be met only with a reflection informed by a kind of “thinking otherwise” that is in danger of liquidation. From Kabakov...
and Richter, in other words, can be gleaned the continuing necessity of the reflections by Kant, Hegel, and Freud on the crises of continuity and discontinuity. Thus, perversely, through an effort to hear what contemporary art stuttersingly strives to voice, we might still orient our reflections toward the older problem of the place of systematic reflection on art in the project of historical transmission, albeit "under new and difficult conditions."4

In the remainder of this introduction I will pursue three aims. In section III, I will put a little bit of flesh on the skeletal picture of the discontinuity within the history of art I referred to above. In section IV, I will do the same for the discontinuity within the history of reflection on art. In section V, I will lay out the conceptual background of my efforts to inherit the thoughts about art, reflection, and historical transmission in Kant, Hegel, and Freud, as well as some of the complexities and pitfalls that await it.

III

By the time the Greek philosophers got around to reflecting on art, its transmissive capacities were already deeply troubled. The defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War was only the most pressing evidence that the repeating of traditional wisdom was insufficient for its effective transmission, since were it sufficient then Athens would not be trembling at the edge of its fall. Art's implicit claim to transmissive authority rested on the successful regeneration of the polis, so the moment that the claim became explicit was simultaneously the moment it was falsified. Once one could ask whether a piece of received wisdom was true regardless of its having been handed down properly through artistic traditions, the intertwining of art and legitimated inheritance had begun to come apart.

This, at least, is the argumentative strategy Plato adopts in the gently mocking Socratic interrogation of Ion the rhapsode. Ion is a specialist in the reciting of Homer, a specialty that to contemporary sensibility would seem to be a performance skill. But the common ground of conversation for Socrates and Ion is the belief that the performance of poetry is not extrinsic to the acquisition of knowledge; it is, rather, one of its primary modes. In Greek education, students were not taught poetry as a mere adjunct to an otherwise prosaic education; they were taught by means of poetry. Poetry was both tool and subject of Greek pedagogy.5 Hence, implicit in Ion's claim to expertise in the recitation of Homer there is also a privileged claim to knowledge of what is being transmitted from the time of Homer. After Socrates has gotten Ion to acknowledge that he lacks the arts with which to judge the truth of Homer's descriptions of charioteering and fishing, the rhapsode finally falls back on his knowledge of what generals should say to their troops, a knowledge of the rhetoric of leadership, authorizing his claim by saying, "I learned this also out of Homer."6 But when Socrates asks Ion whether what he claims to know is right and at the same moment forbids Ion from answering in the affirmative just because it is Homeric wisdom he can recite, the rhapsode is reduced to silence.7 Ion has no other criterion to consult than the divine tradition of which he is the vehicle, and at this point in Athenian history the question whether that tradition is self-validating—is really divine—is obviously doubtful.

The pedagogical function of poetry for the Greeks is reasonably well known.8 Perhaps somewhat more obscure, but by no means unexamined, is the pedagogical function of painting and sculpture. Again, the interesting point for now is not so much that these media were something the Greeks taught, which is obviously true, but that they taught by means of them. In his analysis of the development of canons of perspective in Greek art, E. H. Gombrich argues that the techniques of perspective construction were developed under the pressure of the "eyewitness principle," the demand that painting and sculpture illustrate and preserve cultural history and prehistory for those not able to witness it directly.9 What mattered for the artist, therefore, was the invention of forms capable of generating a nonreflective conviction of witness (hence the oft-repeated legend of Parrhasius's deception of Zeuxis). As in poetry, so too in painting: the art was a technique of preserving what had been known before as it had been known.10 It is therefore no surprise that when Plato turns his cold eye on the arts again in the final book of The Republic, painters are also convicted of ignorance parading under the mask of wisdom.11

The Platonic interrogations came late in the history of the Mediterranean, in the specific sense that so many of its cultures were by then literate. With the invention of writing, tragedy and comedy—which of all the Greek arts have been most analyzed as wisdom practices—had developed into a script-and-dramaturgy form such that we have been able to inherit their fragments. However, it would be anachronistic to think of them therefore as essentially written forms. Just as they had been in their earlier, preliterate history, history, drama and comedy, like poetry, were sung, that is performed, transmissions of knowledge (and the written portion of the performance was a script, a writing for the sake of being spoken aloud). For the Greeks, theater was a brew of cultic, religious, and civic elements in which the myths and legends that had been heard since before written records were re-enacted or re-presented in an exhibition that staged cultural continuity. Friedrich Nietzsche goes so far as to argue that the tragic theater was a ritual of cultural renewal, an artistic festival for the celebration of culture's perpetual rebirth from nature. By inviting Dionysus into the space of cultural life
through the *scenography* that articulates nature and culture, Greek theater vouchsafed cultural continuity by exhibiting its source in the disruption of uncultivated and timeless nature. If we understand “nature” as that which culture has always taken itself to have left behind but with which it still must settle accounts, then even Nietzsche’s radical interpretation entails that tragedy is a means for renewing the culture of our historical past.  

