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**Aesthetics
and Contemporary Discourse**

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Radical Aesthetics

This essay discusses three examples of contemporary cultural radicalism in artistic production as well as interpretative practice, in order to find out how the relationship between the political and the aesthetic is re-defined in these three cases and whether there is something like a characteristic pattern emerging in current revisionist practices.¹ The context for this discussion is the radical critique of the aesthetic and the idea of a specifically literary value which may have found its strongest and most consequent expression in neo-historicist approaches influenced by Foucault. In a book on Henry James with the already telling title *Henry James and The Art of Power*, Mark Seltzer summarizes this position succinctly:

Whereas Foucault in his earlier work – in *The Order of Things*, for instance – represented the literary as an essentially transgressive counter-discourse; he more recently has viewed the literary, not as a privileged source of resistance to normalizing and regulative social practices, but rather as one among other disciplinary practices. By this view, literature has no privileged status at all, although its claim to be oppositional, as we will see, functions as part of a more general ideology of power.²

How can we then still make choices among different items of a discursive formation? Does this relegation of the literary to the level of disciplinary practice imply that criteria of political analysis should guide our choices

1 By cultural radicalism I mean all those forms of radical thought after the linguistic turn which have replaced political radicalism. While the latter placed its hopes in radical change on a political theory and analysis of capitalist society, its subsequent disappointment over the lack of resonance and acceptance by the “masses” turned its argument toward structural elements of the system. Political radicalism put its hopes on a particular political principle and party within the spectrum of political possibilities, and, more specifically, on the eventual ability of the oppressed to gain a measure of political consciousness through the experience of their oppression. In contrast, the various forms of poststructuralist thought, in one way or another, all focus on all-embracing systemic features such as the state apparatus, the symbolic order, a discursive formation, or a logocentrism which pervades all acts of sense-making. To such a degree is this true that even oppositional gestures are effects of the system.

2 Mark Seltzer, *Henry James & the Art of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984) 176. Hereafter cited as *Art of Power*.

in literary criticism? In its sweeping claim that the aesthetic is the political, cultural radicalism creates instructive difficulties and dilemmas of choice. In this context, my three examples provide interesting case studies for some of the problems that result from the current radical rejection of the idea of the aesthetic.

My observations on whether there exists something like “a radical aesthetics” and what its current form and function may be were provoked by the encounter with the work of a highly regarded American artist of the 1980s, Jenny Holzer, who was elected to represent the United States at the Biennale in Venice in 1990 and won the Golden Lion Award for her installation (called the Venice installation). Clearly, Holzer’s choice as representative of contemporary American art – “one of the most prestigious honors in American art”³ – reflects new priorities in artistic values: “The selection of this solid and still emergent artist by an impressive advisory committee of seven museum professionals brought together by the National Endowment for the Arts and the United States Information Agency is intended to send several messages. It is a statement of change. Holzer is the first woman to be awarded the United States pavilion at a Biennale. Her work reflects the current widespread interest in site-specific, socially concerned art.”⁴

Holzer went to the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1970s, and like many artists in those days she became interested in a more public-spirited, even political art. She began by putting words into her paintings. Eventually she dropped the painting altogether, and started mounting messages in many public places, including billboards, the sides of subway cars, and park benches, baseball parks.⁵

Such a movement away from the canvas and “out into the streets” reflects contemporary attempts to overcome the separation of art and life by invading the public sphere.

3 *New York Times* (27 July 1988), II, 15:5. Holzer’s installation is described and documented in Jenny Holzer, ed., *The Venice Installation*, United States Pavilion, The 44th Venice Biennale, 27 May–30 September 1990 (Buffalo: Hoffmann, 1990).

4 *New York Times* (7 August 1988), II, 29:1. See also Arthur C. Danto: “Jenny Holzer is to be the official U.S. representative in the 1990 Venice Biennale, and it is difficult to think of a more appropriate artistic emissary, for hers is in every sense state-of-the-art art and a symbolic condensation of our national culture – up-to-the-minute in technology, populist in format, moralistic in tone.” *The Nation* (12 February 1990): 213. In the monumental European exhibition “American Art in the 20th Century,” first shown in Berlin, Holzer was one of only three artists of the Eighties considered important enough to be included in the exhibition.

