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RADICAL HISTORY &  
THE POLITICS OF ART

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Art and Politics in the Time of Radical History

### POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Reflections on art and politics commonly begin with an inquiry into the specific nature of these two entities, as well as into possible connections between them. This tends to lead to two logical possibilities, which serve as bookends to numerous middle-ground and hybrid positions: either art and politics form completely autonomous spheres divided by an insurmountable barrier, or they constitute domains that do indeed influence each other through privileged points of interaction. These two extremes appear to be mutually exclusive insofar as they defend opposite conclusions regarding the possibility or impossibility of linking art and politics. However, it is important to recognize that they are founded on the same basic point of departure: the assumption that art and politics each have their own proper nature, and that there is a definitive and definable relationship between them. One of the central aims of this book is to critically examine the viability of this supposition by raising a series of questions concerning the precise status of the supposed entities called 'art' and 'politics.'

Everything hinges, as we will see, on the starting point, in the double sense of the beginning point for reflections on art and politics, as well as the point of departure for the constitution of these entities themselves. It

depends, in other words, on the historicity of these supposedly distinct elements, and the initial question raised by this work is: where did these entities come from? It is sometimes assumed—implicitly or not—that they have simply always existed. However, this is not at all self-evident. To take the most blatant case, there is abundant evidence that suggests that the modern European concept and practice of art are very far from being historical or cultural invariants. On the contrary, many have argued, as we will see, that these date from approximately the eighteenth century. Numerous authors have advanced analogous arguments regarding politics in the modern sense of the term. Even those who expand the time scale and assert, for instance, that politics has existed at least since the ancient Greeks, if not before, do not necessarily claim that politics has *always* existed. Such an affirmation would require grasping politics *sub specie aeternitatis* and proving that it existed prior to the historical emergence of the world as we currently know it. This ultimately includes—in the grand scheme of things—the historical appearance of sentient beings like *Homo sapiens*, as well as their practices and concepts. From the perspective of what we might call deep history, or the history that is not restricted by the anthropocentric time scale of traditional history, it is patently unclear how it could ever be truly proven that art and politics have indeed always existed.

If it is accepted, then, that these are dynamic entities that emerged in history—and certainly in deep history—at some point in time, there are at least two ways of conceiving of this dynamism. One consists in supposing that there is an invariant kernel at the heart of historical changes, which thereby correspond to so many different facets of the entity in question. Insofar as it remains a fixed reference point, this invariable essence is precisely what allows us to measure alterations and compare across time periods. However, if appearances can change with time, why must we presume that the core essence of phenomena cannot be transformed? If these did indeed appear in time, then they must have undergone at least one major historical transformation. Therefore, they could, at least in principle, disappear or undergo other significant alterations at different points in time. This line of thought leads to the conclusion that art and politics are fully historical in the sense that they have no transhistorical or ahistorical essence.

To be sure, this brief account of one possible intellectual itinerary leading from ahistoricism to what I will call selective historicism and finally to radical history or radical historicism does not purport to prove the superiority of a particular theoretical position. On the contrary, these prefatory remarks seek to succinctly elucidate some of the theoretical background for the decision to abandon the common sense point of departure in order to explore the consequences and implications of a radical historicist orientation. They also allow me the opportunity to begin introducing some of the key conceptual vocabulary that will guide us in the analyses that follow. Ahistoricism, to begin with, ignores or rejects the historical development of phenomena, whereas selective historicism recognizes the historicity of privileged entities or concepts, which themselves more or less escape the flow of time. It selects—hence its name—what transcends historical transformation: the deep kernels of reality that allow us to measure change. Radical history, on the contrary, recognizes that everything is historical, including our most privileged practices, cherished concepts, and venerated values. This does not mean in the least that all things are historically determined, which would lead to the position of reductive historicism (nor does it mean that everything is historical in the exact same sense). The adjective *radical* refers both to the dissolution of the supposedly natural objects of history and to the dynamic role of different forms of agency in history.

One of the central working hypotheses of this book is that radical history subverts the fundamental assumption that has undergirded much of the debate on art and politics: the idea that there are two distinct entities with a determinate relation. If what we call ‘art’ and ‘politics’ are recognized as variable sociohistorical practices that have no essential nature or singular relation, then we need to entirely rework our understanding of these practices, beginning with the very questions that are raised. The classic, common sense trinity—what is art? what is politics? what is their relation?—becomes obsolete as soon as it is acknowledged that there is not a single, ontological answer to any of these questions. Radical history thereby opens a fundamentally different field of inquiry and introduces a unique gamut of questions by maintaining that there is not, in fact, a firm starting point with clearly delimited entities whose unique relation

can be definitively described. It begins, in other words, by recognizing that there is no absolute point of departure: we always start in the middle, so to speak, in a complex nexus of immanent, historically constituted notions and practices.

Conceptually, radical history undermines the belief in transcendent ideas, meaning transhistorical notions that purport to guarantee the true meaning of our terms. The critique of the illusion of transcendence and of the assumption that there is—or must be—a common property unifying the fundamental building blocks of thought does not, however, lead to the conclusion that we are trapped in a relativist vortex of theoretical nonsense. Defenders of radical historicism, in resisting relativist blackmail, recognize that there are indeed immanent notions, meaning operative concepts that circulate in the social world at a given point in time. In our day and age, for instance, there are widely accepted uses of terms like *art* and *politics*. They do not necessarily have precise definitions or rigorously determined semantic borders, but they function instead as notions in struggle. They operate in a force field that is sometimes the site of interventionist concepts, which are *idées-forces* that attempt to reconfigure the given matrix of immanent conceptuality.

The theorization of radical history, as it is developed through the course of this book, functions as just such an intervention. It does not purport to describe the true nature of history or identify its invariable essence or structure. It is a situated and circumspect intervention into a field of struggle that seeks to operate a fundamental displacement. In terms of the vocabulary just introduced, it could be said that this is a displacement from a theory of transcendent ideas to an analytic of immanent practices. A theory, at least in the restricted sense of the term, begins with the presumed existence of natural objects of history or transcendent ideas (such as Art and Politics). An analytic, on the contrary, examines the differential relations between socially constituted practices as well as the historical formation of supposedly natural objects. It does not presume the existence of more or less fixed entities with a single, determinate relation. It acknowledges, in other words, that there is no absolute point of departure because we always ‘begin’ in a historically constituted immanent field of practice.

THE POLITICS OF ART, SOCIAL AGENCY,  
AND RADICAL HISTORY

In contesting the common point of departure for debates on art and politics, one of the primary objectives of this book is to open new vistas for rethinking artistic and political practices. This includes revisiting the basic methodological framework of the very question of art and politics, proposing a multidimensional theory of social agency and developing an alternative logic of history.