We have so far made our point about transmission largely indirectly, by means of inferences from the confessions elicited by Plato’s Socratic questioning. However, the mention of tragedy provides an occasion to make the same point more directly. Aristotle is to all appearances an apologist for tragedy against the Platonic charges. For this reason, Aristotle’s arguments in the *Poetics* can be interpreted as if he has accepted the basis of the Platonic indictment that art is not a purveyor of wisdom yet mounts nonetheless a noble defense of the value of the emotional turmoil art produces in its audience. But this interpretation is entirely wrong. While Aristotle does defend the undergoing of emotion induced by art, he does so by restoring to that emotion an essential cognitive component—that is, by explaining how emotion is a means of knowledge. The catharsis suffered in watching tragedy is made possible by the artistic imitation of actions that instantiates universals through which the audience experiences the emotions suitable to those actions. The audience, in other words, learns through imitation. Aristotle’s point, then, is that art properly understood is still a form of teaching and learning, of transmitting and inheriting. (No other argument, really, would be a response to Plato.) While it has been noted often enough that Aristotle therefore judges poetry of greater philosophical import than history, since poetry is of universals while history is only of particulars, it has not been noted often enough that history is the proper contrast for Aristotle because it and poetry contend for the privilege of transmitting the past. Even when the tragic poet keeps to actual names in the service of credibility, it is still a poetic error to confuse credibility with possibility or necessity; the poet’s work is to present the actual in its modality, that is, as an actual outcome of a flow of necessities and possibilities.

It is also obvious from what we have said that it is the function of a poet to relate not things that have happened but things that may happen, i.e. that are possible in accordance with probability and necessity. For the historian and the poet do not differ according to whether they write in verse or without verse—the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse, but they would be no less a sort of history in verse than they are without verses. For this reason poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of particulars. A universal is the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity—this is what poetry aims at, although it assigns names to the people. A particular is what Alcibiades did or suffered.

In a judgment only possible after the writing of Thucydides, who described his aim as making the lessons of the Peloponnesian War “a possession forever,” Aristotle judges that history, in hewing too closely to the actual, is ill-equipped to present the actual in a way that can make perspicuous how it became actual. In other words, history evades the modal question of how the actual becomes available to us through imitation. Aristotle’s defense of poetry, thus, is a defense of it as the privileged mode for the transmission of wisdom.

In order that this point about the traditional function of art not be thought to apply only to oral or transitionally post-oral cultures, let us consider another example of the same function of art from a later historical period. In his treatise *De pictura* (1436), Leon Battista Alberti offers an argument for art—painting specifically—as an intellectually significant enterprise. Although it is in arguments like his that later conceptions of the fine arts as distinguished from mere crafts would retrospectively find their origins, ascribing the making of such a distinction to Alberti would be anachronistic. Rather, Alberti’s aim was to identify painting as a craft with a unique function: to make vivid to the painter’s contemporaries that the legitimacy of the newly powerful Italian city-states arises from their proper embodiment of ancient virtues and, in making this vivid, to make those contemporaries proper citizens of those states. In painting, a syncretic image of time past and time present could be forged; just as painting could be a classical art, so too could the cities in which it thrived be sites of classical renaissance. Although the syncretism of the practice Alberti had in sight is so obvious to modern eyes that the claims for historical continuity are hard to credit, nonetheless that continuity was the basis of Alberti’s effort to accord special craft status to painters.