5 Mark Stevens, “Jenny Take a Ride,” *The New Republic* (26 March 1990): 30.

Some of the messages of the “wordsmith” Holzer, as she has been called, are ironic comments on American life and mass culture such as her Las Vegas electronic billboard messages “Money Creates Taste,” or “Protect Me From What I Want.”⁶ As Stevens points out, “these signs are funny, and telling, in their context.” But it is also true that “such signs may not amount to much.”⁷ Some are, in fact, deliberately ephemeral – for example, when she prints messages on cash-register receipts. At the same time, these subversive messages are unexpected and unsettling in their new context; they catch us by surprise and thus capture our attention, if only for a passing moment. In a public sphere flooded by commercial messages, they function “as if they were smuggled, in messages in a bottle.”⁸ At one point, Holzer wanted more, however, and began to introduce manifesto-style statements about revolutionary politics into her texts, such as “Rejoice our times are intolerable” or “Only dire circumstances can precipitate the overthrow of oppressors.” As a rule, such lines remain juxtaposed with aphorisms or even clichés. This juxtaposition creates playful combinations of the serious and the banal, the relevant and the irrelevant, the political and the apparently private, thereby linking these spheres on the same hierarchical level and making them part of a continuous circulation of cultural material which, in the case of Jenny Holzer, can come to a momentary stop either on a park bench or on the floor of the American pavilion in Venice.

There are several interesting moves and counter-moves at work here which can tell a lot about the current dilemmas of an artist who wants to be both avantgarde and radical. One way to remain on the cutting edge of artistic developments is to radicalize formal experimentation. However, since the idea of the aesthetic is under attack, this can no longer be sufficient in itself. On the other hand, a mere politicization of cultural material cannot be sufficient either, not only because it would hold little prestige in art circles but also because it would disregard cultural radicalism’s critique of representation. Thus, the two levels and sources of cultural authority have to be brought together in new ways by juxtaposing

6 Bruce Ferguson, “Wordsmith. An Interview with Jenny Holzer,” *Art in America* (December 1986): 108–115, 153. Before the Venice installation, Holzer, apart from other projects, had produced the following series: “Truisms” (1977–79), “Inflammatory Essays” (1979–82), “Living” (1980–82), “Survival” (1983–85), “Under A Rock” (1986), “Laments” (1987–89). “Truisms” is a series of alphabetically ordered one-line statements. The other series comprise either single sentences, or paragraphs without any discernible order of sequence except that of ironic comment and semantic rupture.

7 Stevens 30.

8 Stevens 30.

two modes and types of statement. The more radical this juxtaposition is, however, the greater its inner dehierarchizing effect, and the greater also the danger of withdrawing authority from the political statements. In this case, the text is in danger of being considered politically banal, of teasing us with a political message that is not backed up by argument and analysis. Thus, a likely mode of reception is that of a curiosity soon disappointed, of a passing glance which quickly moves on to other messages, resembling the way in which we take note of advertisements with which Holzer wants her texts to compete. Or, to put it differently: the more the idea of representation is subverted by means of formal experimentation and dehierarchization, the greater the danger that the text will become a quickly forgotten signal amongst a constant flow of similar messages.

How can this type of radically dehierarchized avantgarde text protect itself from such a fate and distinguish itself from the daily flow and flood of mass-produced communication? Ironically enough, only by sending out a signal that what we have here is art. How can this be achieved, however, without appealing to the authority of that which one wants to undermine by moving away from the canvas, the image, and other traces of representation? If traditional aesthetic signals of "art" can no longer be employed, one way of distinguishing the text or object as art from, for example, advertising material, lies in offering something this other material has not and cannot offer, namely the promise and claim of political relevance or, for that matter, "seriousness." In a fascinating exchange between Holzer and interviewer Bruce Ferguson, this issue emerges with a clarity rarely achieved in characterizations and self-characterizations of the avantgarde:

B.F.: The following terms have been associated with your work: "violent displacement" (Carter Ratcliff), "uncertainty, multiplicity" (Jeanne Siegel), "skewed content" (Jenny Holzer), "slightly schizoid" (Lynn Zelevansky) and "promiscuous mixing of signs" (Hal Foster). These are the very terms of the historical avantgarde's attempts, now failed, to raise consciousness. How is it possible at this time to make effective art using these methods when these very techniques are now the lifeblood of corporate media productions – of Hollywood and TV?