Regarding the methodological framework, to begin with, the common sense point of departure is based on the ontological illusion, or the unfounded assumption that there is a being or fixed nature behind phenomena such as art and politics. It is closely tied to the epistemic illusion, according to which it is possible to have *epistēmē* or rigorous knowledge of these phenomena as well as their relation. This methodological framework lends itself to the establishment of fixed formulas: *this* art has *this* political consequence or implication. Such recipes are often structured by an undergirding binary normativity, according to which the artistic world is divided between authentic and inauthentic art, truly political and apolitical artwork, and so forth. Regardless of the specific terms that are used, it is generally a matter of opposing good and evil according to a strict dichotomy. This not only presupposes a heightened form of *epistēmē*. It is also founded on a restrictive conception of political efficacy that aims at definitively distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful political art. Theorists thus regularly draw up balance sheets opposing, for instance, realism to avant-gardism, autonomous art to the culture industry, the aesthetic dimension to the affirmation of reality, and so forth. By isolating works of art in various ways from the complexity and variability of their social nexus, theorists often act as if there were only two possibilities: success or failure. Furthermore, the political valence of art is frequently situated in the artistic work itself. According to what I will call the talisman complex, it is assumed that the individual artwork is—or is not—the bearer of a unique political force comparable to the magical powers of a talisman. Like the latter, a successful



artistic object or practice is supposed to be capable of directly provoking changes in the world via an obscure preternatural alchemy.

One of the core problems in contemporary debates on art and politics is the social epoché, meaning the tendency to bracket the intricate social relations at work in aesthetic and political practices. When the social sphere is taken into account, it is often reduced to a binary and determinist social logic in which it is assumed that there is a single determinate matrix that works of art react to (by either confirming or rejecting it). It is rare that theorists take into full consideration the social force field constituted out of the multiple sites and types of agency involved in the production, distribution, and reception of aesthetic practices (and, for that matter, of political activities). Such a social epoché runs the risk, as we will see, of casting a long shadow over the social complex in which diverse dimensions of aesthetic and political practices overlap, entwine, and sometimes merge. By setting aside to a greater or lesser extent the social world—and hence the political realm as it is commonly understood—the politics of art is largely reduced to the magical powers of talisman-like objects to more or less miraculously produce political consequences (or fail to do so).

In order to definitively part ways with the politics of the isolated aesthetic artifact, it is important to explore the intertwined relationship between these three heuristically distinct social dimensions of aesthetic practices—creation, circulation, interpretation—in order to chart out their social politicity, meaning the political dimensions that play themselves out in the historical struggles between various forms of social agency. The central framing question is thus no longer: “what is the privileged connection between art—and more precisely the individual aesthetic artifact—and politics?” It is also not its pessimistic inversion: “why is there no link between art and politics?” Instead, the attempt to think the social politicity of aesthetic practices raises the question: “how do diverse dimensions of the practices socially labeled as ‘aesthetic’ and ‘political’ cross, intertwine, interlace, and at times become coextensive?”

The examination of the social politicity of aesthetic practices requires an alternative account of agency that recognizes its multiple types, tiers, ranges, and sites. The politics of art is not the result of one privileged point

of agency according, for instance, to the monocausal determinism inherent in the talisman complex. It is a battlefield of rival forces that are of various kinds, that operate at different levels of determinacy, that have specific ranges of efficacy, and that are anchored in concrete sites of agency. In fact, the expression *the politics of art* might not even be appropriate insofar as it suggests that there is a politics inherent in art. Since political and aesthetic practices play themselves out in a veritable force field of agencies and are generally irreducible to the monolithic opposition between complete success and absolute failure, it is more appropriate to speak of the social struggles over the politicity of aesthetic practices.

These battles are not synchronic but are part of a larger historical dynamic. It is important, therefore, to develop this multidimensional account of social agency in conjunction with an alternative historical order. By historical order or logic, I mean a practical mode of intelligibility of history that is at one and the same time a way of understanding and of practicing history. The historical order proposed in the following pages takes into account three heuristically distinct dimensions of history: the vertical dimension of chronology, the horizontal dimension of geography, and the stratigraphic dimension of social practice. Such an approach allows us to chart out historical constellations in time, space, and society, thereby avoiding the widespread problem of historical compression (which consists in flattening one or more of the dimensions of history). It also leads to an alternative account of historical change in terms of phases and metastatic transformations. A phase, unlike an epoch or time period, is variably distributed through the three dimensions of history. It changes by metastatic transformations, which are variable rate alterations that morph in diverse ways through time, space, and society.

This alternative logic of history and theory of agency provide for a very different account of aesthetic and political practices. In describing some of the specific conjunctural encounters between them, this book simultaneously seeks to intervene in the battlefields that it adumbrates. It mobilizes what I will call the dual position by detailing immanent fields of practice while also interceding in them in order to operate displacements through concrete points of leverage. Indeed, the descriptions provided are already

specific forms of anchored intervention. Although I will insist on this regarding the interpretations of aesthetic practices, this is obviously also the case for the interpretations of theoretical works that are advanced: they are descriptive interventions that seek to shift our understanding of these works in a particular direction (at times by heuristically relying on oppositional framing devices). In this light, the overall objective of this book is to leverage the debate on art and politics in the direction of a radically historicist analytic of aesthetic and political practices.

## A PALIMPSEST OF RADICAL HISTORY

In what follows, the claims advanced in the preceding paragraphs will be drawn out of detailed historical explorations into the relationship between ‘artistic’ and ‘political’ practices. Divided into four parts comprising two chapters each, this book is organized as a series of layers whose superimposition seeks to produce the effect of a palimpsest. Early chapters will bleed through and become visible, in a different light, in later chapters, just as the latter will come to fill in lacunae in the opening sections. The juxtaposition of these different layers aims at creating a dense texture with multiple entrance points rather than a sequential or progressive narrative with a single beginning and a definite end.

Each tier can be read independently, but they ultimately infiltrate and inform one another. If the book is read from start to finish, the initial layer is composed of an outline of a radical historicist analytic of aesthetic and political practices, whose praxeological orientation stands in stark contrast to the quixotic search for the privileged link (or insurmountable dividing line) between art and politics. This chapter provides a sketch of the book’s basic conceptual armature and develops many of the theoretical strategies that are used throughout the work as a whole, and whose numerous implications are drawn out in subsequent chapters. The next stratum consists in an examination of three major positions on art and politics in the twentieth century—realism, formalism, and commitment—

through the study of the work of prominent figures in the Marxian tradition: Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, and Jean-Paul Sartre. This chapter combines an exegetical endeavor to rigorously present analytic positions found in certain of these authors' key publications with a critical account of some of their shared shortcomings, which range from the ontological illusion and the talisman complex to binary normativity, historical determinism, and the social epoché. A clear juxtaposition thereby emerges between the radical historicist analytic of practice discussed in the first chapter and three of the important positions on art and politics found in the twentieth century.