While Alberti’s treatise was intended to be read by the educated elite (Florence was a literate city, but reading Latin was still an elite capacity and, in any case, it was from the elite that patronage would flow to the new style of art Alberti was defending), it would be a mistake nonetheless to infer that his historical apologia was valid only for those who could grasp it in its literary form. The aim of *De pictura* was to formalize and disseminate a practice of painting, not just a theory of it; in other words, the establishing of the continuity between past and future glories was intended to be artistically achieved. One piece of evidence for this aim is the treatise’s publication both in Latin and then in the “unadorned” vernacular (as *Della pittura*) so that it could be used as a manual by craftsmen. But another and more important piece of evidence is Alberti’s claim that the final judgment of the adequacy of a painting had to be made nel
lume della piazza, in the light of the public square. That classical knowledge had been transmitted to educated elites in a sense went without saying, since they could be presumed to understand the treatise in a language, Latin, that in itself bespoke classical education. But the transmission to and by means of elites was characteristic of the medieval monastic separation of knowledge from civic life, and the function attributed to painting by Alberti was the transmission of wisdom for a broader public. The light of the public square, as David Summers has shown, was the enlightenment of the public, its being rendered capable of bearing the knowledge that constituted the rebirth of classical virtue. The public square was thus both the subject and the site of Albertian painting, and its illumination both the means and the product. Painting could only succeed, and so deserve the status of a special craft, to the extent that it served as a vessel for the distribution of the wisdom of the past.

Since these brief discussions of the traditional transmissive function of art are only intended to provoke interest in the question of art's fate in the era of transmissive crisis, there is no point in multiplying them further. In any case, were we to attempt to generate later examples, we would begin butting up against the era of crisis itself. We can see in Alberti already the seeds of the crisis in his apology for establishing a determinate relation to the past by means of what seems even to him to be a kind of fiction. In other words, by the fifteenth century, the querelle over the transmission of the past had already begun to give rise, or give way, to the contest between the past and the present that is our proper subject. So let us leave our examples behind and begin to draw a more general conclusion. However, we need to start with a proviso. While sketching art's traditional function, metaphors such as "vessel" and "carrier" offered themselves naturally. Such metaphors suggest that by "artistic transmission" we should understand art, in its traditional uses, to be a means for communicating semantic content across generations. And indeed, we should understand it that way in part. But we must not be misled by these metaphors into construing "means" as "mere means." Art did transmit content, but it was not an empty bucket into which content was poured. Rather, art also transmitted the manner of representing and preserving that content. In transmitting the content it also transmitted itself or, put more precisely, it transmitted the content by transmitting itself. With our proviso in mind, then, the general point is this: since what was at stake in art was transmission, we must understand the very idea of artistic content, as well as artistic form, in terms of its transmissibility.

This idea of the self-transmission of art can be grasped most easily through one of its most obvious instances: carved or incised stones used for funerary monuments. In older cemeteries one finds monuments etched with versions of the imperative "forget me not." Such stones are the most powerful testimonials to the profound forgetfulness of human beings. Even though these messages were meant for the closest relatives of the deceased, those we would think least likely to be in danger of forgetting, there was nonetheless the need of a reminder to remember. Further, these sorts of monuments are frequently found in cemeteries containing remains from communities in which a later reacquaintance with the deceased was devoutly expected. Again, not only was the imperative still required, but further it was borne in material destined to outlive those to whom the imperative was addressed. The stone is the medium in which the striving for transmission is carved because the stone can be counted on to transmit itself. Unlike those to whom it is addressed, the stone needs no other means of transmission than its own stoniness. Thus, it is the stone which is transmitted, and the art of stone carving can be construed as the art of self-transmission.

We continue to respond today in an especially powerful way to the memoriousness of the funerary stone. This makes it a particularly useful example for reminding ourselves of the mnemonic function of all the diverse techniques of art. Rhyme and rhythm, iconography and choreography: they were all forms of etching crafted to inscribe their different materials. They were forged to be set against forgetting, as immunizations against the memory loss to which we are everlastingly committed. Art, we might say simply, was what outlived the passing of the generation that manufactured it. What art transmitted between generations, thus, was certainly this memory or that, but first and foremost the very power of memory itself. In passing along the incapacity to forget, art also passed along what was thus rendered memorable, but it did so by means of rendering inseparable the means and content of memory. In all past art, thus, we can locate an implicit conception of generations as bound together through representational and affective practices. Succeeding generations were conceived as the bearers of the past in which the past imagined itself overcoming its finitude, and art was the sensuous vehicle of this transmission. The making of art was a culture's way of making its future by tending its past, of receiving from its past a mandate and license to preserve that past and pass it on.