J.H.: They've certainly absorbed the techniques and often use them better than any avant-garde artist because they have more money to throw at it. But they definitely don't use the same content that I do, so it goes back to that maneuver I discussed of putting very surprising content in a very ordinary format, or in an avant-garde practice that has become familiar. People are used

to seeing something surprising selling breath mints. They're not used to looking at anything serious. Serious is shocking a lot of times.⁹

Avantgarde art needs the "serious statement," preferably in the form of a moral or political commitment; in order to be rescued from the consequences of its own radical experimentation, that is, from its own attack on the idea of the work of art. This, I want to claim, is one of the reasons for the surprising reemergence of the political in a postmodern situation characterized by a far-reaching dehierarchization of cultural values, including those of art.

The reemergence of the political in contemporary art does not simply reflect a longing for certainties or a renaissance of ideology. It is part of an increasingly radical process of formal experimentation and innovation, described by Jürgen Peper and others.¹⁰ Once moral, social, or aesthetic hierarchies are successfully undermined, another source of authorization is needed. This constitutes an interesting trajectory:

- 1) Because the aesthetic masks political power, radicalism wants to subvert the authority of the aesthetic.
- 2) To counter the potential loss of status and influence resulting from radical dehierarchization, however, the literary text or aesthetic object needs a new marker of its own status as art.
- 3) This new marker for distinguishing artistic work from other cultural material can only come from one of the remaining areas of cultural authority such as the area of political engagement. This extension of the sphere of the political cannot leave the political unaffected, however. It is contaminated and transformed by that whose authority it wants to replace – the aesthetic. The result is an aestheticization of politics, as can be seen in such recent developments as victim chic, romantic self-Africanization, re-ethnicization, the fetishizing of "the other," and, above all, a rhetorical inflation and omnipresence of the magic word "political" that has led to what, very fittingly, has been called "the politics of everything."

The political, then, has to pay a price for its victory over the aesthetic: increasingly, it is no longer tied to a political theory or position but stands for the idea of the necessity of political engagement itself. The artist Jenny Holzer, we learn, is an artist, even a true avantgarde artist, because

⁹ Ferguson 114.

¹⁰ Jürgen Peper, *Bewusstseinslagen des Erzählens und erzählte Wirklichkeiten* (Leiden: Brill, 1966) and "Das Zeitalter der heuristischen Epoché," *Working Paper* 31 (Berlin: J.F. Kennedy Institute, 1991).

she is committed – not necessarily, however, to any particular ideological creed but to the idea and necessity of political commitment itself.¹¹ Because of their fragmentation and Holzer's technique of ironic juxtaposition, we hardly remember the political slogans themselves, but we remember that Jenny Holzer is an artist who works with political messages and is thus one of the politically aware. No political theory or even coherent political position is needed for this kind of engagement and therefore the commitments are, in principle, interchangeable. Auping, for example, characterizes one of the more recent of Holzer's works, *Laments*, by saying:

Indeed, the *Laments* are the genesis of a series of extreme meditations on death, and some of the current events that make it a constant mental image in the late twentieth century: AIDS, the fragile state of the environment, world politics and nuclear threats, to mention only a few.¹²

This is a remarkable statement: AIDS, the environment, world politics and nuclear threats: *to mention only a few*. Should there be radical demand, other causes could be added. Obviously, there is a wide choice of disasters for the purpose of dramatizing one's own personal commitment. One is reminded of the popular-music scene, where commitments, depending on individual initiatives but also changing cultural fashions, can range from AIDS to Somalia and ultimately serve a purpose of self-advertisement.¹³ I mention this not to be polemic or facetious but to draw attention to the fact that similar developments can be observed in entirely different areas of cultural production and that they therefore may have a common social basis: They stand in the service of what Robert Bellah and

11 John Howell tries to express the same idea in positive terms: "Although Holzer describes her current political stance in self-deprecating terms – 'When I was younger, I wanted to go fight with Che in the jungle, but now I'm just a standard leftie-liberal' – it's clear that her sense of moral outrage is extending her art into new, potent forms of expression." "Jenny Holzer: The Message Is the Medium," *ARTNews* (Summer 1988): 124.