The second major plane of investigation concerns one of the central focal points for contemporary debates on art and politics: the status of the avant-garde and its relation to radical experiments in politics. Often considered to be one of the privileged historical moments of close encounter between art and politics, the avant-garde of the early twentieth century shared the historical stage, in many ways, with the vanguard of the Russian Revolution. Chapter 3 opens, therefore, by exploring the 'end of illusions' thesis and the widespread assumption, in the contemporary world, that the avant-garde and the revolutionary vanguard shared a common historical destiny, leading them both toward their eventual—but perhaps inevitable—failure. After briefly touching on the consequences of this thesis in contemporary critical theory, it undertakes a detailed investigation of the flagship publication by Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Unearthing its deep-seated idealism, it calls into question its conceptual reduction of the avant-garde to an undertaking whose objective is logically impossible: to destroy the concept of art while producing inorganic works of art. Chapter 4 mobilizes the alternative historical logic and theory of social agency developed in chapter 1 in order to foreground specific elements that problematize the nearly ubiquitous thesis on the failure of the avant-garde. These range from the diversity and variability of avant-garde practices (as well as of their social circulation and reception) to different understandings of social efficacy, the spread of the temporality of avant-garde production in the art world, and what is arguably the triumph of the avant-garde in certain forms of architecture and design. The juxtaposition of these two chapters functions as an

untimely invitation to reopen, in a new light, the supposedly closed question of the avant-garde encounters between art and politics.

Part 3 introduces a new level of analysis by turning to the important work of a contemporary thinker, Jacques Rancière, who has proposed a complete rethinking of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and who has significantly reconfigured the historical models for understanding their development. Chapter 5 meticulously outlines his position and situates it in relationship to the work of some of his illustrious predecessors, including Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. It highlights the specificity of what could be schematically referred to as his Copernican revolution insofar as he rejects the search for the privileged link between aesthetics and politics in favor of studying their consubstantiality as distributions of the sensible. Chapter 6 focuses on one of the fundamental contradictions that plagues Rancière's apparently novel reopening of the question of art and politics: his affirmation of the consubstantiality of aesthetics and politics is curtailed by his incessant claims that art and politics proper never truly meet in any determined sense. By unpacking this contradiction, it argues that Rancière's work is ultimately beset by many of the shortcomings highlighted in the writings of his precursors. In contrast to his approach, and in line with the arguments advanced in the preceding parts, this chapter proposes to shift the nature of the debate from the politics of aesthetics to the social politicity of aesthetic practices.

The fourth and final layer of analysis marshals many of the arguments of the previous chapters in order to develop an account of social politic-ity. Chapter 7 is an extended case study that seeks to demonstrate the relevancy of the conceptual reconfiguration undertaken in the book as a whole. By concentrating on the extreme case of works of art that are purportedly apolitical—the paintings by the Abstract Expressionists—it examines the social politic-ity of their work as it is bound up in the complex matrices of Cold War power politics. At the same time, it mobilizes the alternative logic of history and theory of social agency developed in the earlier parts of the book in order to provide a specific account of the cultural battlefield of artistic and political practices. The concluding chapter serves as a final stratum that draws out the ultimate consequences from the ongoing critique

## INTRODUCTION

of the ontological illusion and the talisman complex. It also expands the argument in favor of an examination of the social politicity inherent in the production, circulation, and reception of works of art. It thereby provides a developed overview and synthetic rearticulation of many of the key themes of the book.

As so many layers in a dense palimpsest, these eight chapters illuminate one another through juxtaposition and reciprocal resonance. The overall objective is to marshal motley points of view in a manifold of diverse argumentative strata in order to open space for rethinking art and politics in terms of a radical historicist orientation, which recognizes the existence of multiple forms of social agency and provides a praxeological account of cultural activities. Instead of purporting to have discovered the true or authentic bridge between two ontological entities, or definitively concluding that there is no connection between them, this book examines and intervenes in the social force field of immanently constituted practices in order to try to displace the theoretical coordinates governing the debate on ‘art’ and ‘politics.’

# 1

## FOR A RADICAL HISTORICIST ANALYTIC OF AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL PRACTICES

### IMMANENT, TRANSCENDENT, AND INTERVENTIONIST CONCEPTS

*But if the colors in the original merge without a hint of any outline won't it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? . . . This is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics.*

---

—LUDWIG WITGENSTEIN

There is no such thing as art and politics in general. They do not exist as natural entities, cultural invariants, universal concepts, or strictly unified practices. There are only variable theoretical configurations and constellations of practices that are identified as artistic or political within variegated societies at diverse points in time. However, the naturalization of these terms and a lack of ethnographic distance from our own cultural practices tend to foster the ontological illusion, or the mistaken assumption that there is—or even must be—a ‘being’ of art and politics, which can be identified once and for all. This illusion has guided many a thinker in their quest for a theoretical El Dorado in which conceptual

elements would be forever present in their most pristine form. It has led, for instance, to the motley kinds of retrospective or archeological teleology by which thinkers myopically project the end point of history back onto its beginning as if art and politics as they exist today had always existed. It is equally at the origin of the ethnocentric projection of one's own cultural forms onto the sundry societies that have inhabited the planet. Finally, it is the primary source of the seemingly endless attempts to discover the privileged link between these hypostatized elements, as if there were a single, natural relation between art and politics that could be determined once and for all.

Relativist blackmail is one of the strongest deterrents to the full-scale rejection of the ontological illusion: we are told that if there are no stable entities or fixed concepts, then everything will be swept into an abysmal vortex of chaotic flux and relativist pandemonium. In countering this blackmail and the simplistic choice between universalism and relativism, we can take our cue from the work of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein:

What is the meaning of a word? . . . The questions "What is length?," "What is meaning?," "What is the number one?" etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)<sup>1</sup>

The existence of terms such as *art* and *politics* immediately suggests that there must be some *thing* that corresponds to them. In fact, if we are unable to detail the common property at the core of such words, it is often assumed that we have not grasped their true meaning. However, this is precisely where Wittgenstein intervenes in order to break with an extremely widespread but misguided conception of the pragmatics of language:

The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but



also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term. When Socrates asks the question, “what is knowledge?” he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Wittgenstein adeptly points out that problems only arise when we try to transcend the actual use of terms in order to establish conceptual generalities. There is, in fact, no problem at the level of pragmatic function. In many ways, he thereby takes sides with Socrates’s interlocutors, who describe the use of terms rather than trying to abstract from them in order to isolate a supposedly essential feature. Taking the example of Socrates’s question “what is knowledge?” he declares: “We should reply: ‘There is no one exact usage of the word ‘knowledge’; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used.’”<sup>3</sup> The same could be said of terms like *art* and *politics*: there is no definitive conceptual feature unifying all of their uses. Therefore, it is a methodological mistake to search for an exact usage or a single, essential property.