An alternative way to put this point would be to say that what we now call art was once a social practice charged with the difficult and uncertain task of cultural generation and regeneration, of the transmission, which is to say also historical preservation, of forms of social life. However, what we call art was by no means alone in this struggle. Alongside material production and reproduction, the transmission of forms of social life was traditionally the most pressing concern of all cultural practices. From the everyday phenomena of manners and childrearing to the more exalted domains of religion, politics, and philosophy,
social life was inherently pedagogical. The universality of pedagogy tells us much about the dialectics of fate and faith, since just as each new generation was the vessel of the older one’s survival of its passing, the new vessel was inherently untrustworthy and thus needed to be bent to its responsibilities. Put simply; social life was saturated with art. A lingering echo of this blending of social practice and the concern for its transmission to future generations can be heard in the continued use of the word “art” to refer to certain practices that do not correspond to any plausible contemporary sense of fine or high art whatsoever. Ted Williams’s still influential book on baseball, *The Art of Hitting*, is a book on art insofar as it preserves for later batters the refinements in skill Williams attained for himself. To be an artist of hitting is to develop one’s capacities in ways that others may imitate, and unless others may imitate them the capacities are not so much art as mere luck. The concern to make a gift of nature into an art is nothing but the concern to preserve that gift for those who will come later.

**IV**

Since generational transmission was the aim not just of “the arts” as we now understand them, but of other social practices also, it stands to reason that thinking about art as well as art itself was oriented by this goal. Because both art and reflection on it were elements of the same grand transmissive project, the idea that art might be a practice with a purpose different in kind from other cultural practices is not to be found in the history of thinking about art prior to modern times. While no single instance can establish this general point, let us return to a fragment of Western cultural history (which we have touched on already in the discussion of Plato) that would seem to offer the most powerful counterexample to it: the quarrel between philosophy and poetry that is as old as the former if not the latter. Because it is intuitively plausible to think of the philosophical contestant in this quarrel as committed to a view of art as pursuing an end different from its own, the quarrel seems to be prima facie evidence that art was seen from at least one perspective as having a different purpose from other cultural activities. This intuition, however, is based on a misapprehension, since, in fact, the famous quarrel depended on precisely the opposite presumption—that art and philosophy were after the same end. In the Platonic critique that sought to dislodge poetry from its place of cultural privilege, art was judged as failing to live up to the standards of the mission it had arrogated to itself. Philosophy then claimed that it was better suited to the task of historical transmission; in virtue of being a practice based on rendering accumulated knowledge nonperspectival and thus logical, philosophy, it was argued, is able to sift real from apparent truths and pass on only the genuine articles. As Nietzsche observed, Platonic philosophy emerged as the effort to inherit the pedagogical functions at which art was failing. Thus, when philosophy claimed the mission of historical preservation as its own, it did so not by offering a new definition of art but rather by endorsing art’s self-image in order to appropriate and transform it. In the immanent critique of art through which philosophy’s future career was established, art continued to be thought of as a flawed practice of cultural transmission, and so as one which shared its aim with philosophy.

Thus, just as art was a way of preserving and transmitting social life, so too was reflecting on art. Traditional thinking about art was, we might say, a way of assisting in the inheritance of what art was seeking to transmit. Even when striving to supplant art, it remained nonetheless a part of art’s social function. The historical reach of this traditional conception of art and art reflection ought not to be underestimated. Indeed, in order to grasp the precise nature of our present moment, we need to work especially diligently to salvage the earlier conception from the historical oblivion imposed on it by the anachronistic projection backwards of contemporary concerns. It is only in our century that the philosophical prospect of a timeless definition of art as such has arisen; put otherwise, only recently has the theorization of art sought to pursue its own aims independently of a reflective engagement with art’s cross-generational purposiveness. There are, to be sure, contemporary thinkers of a pragmatic or constructivist bent who believe that the right way to pursue a philosophical account of art is in terms of its purpose, but it is an unavoidable philosophical issue, even for such thinkers, whether an historical approach is a philosophically respectable one. But even as recently as the nineteenth century, during art’s great era of crisis, the deepest thinkers about art—Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles Baudelaire, Nietzsche—never broached the question of art’s definition in abstraction from its transmissive purpose. It is only in this century that the idea has come to consciousness that art might be different in kind from other cultural practices—in particular, that it might not be essentially transmissive—and therefore that it might be possible to define it in itself. It now can look practically obvious that art was always ontologically distinct from the rest of culture even while granting that for most of its history it was being put to extrinsic cultural purposes; it can also look obvious, therefore, that the aim of the philosophy of art is to discern the extracultural site of art. But in treating art as undialectically distinct from the cultural demands which surround it, we presuppose a philosophical illusion of our own moment. In this way we actively obscure the transmissive function of art and so find ourselves disposed, unsurprisingly, to denying that that func-
tions of art and culture are largely makers of tastes and markets, not authors of timeless definitions in the sense described above. These two orientations, despite their real differences, share the belief that the relationship between singular reflection on works of art and systematic philosophy is an extrinsic one. And as the narrowly empirical concerns of art criticism and the broadly abstract ones of philosophy of art fitfully cohabit while hopefully awaiting their final divorce, what passes for cultural reflection (or, as it is barbarously called, "cultural theory," as if it were somehow a discipline different from culture) floats free of the quarrel; by employing material production and reproduction as the appropriate model for cultural production and reproduction, the sociology of art has lost the ability to imagine the meaningful continuity between any two historical moments of what thereby becomes only in thought the same culture. From no available point of view is art now regarded as a means of passing the accumulated burdens and achievements of previous generations to future ones.