12 Michael Auping, "Reading Holzer or Speaking in Tongues," Holzer 31.

13 A report in *Art in America* on an anti-Reagan campaign by "Jenny Holzer and 21 other artists" is instructive in this respect. The 3-page article contains a brief description of the project called "Sign on a Truck" which basically only emphasizes the anti-Reagan direction of the campaign, followed by two pages of listings and pictures of the participating artists, graphically arranged like a roll of honor. Although this is 'political' art, there is no political argument even in rudimentary form, just an advertisement of participation in this progressive affair. *Art in America* (January 1985): 89–91.

his group call expressive individualism which, in their analysis, has replaced economic individualism as the dominant system of cultural values in Western societies. In economic individualism, economic and social achievement is the supreme goal. Self-realization means to get ahead on one's own initiative. This requires, above all, self-discipline, a willingness to subordinate personal goals of self-fulfilment to socially defined ideals of economic and social success, and provides self-esteem through one's position in a social hierarchy. In expressive individualism, on the other hand, at least as far as a professional middle-class is concerned, social security and professional success are more or less taken for granted, and the search for wealth is "put aside [...] in favor of deeper cultivation of the self."¹⁴ Benjamin Franklin's bow to the wisdom of convention "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise" is replaced by Walt Whitman's "I celebrate myself" and a search for self-expression against all cultural constraints and conventions: "For Whitman, success had little to do with material acquisition." For him, "the ultimate use of American's independence was to cultivate and express the self and explore its vast social and cosmic identities."¹⁵ In expressive individualism, self-esteem is thus gained through ever new forms of cultural self-dramatization and role-taking. Nowadays, political commitment, I claim, has become such a form of self-expression, because – after the promises of experimental art are exhausted and the aesthetic has come under radical suspicion – the political is one of the few realms left which still holds a promise of relevance and importance. Thus, the separation of politics and aesthetics is indeed overcome and the two are reunited, although in an unforeseen and entirely unexpected sense: namely, as equally useful cultural options of expressive individualism.

Disciplining Henry James

The transformation of political radicalism into an instrument of cultural self-expression and self-definition can explain several striking features of the new cultural radicalism. It explains why this radicalism has been confined, by and large, to academic life and to cultural avantgarde movements. In both cases, radicalism does not serve as a theory of political action, but as a vehicle for avantgarde claims and/or professional distinction and self-assertion. The observation that radicalism and political com-

14 See Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 33.

15 Bellah 34–35.

mitment are in the process of being transformed into options for a new type of expressive individualism can also explain a puzzling, almost parasitic dependence of radical and revisionist discussions of art on that which one wants to undermine and displace. The case of Henry James criticism is especially interesting in this respect. Because James was one of the heroes of the long-dominant formalist tradition in literary criticism, his work poses a special challenge to radical revisionism. This revision has gone through various stages, reflecting the gradual radicalization of literary studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Already in 1978, Henry Nash Smith had described the belief in the autonomous artist attributed to James as a form of self-deception exploded by World War I.¹⁶ In the following years, several studies set out to demonstrate that the supposedly "autonomous" artist James was much more strongly influenced by the popular literature of his time and much more market-oriented than he or the bulk of James criticism had ever been willing to admit. (There were even suggestions that James would have been only too glad to "sell out" to the public and that his real problem was that of not getting bought.) But while such claims of a secret complicity with dominant values are still based on the assumption of a personal flaw or weakness (for example, an unresolved ambivalence toward success), more radical critics began to insist that this complicity is really embedded in structural elements and testifies to the all-pervasive impact of the commodity form or the disciplining powers of discourse in the Foucauldian sense.¹⁷ In a landmark reading of this type of revisionist "complicity-criticism," Jean Christophe Agnew proposes to treat "James's writings as clues to the ways that feeling and perception were restructured to accommodate the ubiquity and liquidity of the commodity form."¹⁸ In undermining a "traditional, aesthetic critique of consumer culture" by revealing the presence of the commodity form even "in the life and work of one of American Consumer culture's earliest critics,"¹⁹ Agnew can claim that social structure asserts itself triumphantly against any promise of aesthetic transcendence. If aesthetics could not even help the master-craftsman James to free himself from capitalist society, the case, it seems, can be closed.

16 Henry Nash Smith, *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) 164.

17 Similar arguments have been made with reference to all major American writers. What we have here is the history of revisionist literary criticism in a nutshell.

18 Jean Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox & T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983) 68.