This does not, however, mean that such general terms thereby fall prey to sheer relativism. On Wittgenstein’s account, family resemblances link various uses together without reducing them to a common property:

We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term “game” to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap.<sup>4</sup>

The abandonment of the misguided search for common properties does not, therefore, condemn him to a form of linguistic relativism in which terminological and conceptual use endlessly fluctuates. On the contrary, he insists on the praxeological status of language and the role of the immanent normativity of social usage: rather than being a purified semantic order based on strictly defined rules and firm definitions, language is properly speaking

a practice whose variable forms are mediated by cultural customs and social norms.<sup>5</sup> Devoid of common properties, terms nonetheless function according to family resemblances within general fields of socially accepted usage. The fact that these fields do not have clearly delimited borders does not inhibit them from functioning (on the contrary):

For remember that in general we don't use language according to strict rules—it hasn't been taught us by means of strict rules, either. *We*, in our discussions on the other hand, constantly compare language with a calculus proceeding according to exact rules. This is a very one-sided way of looking at language. In practice we very rarely use language as such a calculus. For not only do we not think of the rules of usage—of definitions, etc.—while using language, but when we are asked to give such rules, in most cases we aren't able to do so. We are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don't know their real definition, but because there is no real "definition" to them. To suppose that there *must* be would be like supposing that whenever children play with a ball they play a game according to strict rules.<sup>6</sup>

One of the drawbacks to Wittgenstein's methodological orientation is that he sometimes writes as if it were sufficient to simply describe the present state of a particular language, and he regularly appeals to a rather homogenous form of linguistic common sense based on what we would say in a particular instance (as if there were a generic *das Man* serving as the universal arbiter for linguistic use). Fortunately, there are, however, a number of important passages where he clearly distances himself from this ahistorical and partially extra-social account of language. In *The Blue Book*, for instance, he touches on the temporal process of language acquisition and correlates language games with "the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words."<sup>7</sup> In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he also appeals to the importance of inquiring into the genetic process by which we learn the meaning of particular words. Moreover, he emphasizes, on at least a few occasions, the historicity of language itself, as in his description of language as an ancient city and his assertion that "new types of language,

new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten.”<sup>8</sup>

This theme is important to Wittgenstein’s posthumously published lectures on aesthetics. He begins by asserting that “the subject (Aesthetics) is very big and entirely misunderstood as far as I can see.”<sup>9</sup> He then appeals to the genetic methodology just mentioned: “One thing we always do when discussing a word is to ask how we were taught it.”<sup>10</sup> It is against the backdrop of these introductory remarks that he affirms that language games change with history as well as with the social and cultural context. For instance, he not only makes reference to historical changes in language, but he claims that “what we now call a cultured taste perhaps didn’t exist in the Middle Ages. An entirely different game is played in different ages.”<sup>11</sup> He also evinces an interest in sociocultural differences, clearly suggesting that language games can radically diverge from culture to culture: “Imagine an entirely different civilization. Here there is something you might call music, since it has notes. They treat music like this: certain music makes them walk like this.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, he hints in passing at the ways in which individuals within the same culture can have divergent social trajectories that lead them to use words in different ways.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is ultimately true that Wittgenstein only provided rudimentary tools for thinking the historicity and cultural variability of linguistic practices, he nonetheless formulated a compelling critique of the ‘craving for generality’ and adumbrated a praxeological account of language that begins with social use rather than with the supposed calculus of common properties, essential meanings, and strict semantic rules. His praxeology can therefore serve as a helpful reference point for developing a heuristic distinction between three different conceptual registers, which are always part of specific practices: transcendent ideas, immanent notions, and interventionist concepts. Transcendent ideas, to begin with, emerge out of the pretension to have grasped the common property of general terms, which are thereby defined once and for all. Insofar as they seek to transcend the sociohistorical world or, at the very least, synthesize all social use at one point in time, they are ultimately rooted in the illusion of transcendence, or the mistaken assumption that a general term has a single meaning based on

a common conceptual property. For this assumption to hold, signification would have had to be established transcendentally, and there would need to be some form of external, more or less metaphysical guarantee to meaning. “Let’s not forget,” Wittgenstein adeptly proclaims, “that a word hasn’t got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word *really* means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it.”<sup>14</sup>

Unlike transcendent ideas, immanent notions are part and parcel of specific sociohistorical practices within a particular conjuncture. Since they emerge in unique fields of activity, they are bound up with distinctive cultural matrices, which themselves are dynamically negotiated and renegotiated between various forms and levels of agency. Moreover, insofar as they are social phenomena, immanent notions are not univocal. Within the same sociohistorical juncture there can be, and often are, motley and rival accounts of general concepts such as art and politics. Against the tendency of transcendent conceptuality to ignore or bracket the social dimension of thought, it is crucial to insist on the ways in which concepts are part of social practices. It should therefore be no cause for dismay that there are no strict limits to immanent notions. As Wittgenstein regularly explains, general terms do not need to be clearly delimited in order to function in social discourse. In discussing the word *game*, for instance, he writes: “how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary [*Grenzen*]? No. You can *draw* one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word ‘game.’)”<sup>15</sup> It is, of course, possible to give precise definitions in particular instances. However, these are by no means necessary, nor do they automatically hold for all other uses of the term: “we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.) No more than it took the definition: I pace = 75 cm. to make the measure of length ‘one pace’ usable.”<sup>16</sup>