However, to say that there is no longer any reflective perspective from which art can be seen as transmissive is to say that it is a peculiarity of our historical present that we have not inherited the transmissive function of art in a reflective fashion. The modes of reflection we have available to us do not offer us a way to receive and in turn transmit the practice of art as a mode of transmission. This loss, this failure of transmission and inheritance, is not, it needs to be stressed, like the quite common disappearance of a particular thought from memory. It is the loss of a power or capacity to think, on the order of the loss of a language or a people. In sketching the state of disinheritance characteristic of contemporary cultural reflection, then, I am also suggesting that contemporary cultural reflection, taken as a totality, is discontinuous with the history from which it emerges. We stand now in a relation of estrangement from the past that lived in the art that was sent our way.

A certain way of thoughtfully living a relation to art has disappeared, and with it, too, a certain solicitous concern to transmit culture between generations, the thoughtful living in relation to other people of which art was a central expression. That this marks a failure of art—necessarily so, given art's traditional function—is worthy of philosophical scrutiny. However, since it also marks a failure of scrutiny, the form such scrutiny must take is far from clear. If we live in the wake of the failure of art, then philosophy—understood, again, as systematic cultural reflection—must take care not to compound the loss by refusing to acknowledge its own commensurate disability. That there is a problem to confront can be acknowledged simply by noting that in contemporary philosophy, and not just in the philosophy of art, the idea that philosophical practice is intrinsically, and not only as an accidental by-product, a mode of transmission, has also fallen from favor. In its pursuit of truth for all times, truth not just un-
threatened but in principle immune from historical oblivion, philosophy has jettisoned its age-old concern to generate not just knowledge but knowers. For ill or good, philosophy has recoiled from its own participation in the work of generation. It is thus a living question whether the appropriate form of scrutiny for art’s failure is properly philosophical, at least in the sense of “philosophical” which is canonical today. I hoist this flag in warning: as we trace the ways we have not inherited the practice of art as an agent of historical transmission, we may also be limning a form of historical oblivion to which, without sufficient care, we might also contribute. It is with this warning in mind that I will turn to Kant, Hegel, and Freud, since it is with their assistance that I believe we may attend to our noninheritance without at the same time magnifying it.

V

No doubt the way I have set out the problem of art, reflection on art, and the relation between past and future generations, has aroused the suspicion that I court self-contradiction. To meaningfully call a relation between any two items “discontinuous” requires making a comparative judgment between them. Any claim about historical discontinuity in particular requires a framework in which the two elements can be contrasted as two instances of the same sort of thing. Regardless of the historical technique used in establishing such a framework, it remains a desideratum of specifically historical explanation that the identity of the later element be able to support a reasonable contrast with the earlier one. For instance, while it might be claimed truthfully that marriage laws in the postbellum South are discontinuous with the rules of the wool guild in Renaissance Florence, the claim would be historically vacuous; no imaginable framework can identify the later marriage practices as a transformative break from the earlier wool-trading ones. For a discontinuity claim to be an historical explanation (or a part of one), the identity of the later element must be a function of its difference from the earlier one. If we add the (logically independent) premise that what we call the “identity” of an historical practice is a norm, a means, that is, whereby two instances can be identified as of the same practice, then we must conclude that some principle of proper identification has been inherited across the purported divide. Now, if the later element in question is the very practice within which the discontinuity claim is being made, then for me to be able to make such a claim I must have inherited at least some of the criteria of identity—of continuity—the claim itself denies we have inherited. Therefore, the claim must be false.

This is a serious argument against certain forms of genealogy and historiography that are committed to radical discontinuity claims. It can be brought to bear (arguably) against Foucault and the cult of synchronicity spurred by his archaeological method. It would be a just charge against the case I am making too if I were claiming that we now stand on the other side of a specifiable historical discontinuity across which we have inherited nothing and relative to which our period has its own proper coherence. However, I am making no such claim. To the contrary: I argue that we stand within—we are—the discontinuity in question. We moderns are the failure to inherit the relation of art and culture that is nevertheless our own past. It is our knowledge of what we cannot remember that shapes our identity. This will be a hard enough claim to establish, but it is in no danger of being ambushed by this particular logical absurdity.