19 Agnew 67.

More recent revisions have taken two routes. One of them is exemplified by Alfred Habegger in his study *Henry James and the "Woman Business."* Habegger argues that James should be reevaluated as a writer because of "his anti-feminism," or, more specifically, because of "the novel's inaccurate and hostile representation of the women's suffrage movement."²⁰ Undoubtedly, Habegger knows what an accurate portrait would be like, and he insists on representational accuracy in this respect. Does this mean that texts by suffragettes are better than those of James? Obviously not. At one point in his argument, Habegger describes a politically progressive (or should one say, politically correct?) novel as "an earnest but inartistic novel assailing white American prejudice against blacks." ("Woman" 10). There must be additional criteria, then, for what constitutes artistic or inartistic novels. The interesting, exemplary aspect of Habegger's argument is that he does not only seem to presuppose such criteria without elaborating them, but that he actually needs them as a basis for his argument and critique because, unless the authority of James as a writer were not already established, Habegger's unmasking of "the elusive male authoritarianism of James's narratives" ("Woman" 26) would not carry nearly the same importance as it is supposed to do. If James were just another dead white male writer with all too familiar prejudices, it would hardly be necessary and justified to devote another book-length study to the task of unmasking him. If James's novels are infused by "antifeminism" and patriarchal ideology, what distinguishes them from other expressions of the same ideology must be either the special shape he gave to such ideas or the process of reception through which James was elevated to the rank of a great writer. Both of these possibilities imply an experience which transforms ideology into something else which is especially effective. The challenge, then, is to account for this dimension. This can only be done, however, by implying a theory of aesthetic effect even in the process of undermining the idea of the aesthetic.

Habegger hints at the possibility of such an explanation by granting that there is some complicating factor in what he calls James's antifemi-

20 Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 7. Hereafter cited as "Woman." The passage continues: "Very few of those who have thought about James's female characters have questioned his authority in writing about women or have looked with any energy for the political commitments and historical determinants that underlie his treatment of women's lives." (7) Habegger's earlier book *Gender, Fantasy, and American Realism in American Literature*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), in which he pointed out the influence of the domestic novel on American realism, was one of the earliest revisionist studies of American realism.

nism. James was no mere ideologue. Instead, he absorbed and grappled with the women's fiction of his day, and this leads to remarkable ambivalences and contradictions in his fiction. This would account, for example, for the divided loyalties a novel like *The Bostonians* has produced: "Such a hypothesis – that the novel itself is divided between its allegiances to its male oppressor and its female victims – would explain why both radical feminists like Fetterley and sexual conservatives like Foote and Philip Rahv and Lionel Trilling have been attracted to *The Bostonians*" ("Woman" 6). To make such a dramatization of conflicting perspectives the basis for a description of aesthetic effect would, however, create the danger of claiming aesthetic superiority for James over the women's fiction of the time. Instead, the radical Habegger wants to reveal the extent to which *The Bostonians* "is gravely disunified, incoherent, or fractured, split by (a) system of injustice and inhumanity" ("Woman" 6). What, then, accounts for the impact of James's work? Habegger finds the answer in its absorption of public day dreams:

James's best work thus turns out to be saturated with American literature and life in ways he may not have been fully conscious of. In the bestselling women's novels, in the agonists' work, in Alice James's madness, and in James's own narratives we can discern a common passion or yearning, and that yearning is incestuous. To the extent that James's fiction was rooted in American society, it was rooted in incest – in incestuous acts, perhaps, but even more in incestuous daydreams. ("Woman" 28)

The toppling of the monument could hardly be more radical indeed: from master craftsman to just another repressed character with wet dreams! At one point, Habegger suggests that such a psychic source may make James's work "powerful," but he is not interested in describing or tracing this power. His interest in incest is of a different kind: "Much of James's distinction came from a deep engagement with a mass feminine daydream, one whose symbolic incest was an unavoidable consequence of patriarchal family life" ("Woman" 29). What could have served as a point of departure for an elaboration of aesthetic effects leads to the unmasking of a complicity of which James himself was not aware and which he tried to resist by downgrading women's fiction. Instead of joining a struggle against patriarchy from within, he thus betrays women's fiction. Habegger's argument has come full circle.