There are no strict limits, in part, because immanent notions have a polyvocal social life. Various uses are proposed, corroborated or contested in the social sphere, and there are no predefined borders or strict guidelines for linguistic practice (although there are, of course, embodied norms

concerning common use as well as ex post facto grammatical rules). In spite of the fact that there is oftentimes a socially produced illusion of fixity, which is partially due to the operative timescale of human beings and a relative blindness to long-term historical transformations and social variability, the field of immanent conceptuality is dynamic. This is not only due to ongoing social struggles (which are sometimes masked by their institutionalized results), but as well to the interaction between diverse cultural matrices, which themselves are devoid of rigid borders. To foreground the dynamism of immanent notions and the fact that a purely given or stable immanence is an abstraction, it is worth proposing a working distinction between three forms of cultural transition: transit, transfer, and transplant.<sup>17</sup> Transit, to begin with, records the movement of objects—including texts, works of art, and other material traces of theoretical and cultural nexuses—over time and across social space. Human beings as well as their practices can, of course, transit between different cultural conjunctures, thereby serving as transformative vehicles in the ongoing reconfigurations of an immanent field. Transfer refers to the displacement of a system of meaning and value from one juncture to another due to the transit of historical phenomena manifesting an alternative immanent conceptuality. The transit of Aristotle's *Poetics* from Ancient Greece to seventeenth-century France, for instance, contributed to a cultural transfer in which Aristotle's work both was reconstituted and helped reconstitute a different sociohistorical conjuncture. Transplant indexes the importation or exportation of an entire theoretical and practical matrix, such as the spread of the modern European concept and practice of art around the world through the globalization of the art market. All three of these phenomena can intertwine in diverse ways, and they take place, of course, in a larger realm of interaction, since they do not necessarily dominate the entire field of cultural activity. They contribute in various ways to what we might call the transition of immanent fields of cultural practice.

In the case of keywords like *art* and *politics*, immanent notions actually function as veritable concepts in struggle, or nodal points in a social battle bereft of a final arbiter. This does not, however, mean that individual speakers can arbitrarily define all of their terms in any way that they choose, or

that they can capriciously skip between cultural contexts as in a game of anthropological hopscotch (in part because cultures do not function like secure, static boxes). On the contrary, since language is a collective practice, the use of terms contributes to the formation of a social archive. Indeed, the gradual sedimentation of social use produces what we might call, by appropriating and modifying Jean-Paul Sartre's vocabulary, a linguistic or conceptual practico-inert: a sedimented series of past practices that continue to have practical effects on conceptual use in the present.<sup>18</sup> This does not imply that there is a pure pole of active practice and another of inert institutionalization, but rather that linguistic and theoretical practices attest to an inertia by which there is a complex interactive exchange between the social archive and acts of speaking and thinking (which are at once constituted and constituting). For descriptive reasons, we can distinguish between the institutionalized practico-inert and the practico-inert of use. The former results from the official codification of language through dictionaries, grammar books, and education, whereas the latter is constituted by the unofficial sedimentation of practice that is part of our linguistic common sense, comprising a network of connotations, contextual relations, practical fields of application, and so forth. When Wittgenstein refers to what we would or would not say in particular instances, he is usually appealing to the practico-inert of use, which has largely been institutionalized *ex post facto*. In certain instances, his references to the language of *das Man* are problematic in their generality and seem to presuppose that every individual speaker has the same social archive of linguistic use. However, this is by no means always the case, and it is important to emphasize the extent to which the constitution of the practico-inert is itself the result of variable practices and the singular trajectories of social agents.

It is arguable that Wittgenstein primarily sought to abandon the misguided metaphysical quest for common properties in favor of a description of what I am here calling immanent notions, and more specifically the practico-inert of linguistic use: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."<sup>19</sup> In castigating efforts to explain or deduce phenomena by searching for what is supposedly hidden behind them, he austerey proclaims: "philosophy really *is* 'purely descriptive.'"<sup>20</sup> In

this regard, he runs the risk of reducing philosophic practice to the interminable, platitudinous task of drawing up an infinite inventory of linguistic use based on the social archive that forms the basis of linguistic common sense. If this is indeed the case, then Herbert Marcuse was surely right to lambaste as “one-dimensional thought” Wittgenstein’s endeavor to develop a philosophy that “leaves everything as it is”: “Paying respect to the prevailing variety of meanings and usages, to the power and common sense of ordinary speech, while blocking (as extraneous material) analysis of what this speech says about the society that speaks it, linguistic philosophy suppresses once more what is continually suppressed in this universe of discourse and behavior.”<sup>21</sup>

The reduction of philosophy to the chary, conservative, and tedious task of drawing up an endless catalog of what exists recalls the well-known joke concerning a drunk who is searching for something beneath a streetlight. When a passerby asks him what he is doing, he replies that he is looking for his keys, which fell when he tripped over the curb. The passerby joins in the search, but after a quarter of an hour there is still no sign of the keys. “Where exactly did you trip?” asks the passerby. “About half a block up the street,” replies the drunk. “Then why are you looking for your keys here if you lost them half a block up the street?” The drunk retorts: “Because the light’s a lot better here!” The endeavor to simply describe linguistic use—in spite of certain benefits—runs the risk of becoming a task not dissimilar from this quixotic, inebriated search beneath a streetlight: it is definitely easier than other undertakings, but it is clearly limited since it is destined to leave things exactly as they are.

It is important to specify that Wittgenstein occasionally insisted on the need to describe not only the use of terms but also “the whole environment” and “ways of living.”<sup>22</sup> And on at least one occasion he specified that his method “is not merely to enumerate actual usages of words, but rather deliberately to invent new ones, some of them because of their absurd appearance.”<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, just as he paid only a modicum of attention to the historicity and cultural variability of linguistic practices, he largely ignored at least an explicit engagement with what I propose to call interventionist concepts. The latter function as *idées-forces* that seek to displace the

established order of immanent conceptuality. They are incursions into the force field of cultural notions that prove that we are not simply condemned to reproduce—via what we might call the passive interventions in which we regularly participate willy-nilly—the dominant conceptual practico-inert or the status quo of discursive use. In many ways, it could actually be argued that Wittgenstein’s own critique of metaphysical philosophy functions as just such an intervention, which seeks to redefine the very nature of philosophical practice. More germane to our immediate concerns here, we could cite the case of Cornelius Castoriadis’s intervention into the field of politics and his attack on the idea of political *epistēmē* in the name of understanding politics as a collective process of social struggle whose very object is the institution of society as such. Jacques Rancière’s polemical engagement with the field of aesthetics could serve as another example insofar as he aims at dismantling the rote interpretations of art history in the name of entirely reworking the dominant conceptual assumptions regarding the supposed nature of what is called modern art.