It might also be suspected that the way I set out my theme guarantees I will run into a different problem, which, while perhaps not as threatening as the outright absurdity sketched above, will make my discussion of the problem incoherent nonetheless. While successful inheritance establishes the coherence of a practice by locating its normativity in its relation to its own proper past, failed inheritance, by contrast, characterizes practices cut adrift from possible sources of normativity. If this is true, then failure to inherit cannot be an identity-establishing feature of any historical moment whatsoever—our own, naturally enough, included.

It should be admitted, before explaining that this problem will not foreclose my inquiry either, that it is nonetheless deep enough to inhibit it. I am open to the thought that modernity is not, properly speaking, an historical moment at all but rather a break in the logic of historical succession. Since I intend to develop a concrete alternative to this line of argument, let me at least note one of its major attractions (which I regard as an important aim of my own approach as well): it demystifies the idealizing of historical inheritance characteristic of a certain strain in the philosophy of history. It is a constituent feature of modern self-reflection that the determinate relation of the _Neuzeit_—the time of reflection—to the past must be established ever anew in what is, ever anew, the present. Modernity, put simply, burdens us with a debt we can never put to rest. Now, we sometimes seek to discharge overpowering debts by transforming them into universal conditions of life; we disavow their _particular_ claims on us by subliming them into _philosophical_ necessities. Thus, modern reflection often finds itself attracted to crafting philosophies of history through which we would grasp, not historical succession, but its universal logic. Philosophy then appears, like the gambler who agrees to do a favor for his bookie, to trump all its unpaid debts at once. If, in this light, we turn the tables by regarding the philosophy of history as a symptom of the burdenedness of modernity rather than as a lightening of the load—if we treat it as philosophy’s refusal to acknowledge its
specific historicity—then the noninheritance that characterizes modernity can be seen as a break in historical succession the experience of which gives rise to the impulse to suture it supra-experimentally. Conceiving modernity as ceaseless rupture, instead of simply as a new challenge to our philosophical capacities for conceptual repair (the deep thought underlying the view that modernity is not a proper historical moment), thus would allow us to rethink the emergence of modern philosophy's compensatory relation to broken experience, its effort to re-establish normativity on "higher" ground. Such a suspicious hermeneutic would work to desublime modernity's problem with normativity.

However, despite its manifest attractions, I shall not adopt this response to the charge that the failure of inheritance can give rise to no practice. Even sharing the conviction that philosophy of history cannot conjure up the normative grounds that history denies us, I still find the thought that modernity is simply bereft of norms too sweeping. I prefer instead to explore the possibility that modernity finds its norms elsewhere than in the moment of reflection, that modernity is the uncanny experience of one's norms not being properly one's own. This experience of a lost normativity moves me, roughly speaking, in a direction opposite to the attractive one sketched above: failed inheritance does give rise to a practice, the practice of sustaining loss, of undergoing it ceaselessly. Failures, no less than successes, have forms, albeit forms that never arrive at their final shape. The two practices of sustaining loss I focus on are philosophical-historical reflection and modernist art. I shall close this introduction with a first effort at defining what such practices are.

That historical reflection is a central movement of modern thinking almost goes without saying. Indeed, if we attend closely to the specific burdens placed on reflection in post-Kantian philosophy, we might well regard anxiety about the past's relation to the present time as our foremost stimulus to reflection. The writings of Kant, Hegel, and Freud are determined by their efforts to properly judge the relation between historically disjoint structures of meaning or, put more expansively, by their efforts to specify the nature of posttraditional modernity as a determinate nonrelation to what preceded it. However, these writings are not crucial to us simply because they aim to establish the discontinuity of the modern and the premodern, but more precisely because they claim for historical reflection a special role in doing so. The burden of the uninherited past, of the past which cannot be made to live in the present, generates needful reflection as the site in which our anxious relation to the past is represented and handled; post-Kantian reflection is haunted by the undead ghosts of what it reflects on. Reflection's privileging, therefore, is also a symptom of anxiety.