Again we encounter an interesting trajectory: 1. The work of James is chosen because of its special cultural status and its powerfulness. 2. This power is not the result of an aesthetic achievement but is the effect of an

unconscious complicity of this work with its cultural and political context. In this sense, the cultural status is undeserved. 3. This raises the question, however, whether and in what way this work is different from other expressions of the same ideology. Habegger presents a crude but frequently used way of dealing with this problem: he simply splits and thus keeps apart traditional evaluation and revisionist view, aesthetic merit and political message. In doing so, he implies that we should no longer (or, at least, no longer to the same extent) evaluate literary works on aesthetic grounds alone but should also consider political merits. At the same time, it is striking to see to what extent his revisionism remains dependent on a traditional view of the aesthetic. There are good reasons for this, I think, and they are not so different from those which shape Jenny Holzer's work. Habegger, too, needs (and therefore tacitly accepts) an authorization established on the basis of other criteria than his own in order to gain symbolic capital (and professional mileage) out of his own radical revision. In contrast to Holzer, Habegger seems to proceed on the assumption that the best way to express strong political convictions is to employ them in the critique of a text with aesthetic status, while Holzer rescues the aesthetically dehierarchized, potentially ephemeral text by linking it with political commitment. But in both cases a logical and consistent application of radical claims would take away the valorization and authority provided by the concept of art and would therefore diminish one's object of attention to the point where it would no longer be rewarding to deal with it. The transformation of political radicalism into a form of expressive individualism thus creates an interesting dilemma, because the radical subversion of the idea of the aesthetic can yield symbolic capital only so long as one can tacitly take for granted the efficacy and authority of what one wants to submit to a radical critique. This dilemma, by the way, has its equivalent in the political arena, where radicalism remains dependent on the institutional support and protection of liberalism in order to be able to act out its own political agenda of a sweeping critique of that very same liberalism.

Habegger's answer to how the political and the aesthetic should be related is that of a temporary rehierarchization. It is a practice widely typical of the current revisionism in American literary history. There is, however, a theoretically more ambitious answer to the same problem, and it is provided by the New Historicism. In American literature, Dreiser and Henry James have been favorite objects of this neo-historical revision. In the case of James, this revision has taken the predictable course of linking James's skillful perspectivism with the Foucauldian concept of disciplinary practices and surveillance, as in Mark Seltzer's study of "the art of

power" in James. Again, the starting assumption is that of complicity: "The intent of this book is to revise the traditional view of the 'politics of the novel' by way of a reading of a novelist who, we are told, was never tempted by the political and always resisted the exercise of power" and therefore was considered to stand "outside the circuit of power." Seltzer's rhetoric signals a radical reversal of this innocent faith:

Questioning the traditional assumption that James is essentially a nonpolitical novelist, I explore the ways in which James represents social movements of appropriation, supervision, and regulation, and examine how both the content and the techniques of representation in James's works express a complicity and rigorous continuity with the larger social regimes of mastery and control that traverse these works. I want to suggest that art and power are not opposed in the Jamesian text but radically entangled. [...] Put as simply as possible, the art of the novel is an art of power." (*Art of Power* 13–14)

The Jamesian text, critics have argued, "resists the imposition of power in the name of a radical (literary) freedom." Instead, Seltzer wants "to suggest that James's art of representation always also involves a politics of representation, and one reason for suspecting this link between art and power is that James works so carefully to deny it." It is this "criminal continuity between art and power and the ways in which the novelist and critic – through an aesthetic and theoretical rewriting of power – have worked to disown it that I want to examine" (*Art of Power* 15, 16, 24). This uncompromising insistence on a "criminal continuity between art and power" is not only directed against formalist idealizations of the power of art but also against poststructuralist positions such as Leo Bersani's, for whom openness of signification is still a potential site of subversion and resistance.²¹ In contrast, Seltzer wants to trace the circulation of a faceless power through the literary text in order to reverse existing hierarchies radically. By claiming that the power of art is really an art of power, Seltzer seems to have found a way to eliminate the aesthetic completely.

Still, the term art remains to be clarified in this argument. If the novel, "as a form and as an institution, reinscribes and supplements social mechanisms of policing and regulation" (*Art of Power* 19), then there must be something in its form that explains its effectiveness in this respect. Why not take other cultural practices to illustrate the circuit of power? One