It is often falsely assumed that concepts can only play a truly interventionist role if they are axiomatically postulated as more or less transcendent elements irreducible to the situation at hand. In fact, some thinkers denigrate all of those who refuse philosophical fiats as if the choice were simply between the reproduction of the status quo and the sovereign imposition of a concept by intellectual decree. Let us briefly consider the work of two contemporary thinkers who have provided an ontological account of art—to take but this example—as a transhistorical phenomenon in terms of what I am here calling transcendent ideas: Alain Badiou and Cornelius Castoriadis.<sup>24</sup> The former explicitly identifies with the Platonic tradition and asserts that art has a transhistorical essence: it is a singular thought process of Ideas that serves to trace the effects of an event in the real. An event is a supplement to the situation that can be neither directly named nor represented by the means available within the situation itself. All true art, therefore, interrupts the given situation of aesthetic expression by acting on an event and ushering Ideas into the situation. This is what links Picasso’s rendering of horses to the authors of the cave paintings at Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc, as Badiou claims in the preface to *Logics of Worlds*. In spite of the different



historical circumstances, the essence of art remains a constant because the paintings in both cases attest to the eternal Idea of a horse.<sup>25</sup>

Although Castoriadis does not identify with the Platonist tradition and is more explicitly dedicated to historical research than Badiou, he nonetheless provides—somewhat surprisingly, given his other work—an ontological account of the transhistorical nature of art. He claims that the institution of society has always sought to produce a web of meaning suspended over what he calls Chaos, the Groundless, the Abyss.<sup>26</sup> Whereas religion has attempted to present the Abyss while simultaneously shrouding it, art—particularly in the form of the masterpiece—is properly speaking the “presentation of the Abyss (of Chaos, of the Groundless).”<sup>27</sup> More specifically, it gives form to the chaos underlying the cosmos by creating new worlds, while simultaneously reminding society that it lives on the border of the Abyss. All true art thereby opens a window onto chaos and “calls into question the established significations.”<sup>28</sup> In spite of the fact that Castoriadis recognizes and insists on the social and historical specificity of cultural production as well as of some of the figures of the art world (such as the misunderstood genius, the avant-garde, and pure art), he nevertheless purports to isolate the universal and transhistorical essence of art as a window onto the chaos of being.<sup>29</sup> From the earliest cave paintings to Aztec statues, African masks, and European classical music, art has always and everywhere strived to escort humanity back to the border of the very Abyss from which it comes. “Every culture,” writes Castoriadis, “. . . creates its own path toward the Abyss.”<sup>30</sup>

These transcendent ideas of art do not properly transcend the immanent conjuncture in which they emerge. On the contrary, they are clear instantiations of a specifically modern European concept of art. As Paul Oskar Kristeller has argued, the modern system of aesthetics, in which the singular category of art serves as the general heading for the genres of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry, is a relatively recent, culturally specific phenomenon. “This system of the five major arts, which underlies all modern aesthetics and is so familiar to us all,” he writes, “is of comparatively recent origin and did not assume definite shape before the eighteenth century, although it has many ingredients which go back to classical,

medieval and Renaissance thought.”<sup>31</sup> Exploring the European tradition and examining the selective historicist assumption that the essence of art has remained a constant in spite of differing historical appearances, he demonstrates that “the Greek term for Art (*techné*) and its Latin equivalent (*ars*) do not specifically denote the ‘fine arts’ in the modern sense, but were applied to all kinds of human activities which we would call crafts or sciences.”<sup>32</sup> He also explains that “there is no medieval concept or system of the Fine Arts”: “if we want to keep speaking of medieval aesthetics, we must admit that its concept and subject matter are, for better or for worse, quite different from the modern philosophical discipline.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, he notes that “the other central concept of modern aesthetics, . . . beauty, does not appear in ancient thought or literature with its specific modern connotations. The Greek term *kalon* and its Latin equivalent (*pulchrum*) were never neatly or consistently distinguished from the moral good.”<sup>34</sup>

Explicitly drawing on the work of Kristeller, Larry Shiner has developed a detailed historical account of the new institutions of the fine arts.<sup>35</sup> He claims that all of the modern institutions, with the exception of the theater and the opera, date from the eighteenth century. He insists on the recent emergence of museums and public exhibitions, as well as of historical phenomena such as secular concerts, copyrights, literary criticism, and art history. While he admits that there were some important anticipatory signs, he insists on the strong connection between the new system of the fine arts and its institutions in the large sense of the term. He also emphasizes the way in which this system and its institutional apparatus produced a new conception of the artist and the work of art. The former was individualized as a creative genius, who delves into his or her imagination in order to give form—more or less freely—to original sensations and ideas. The work of art became a unique and self-sufficient creation bearing the indelible mark of its creator.

This modern, European idea of art, which Jacques Rancière has referred to as “art in the singular,” developed in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century according to Raymond Williams: “The emergence of an abstract, capitalized Art, with its own internal but general principles, is difficult to localize. There are several plausible C18 uses, but it was in C19

that the concept became general.”<sup>36</sup> Since that time, it is important to note that it has been applied to other time periods and cultural regions. James Clifford has highlighted, for instance, a taxonomic reconfiguration that took place around 1900, when “a large class of non-Western artifacts came to be redefined as art.”<sup>37</sup> He thereby distinguishes, à la André Malraux, between art by destination and art by metamorphosis, and he foregrounds the importance of the phenomenon of cultural transition. Moreover, by emphasizing the historicity and cultural specificity of the exhibitionary system of art, Clifford points to its relative historical dynamism: “It has not reached its final form: the positions and values assigned to collectible artifacts have changed and will continue to do so.”<sup>38</sup> It is important, however, to insist on the difference between emic and etic categories. Even though cultures are not static or well-delimited entities, we can heuristically distinguish between emic concepts, representations, values, and practices that are meaningful to the actor, on the one hand, and those that are proper to the observer and purport to be culturally neutral or etic. According to this terminology, my argument here is that art is an emic category though it is not reducible to its emic emergence but has been transferred or transplanted to other times and places (sometimes becoming emically enmeshed in new cultural practices). Inversely, my claim can be expressed as follows: there is no purely etic account of art, there is no a priori conceptual definition of the nature of aesthetics.

Rooted as they are in uncritical philosophical intuition and unquestioned cultural practices, the transcendent ideas proposed by Badiou and Castoriadis—like other such ideas, which are also found in Wittgenstein<sup>39</sup>—are largely determined by their sociohistorical conjuncture (and the practico-inert of conceptual use). They are dependent on the modern European singularization of the concept and practice of art and, more specifically, on the iconoclastic conception of art as a novel act of imaginative creation. Properly speaking, the transcendent ideas they put forth are immanent notions in disguise. They have their source in the immediate sociohistorical juncture, but they are hegemonically projected into the ethereal realm beyond, as if they could be axiomatically elevated above their theoretical force field. This is why it is appropriate to speak of the

pseudo-transcendence of crypto-immanent concepts: so-called transcendent ideas are actually faux transcendentals, or immanent concepts that an unbridled philosophic hubris attempts to pass off as transcendent. Rather than being the opposite of immanent concepts, transcendent ideas are the convoluted inversion of immanent notions that have become blind to themselves.