In treating reflection as an activity burdened by the relation of the modern and the premodern, Kant, Hegel, and Freud regard it as an essentially historical artifact in which our historical situation is expressed. Their approaches are thus diametrical to the many other forms of historical reflection that strip reflection of its historical burden by presuming for it a capacity to express the truth of the history it represents. This putative transparency of historical reflection, its capacity to show the scene of its origin without at the same time and in the same way showing its emergence from that scene, seeks to claim for reflection a mastery over its contents by locating the truth of historical thinking in the condescension of posterity to earlier historical necessities. From the self-assurance that a certain sentimental species of reflection derives from its attachment to the belief that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it," we may infer that it assumes that the disciplining of memory by historical reflection offers a way into a time of free nonrepetition, a new time called, hopefully, the future. The antitranscendent arguments I shall trace, on the other hand, eschew the comforts of reflective mastery. By emphasizing the needfulness of historical reflection they stage its entrapment in the webs of the historical generativity it can never fully master. In Kant, Hegel, and Freud, historical reflection provides a framework for transcending the specificity of the present moment, but only by way of expressing also the need that constitutes the present moment as requiring transcendence to begin with; as such, historical reflection for them never ceases to be self-reflection and so perpetually shows back to us moderns our own endless coming-to-be. Hence, as much as historical reflection is work on the past, it is also the work of the past.

The specificity of the line of thought I follow may be put this way: historical reflection is a necessity for us not merely because through it we witness the past in reflective detachment from it, but rather because, even as such reflection maximizes our detachment by representing the past as dead and gone, the force of the dead past never expires in it. The privilege of history as memory's prosthesis derives from its transmission of the matter of the past, of what memory fails consciously to transmit. Because the deadness of the past is its mode of recurrence, our need for historical reflection is the past's revenge on its noninheritors. However, whereas traditional ancestor worshipers suffered the greatness of their predecessors, their extremeness of force, we suffer their weakness—and we suffer it vividly as the endlessness of historical reflection. The ceaseless return to the scene of the crime, which is the very animacy of historical reflection, derives from our not having been bequeathed the means we require to determine where we stand. Somehow, our progenitors were too weak to craft for us, to craft as us, what they needed from us, so we stand in the shadow of their incapacity. Put in a (putatively) more philosophical vocabulary, historical reflection
rests on an unstable distinction between its concepts and its object; despite being the primal concept of historical reflection, "history" magically names both a concept and its own proper object at once. That "history" is thought to be a proper concept at all, rather than the index of a need in which concepts suffer a shameful confrontation with their material histories, suggests a profound wish-fulfillment in modern consciousness. It is this wish-fulfillment that Kant, Hegel, and Freud seek to expose and avoid. In short, "history" for them is not the story of the transcendence of the dead past.

In the persistence of the nontranscended past within historical reflection, Kant, Hegel, and Freud confront the trauma at the heart of post-traditional modernity. On the one hand, modern historical self-consciousness knows itself as unable to derive orientation from its historical predecessors; history is not for us a mutual dialogue across time, but an unbalanced encounter in which we can see the dead but they cannot see us. But among the myriad traditional orientations most palpably not available to modern historical self-consciousness is the idea of history as the story of the transcendence of the past. The narratives of history as redemption have been exposed as mythical by historical understanding itself, and thus now are the mere detritus of the past we moderns cannot take at face value. The past lingers as what we come after, and also as what, in lingering, denies us the comfort of thinking of ourselves and our understanding as its hidden purpose. To put the point a touch too dramatically, modern historical self-consciousness can avoid falling back into myths of transcendence only by acknowledging that the past, while dead, is not gone, and that we coexist with it not as its afterlife but as its survivors.

However, we still need to ask how historical reflection can remain faithful to the avoidance of narratives of transcendence. We need to find out more about how the loss to which historical reflection is beholden can remain vivid in it. These are the key questions my inquiry into Kant, Hegel, and Freud must address, but they are not, we must caution immediately, to be answered in an a priori manner. They are not, in other words, questions philosophy can answer by reflecting on its own limitations; such a procedure, in making the limitations in question already philosophical, would reassert philosophy's mythical transcendence and thereby make it false to the self-critical thrust of its rationality. Instead, we must return to the texts in which historical reflection in the service of philosophy generates confrontations with specific, concrete failures of transcendence. This is the ultimate reason to return to Kant, Hegel, and Freud: in their writings, the urge for the transcendence of history comes face to face with needs no transcendence can satisfy. Therefore, when I argue in the coming chapters that the other face of historical reflection is art, that the loss historical reflection can neither transcend nor redeem appears in art, I hope to show that aesthetic theory is the site of a mournful encounter between historical reflection—the discipline of memory—and the past that rises up before it as reflection's own untranscended condition of possibility in the present.