The dual position can help us reconfigure a given sociohistorical framework because it consists in simultaneously endeavoring to grasp an immanent conceptual network in all of its complexity and striving to intervene and displace it through specific leverage points concretely anchored in it. Interventionist concepts are primarily those notions that are formulated out of a keen awareness of a specific intersection of social forces but aim at shifting it in a particular direction (which can include the use of projected, pragmatic, or articulated universals, or even what we might call transcendental—as opposed to transcendent—ideas). Transcendent ideas lack leverage: they tend to be blind to their own determination by the immanent notional force field, and they are often hegemonically postulated with little or no grasp of the latter. Therefore, they slip back into the very conjuncture that they believe they are transcending. Interventionist concepts, on the contrary, are rooted in a diligent mapping of the plexus of immanent notions, which aims at discovering the specific points of leverage that can be used to displace the given conceptual order. Leverage, indeed, necessitates concrete points of anchorage within the sociohistorical matrix, and it also requires practical knowledge of how to use elements and forces against one another, how to make more from less, how to produce traction and gain sway by playing off of various points and structures of agency.

Using the heuristic distinction between immanent notions, transcendent ideas, and interventionist concepts, another way of formulating one of the fundamental theses in this book is that there are no transcendent ideas of art and politics. The latter are properly speaking immanent notions within particular cultures, whose field of use we can chart out within specific sociohistorical intersections by means of an analytic of aesthetic and political practices. An analytic does not presuppose the existence of an essential

property capable of conceptually unifying a given set of practices. Such a methodological orientation has far-reaching consequences for the question of art and politics. To begin with, it means abandoning the misguided search for *the* concept of art and *the* notion of politics as if there were a single transcendent idea connecting all of the practices referred to as ‘artistic’ or ‘political,’ whether it be within a particular era or throughout all time. The pragmatic or praxeological approach advocated here begins, instead, with the diverse practices labeled as ‘artistic’ or ‘political’ as well as with the processes of conceptualization that codify them. It abandons the quixotic quest for the unique ideas uniting all of these practices and instead concentrates on the practical social struggles for the definition of concepts. This does not, however, condemn us to simply describing the operative use of immanent notions. On the contrary, by recognizing that concepts are immanent to sociohistorical junctures, and are therefore modifiable, it invites us to actively intervene in order to participate in the ongoing social battles over what is called ‘art’ and ‘politics.’

## IMMANENT CONCEPTUALITY AND ACTS OF DENOMINATION

*Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.*

*(Pause.)*

*Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap.*

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—CLOV (SAMUEL BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*)

Although this is not the place for an exhaustive analysis, a brief overview of some of the fundamental stakes of the sorites paradox can serve to clarify why it is inappropriate to assume that our concepts can be precisely determined and delimited according to common properties. The name *sorites* derives from the Greek *soros*, meaning ‘heap,’ and it is used to refer to a

puzzle and a series of homologous paradoxes that ensue from it. The puzzle has to do with the difficulty of determining the precise nature of an indeterminate concept such as a heap:

Would you describe a single grain of wheat as a heap?

No.

Would you describe two grains of wheat as a heap?

No.

...

Since you must admit the existence of a heap at some point, which grain of wheat allows you to draw the line?

This puzzle can also be inverted, beginning with the claim that one hundred thousand grains of wheat is a heap and working down by subtraction. The same troubling question remains: the removal of which grain of wheat makes it lose its status as a heap? Regardless of how the puzzle is presented, the fundamental problem is that, due to the indeterminacy of the concept of heap, it appears to be impossible to identify a single grain of wheat that could definitively differentiate a heap from a non-heap. The sorites paradox pushes this puzzle to the extreme:

One grain of wheat does not make a heap.

If one grain of wheat does not make a heap, then two grains do not.

If two grains of wheat do not make a heap, then three grains do not.

...

If 99,999 grains of wheat do not make a heap, then one hundred thousand grains do not.

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One hundred thousand grains of wheat do not make a heap.

The premises of this argument appear to be true, and it relies on uncontroversial reasoning, employing only modus ponens and cut (which links together each of the sub-arguments resulting from a single application of modus ponens). However, the conclusion is intuitively false. A similar

paradox can also be arrived at by proceeding in reverse. If one is willing to admit that one hundred thousand grains of wheat make a heap, then it is possible to argue that one grain of wheat does as well since the removal of any one, single grain cannot make the difference between a heap and a non-heap. Whereas in the first version of the paradox no amount of wheat can ever make a heap, in the second version any amount of wheat necessarily makes a heap. If there are no heaps or if there are only heaps, we seem to be equally constrained in both cases: logical reasoning leads us to incontrovertible conclusions that are intuitively false.

Based on the vocabulary introduced above, it might be said that the sorites puzzle and paradox are founded on the assumption that the category of heap functions like a transcendent idea with an identifiable common property. However, if a heap is understood as an immanent notion rather than a transcendent idea, it is arguable that the paradox dissipates straightaway. Immanent notions are part and parcel of social practices, which include the collective activity of naming. General terms like *heap* do not require a common property, a transcendent essence, or a strict lexical definition in order to practically function in social exchanges. This does not mean that there is or has to be strict agreement regarding the identification of a heap of wheat. One person can refer to a certain amount of wheat as a heap according to his or her linguistic practico-inert, and another person can disagree, asserting that it is not a heap. There is no transcendent idea that could isolate the definitive feature of a heap once and for all and serve as an absolute arbiter. There are only immanent notions that are embedded in social practices, as well as interventions that attempt to modify the practico-inert of these concepts (leveraging them from their social point of anchorage).

According to this interpretation, which would of course need to be substantiated by a detailed engagement with the extensive literature on this subject, the sorites puzzle and paradox appear to result from transcendent conceptualism and the ahistorical, extra-social logicism that plagues much of formal logic. The latter, we must remind ourselves, is an abstraction from everyday social practice, and it is itself the result of a highly specific social exercise. Within the general field of linguistic practice, no strict determination

is necessary: we do not need to know exactly how many grains of wheat make a heap in order to be able to appropriately use the term. Words such as this are immanent to the practices of which they are a part, if it be the practice of farming or the practice of naming itself. Indeed, cases where we might imagine an exact definition of a heap are themselves unique social practices and only make sense within certain strictures, such as a scientific experiment in which it was decided that a heap would be defined by the existence of a precise number of grains of wheat. Far from confuting the argument for the immanent status of indeterminate concepts like heap, the establishment of these types of specialized conventions serves to further demonstrate the extent to which the meaning of terms is bound up with their social function.<sup>40</sup>

The same can be said of general concepts like art and politics. They have no common property or strict horizons that would allow us to determine once and for all their essential attributes. Therefore, the question of their precise identity cannot be based on an appeal to a definitive feature, nor can it be decided upon from a singular point in the social field. As in the more banal case of a heap of wheat, not everyone will agree on the precise moment at which art or politics can be said to exist. This does not, however, mean that these concepts are utterly vague. If there are no transcendent ideas uniting the totality of artistic and political practices, there are nonetheless immanent fields of conceptuality unique to specific sociohistorical conjunctures. These fields are the provisory and shifting results of complex forms of social and historical negotiation whose outer limits are not necessarily clearly defined. This is not only because social practices do not need strict borders in order to operate effectively. It is also due to the phenomena of transit, transfer, and transplant discussed above. Immanent notions only continue to survive if they have a social life, which imbues them with an inevitable dynamism.

The rejection of the ahistorical and extra-social formalism of transcendent conceptualism in favor of an analytic of immanent concepts does not simply constitute a naïve appeal to linguistic and conceptual common sense. To begin with, the very attempt to map out the plexus of immanent notions is an active topological intervention from a specific perspective. Secondly,



acts of denomination constitute interventions insofar as they draw provisional conceptual lines in the shifting sands of social practice. This is in part because our concepts tend to be more abstract and generalizing than the practices that they index. Indeed, one of the fundamental difficulties inherent in the very process of naming is that our linguistic armature confronts multifarious and variegated practices with an extremely limited terminology. At the same time, however, this is precisely the source of its power and its capacity to develop leverage over a situation. For if it were as detailed and variable as the practices it seeks to name, it would by this very fact lose its topological purchase.

This is precisely the issue at stake in Jorge Luis Borges's "On Exactitude in Science." In this one-paragraph fable in the form of a literary forgery, the author recounts the problematic story of a map that came to cover the very territory it purported to represent: "the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it."<sup>41</sup> Even though this seems to be perfectly in line with the dictates of scientific exactitude, at least according to a certain positivistic understanding of technical accuracy, the tale recounts the historical discovery of the utter uselessness of such cartographic precision: "The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters."<sup>42</sup> The map, when it reaches its apex as perfect mimesis, masks as much as it reveals. It loses purchase on that which it attempts to grasp as soon as it sacrifices its power of distancing. It might be said, at least in this case, that leverage emerges precisely in the gap between the infinite complexity of an immanent field and its representational organization through pragmatic intervention.

An act of denomination is, precisely, an incursion into the thicket of existence. It is the heuristic postulation of lines of demarcation within an endlessly intricate situation. Let us consider, in this regard, the important example of the modern, European concept of art discussed above. The use of such a category does not aim at isolating a single, essential idea

behind the totality of ‘artistic’ practices in a specific space-time. Instead, it seeks to provide a pragmatic label, in conceptual shorthand, for a Byzantine and dynamic practico-theoretical field, which itself is differentially distributed through the three dimensions of history (see below). Without wanting to overemphasize the parallel, it might be said that the European concept of art partially resembles what Max Weber calls an ideal-type, at least insofar as it is formed “by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present, and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to . . . one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (*Gedankenbild*).”<sup>43</sup> There is no pure form of the modern concept of art precisely because there is no a priori idea of art. There are only a posteriori notions immanent to particular practices, which change and morph through space-time via meta-static transformations (see below). Therefore, there was never a moment of discontinuous rupture in which the idea of art more or less miraculously appeared, perfectly formed, on the historical scene. Instead, there is an extremely intricate process of ongoing social transformation that has been synthetically labeled through interventionist acts of designation, which propose a working topology to gain leverage over the situation at hand.

These acts—in this case as well as in others—do not follow strict dictates. As a matter of fact, they regularly confront the ship of Theseus paradox, which has to do with the status of identity over time. The central question raised by this paradox is at what point in time—if any—a ship, whose parts are gradually replaced, becomes another ship. What is the tipping point at which a quantitative change produces a qualitative shift? However, just as in the case of the sorites paradox, this aporia appears to be founded on the assumption that the identity of a particular phenomenon is rooted in a common property. As soon as we break with the illusion of transcendence by recognizing that there are no transcendent ideas guaranteeing our conceptual, terminological, or phenomenological delimitations, the paradox dissipates (although the dilemma of interventionist denomination remains). There is no such thing as ship *x* and ship *y*, each founded on a common feature or transcendent property. Instead, there is an infinitely complex temporal process within which acts of denomination intervene in an effort to organize

phenomena in particular ways. These acts do not carve nature at the joints, precisely because there are no a priori joints. They draw lines in the shifting sands of existence. Although they are rooted in the practico-inert of specific linguistic practices, they ultimately remain fallibilistic incursions that propose an operative topology to orient us in a dynamic and intricate process of ongoing transformation.

It is for all of these reasons that this book seeks to extend and develop one of Castoriadis's notable claims—"there is no science of politics"—by arguing that there is no *epistēmē* of art and other such general concepts.<sup>44</sup> There are only ongoing social struggles over meaning and values, as well as the institutionalized results of previous battles. Indeed, if there is no *epistēmē* of art and politics in the sense of an objective knowledge of their fundamental nature, it is precisely because the transcendent idea of art and politics is an illusion: they are dynamic social phenomena with no a priori being. Moreover, the very assumption that there should be, or needs to be, such knowledge merits the label of the epistemic illusion because no such requirement has ever been a prerequisite for the operative functioning of social practices. Instead of transcendent ideas, there are—or are not—various immanent notions of art and politics in changing sociohistorical conjunctures. It is this immanent field of conceptuality that allows us to advance the claim, for example, that *this* is art or *this* is politics. However, as we have seen, this does not mean that immanent notions are rigorously determined or that they have strict semantic borders. It also does not imply that we are condemned to relativist battles between more or less determined forms of *doxa* or popular opinion, as if the dissolution of the epistemic illusion were somehow equivalent to the fall of humanity into relativism, if not blind subjectivism. On the contrary, there is the possibility of cultivating what we might call a type of *phronesis* or practical knowledge by which we can at one and the same time come to terms with an inherited order of immanent conceptuality and intervene effectively within it. Such practical knowledge is not simply determined by a relative context. Instead, it is developed out of a reflexive effort to provide a topology of a given theoretical force field and find leverage points within it for developing interventionist concepts.