But why art? How has art become, as Hegel put it, "a thing of the past," a practice whose eminent force confronts historical reflection as reflection's uncannily present past? This is the question of how art, too, became a practice of sustaining loss, how it came to locate its norms in a past which, for the sake of fidelity to it, it hurtled away from. Artistic modernism stands in a mournful relation to its own past, in the specific sense that in a post-traditional age art can locate its norms, the standards that make it a coherent practice, only in a past it must, but cannot quite, live up to. Art is now perpetuated by the effort to introject its own past—which is to say by a mimesis of death. For the sake of a transmission yet to happen, for the sake of an experience that suffers from an inability to be represented and so stands in a traumatic relation to representation, art tarrys with the dead. This is the source of the mournfulness of modernist art, of its unwillingness to leave behind a past that is nonetheless dead for it. Art continues only in sustaining this loss, and it is just this sustaining, this failure of art to transmit the past, that aesthetic theory encounters as the untranscended past harbored in the work of art.

It is this untimeliness of art that so often tempts us to call it "eternal." Since art has no progressive history (in the sense that Matisse is not an improvement on Manet merely in virtue of knowingly coming later), it is easy to infer that art is outside of time and thus is historically transcendent. When we recall, though, that art's nondevelopment is a feature of modernist art and not of some historically transcendent practice called "art," its untimeliness stands revealed as an immobilization, a nontranscendence of history. Art's preservation has come to depend on its being stuck, on its making itself stuck, in an imaginary moment before the impossibility of development flashed up before it. Timelessness, in other words, is the nontranscendence of suffering that confronts aesthetic theory as art's uncanny power: art appears timeless only because immortality is the fate which is worse than death. The past stands out in art as the matter historical reflection needs to digest but which nonetheless it cannot swallow. Aesthetic theory is the locus of this reversal of history.

One brief proviso is required before undertaking to make good on the promises of this introduction. The chapters on Kant, Hegel, and Freud are intended to
work cumulatively. They represent my effort to trace out a genealogy of materialist aesthetics from the struggle, spread out over the long nineteenth century, to understand how art came to exceed the power of aesthetic theory to conceptualize it. If successful, this genealogy will have the peculiar negative shape of showing how aesthetic theory came to terms with the limitations of its power. Its consequence, however, is that the recognition of the necessity of the failure of aesthetic theory to validate its conceptual coinage provides a silence in which the crisis of artistic and philosophical transmission can give voice to the claims of the dead. No one wants the prize of study to be merely negative, but the alternative, I fear, is deafness.

That the claims of the dead are at the center of modernist art, and that they are what allows art to matter still today, deserves a full-scale study in its own right. The chapters on Richter and Kabakov that bring Sustaining Loss to its conclusion may be considered as refugees from that study, as exiles invited into this one for the sake of uncovering the residue of suffering in aesthetic theory. I can only hope that asking them to embrace their exile does not constitute a moral hazard, although there is no doubt that it does. Equally without doubt, the thought of Kant and Hegel (less so of Freud) as materialist aestheticians will strike many readers as an act of violence against the history of aesthetic theory. Against that charge, I have no defense. Kant and Hegel are, of course, idealists, in almost every way which matters, and no less than when they deputize art in the service of systematic philosophy. That the effort to be a systematic idealist should turn out to be a way of fertilizing materialist blossoms is nothing less than the cunning of unreason. However, monstrous growths can be regarded as signs of the unexpected fertility of the best-tended garden. For the love of order, they should be weeded out. Nonetheless, a different history appears in them, a different relation between the past and the future. The tending of monsters might be tolerated for the sake of wishes as yet unclaimed.

It is a truism about Kant that his philosophy of art is a mere corollary of the critique of taste and the philosophy of natural beauty. The Critique of Judgment, where Kant develops his systematic aesthetic theory, is devoted to forms of judgment first and foremost and only secondarily to the objects that are judged. In other words, the subject of critique is a power of mind—judgment—rather than an element of the world, and the question whether there is an element of the world that corresponds to judgment’s claims can only be addressed through the grounding and delimiting of that power. Thus, the question whether there really is a beautiful object at all can only be broached after asking whether there is a power of mind through which such an object may be acknowledged. Further, once Kant deduces an affirmative answer to this second question, it turns out that the beautiful object which does exist can only be beautiful nature, nature appearing as beautiful, and from this it follows that art can only be beautiful if it appears at the same time to be nature. Because the critique of taste, as well as the characterization of the object of the judgment of taste which critique grounds, are philosophically complete—which is to say logically over—before the theory of art