21 See Leo Bersani's *A Future For Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976).

obvious answer would be that these practices do not seem to stand as far apart from politics as the Jamesian aesthetic. But what, then, accounts for its ability to create this impression? Interestingly enough, Seltzer, too, locates the achievement of the novel in its aesthetic strategies. In his interpretation of James's only political novel, *The Princess Casamassima*, a centerpiece of his study, he formulates the challenge: "What I hope to demonstrate is that *The Princess Casamassima* is a distinctly political novel but that James's analysis of anarchist politics is less significant than the power play that the narrative technique itself enacts" (*Art of Power* 28–29). A faceless, all-pervasive power may generate the aesthetic but this also means that the aesthetic distinguishes itself by its power, or, to put it differently, by its suitability for power plays of a special kind. Seltzer's account points "both to the immanence of power in the novel and to the power of the novel: the manner in which the novel at once acts as a relay of social mechanisms of regulation and lays claim to an autonomy and difference from the political, a claim to autonomy that may ultimately support these mechanisms." (*Art of Power* 192)

For Seltzer, such "mechanisms of regulation," which establish the presence of power *within* the novel and thereby also generate the power of the novel, manifest themselves specifically in the dominance of acts of seeing. Primarily, Seltzer's argument focuses on a nexus of seeing and power. In this context, a reciprocal relation between theatricality and watchfulness within the novel can become a *mise en abyme* for the relation between text and reader: just as theatricality within the novel invites watchfulness, so the Jamesian text in its deliberate staging of acts of seeing constitutes the reader as spectator and makes him reenact the disciplinary practices which pervade the text: "In the largest sense, to be seen is to be encompassed by a right of supervision" (*Art of Power* 41). Whatever stages itself, also invites surveillance. The aesthetic power of the text, embodied in skillful theatricality, thus enhances the novel's effectiveness as a training ground for the art of surveillance and disciplining. By focusing on the linkage between seeing and power in order to establish a seamless identity of the aesthetic with the political, Seltzer must introduce a concept, that of theatricality, which explains how the novel's aesthetic rewriting of power can be effective. This dimension is staged so well by James that the novel manages, in the end, to achieve a surprising, though limited victory over the faceless power by which it is generated and governed:

But we notice that this surveillance becomes in many ways the subject and not merely the mode of the novel, and such a foregrounding of the novel's tactics

of supervision indicates, within limits that I will attempt to describe, James's exposure and demystification of the realist mania for surveillance, and his attempt to disown the policing that it implies." (*Art of Power* 54)

Exposure, demystification, disowning: this is a welcome but surprising twist in Seltzer's argument, drawing on familiar rhetorical figures of modernist aesthetics which stress the power of art to foreground its own ideological limitations. James, it turns out, is more than just another disciplinarian in the realist mode. His work is distinguished from that of other realists by a special aesthetic dimension. This, I think, is more than a failure of nerve on Seltzer's part. Clearly, of all of the recent revisionist critics of James, Seltzer nourishes the most radical ambitions. However, it is precisely this radical ambition that creates a by now familiar dilemma: On the one hand, the aesthetic is attacked in order to question its authority in the creation of social values. But the more radical and successful this attack is, the greater the danger that one's object loses its cultural importance and representativeness – and thereby also its usefulness for a radical critique. This result can only be avoided, in turn, by cautiously granting the presence and efficacy of that element whose devaluation created the problem in the first place, the aesthetic.

The real embarrassment of that counter-move, however, lies in the fact that the aesthetic, in Habegger's argument as well as in Seltzer's, must appear in an entirely formulaic and largely conventional form, because any movement in the direction of a more elaborated aesthetic theory would undermine the starting premise of the whole project. In current cultural radicalism, aesthetics must be smuggled in through the back door. As a result, it does not arrive in a very elaborated and impressive form. Basically, two responses to a radical critique of traditional aesthetics dominate current cultural radicalism. One is to work out a kind of counter-aesthetics based on the poststructuralist critique of representation and focusing on open processes of signification. For New Historicists like Seltzer, this is not yet radical enough, however, because it still indulges in intellectual fantasies of the oppositional or subversive power of the carnivalesque, the heterogeneous, of semantic free play or other forms of potentially anarchic semiosis. Thus, Seltzer calls for a further radicalization: namely, to consider the aesthetic as just another effect of power. For a number of reasons, however, the aesthetic cannot be entirely erased. Instead, it continues to live on in parasitic forms in the interpretative practice of cultural radicalism.

The Aesthetic Is the Political

As an artist, Jenny Holzer approaches the relation between the political and the aesthetic from the point of view of artistic practice. Her own project of artistic innovation dissolves established notions of the aesthetic so radically that her work can only regain authority as art through gestures of political and social commitment. Critics such as Habegger or Seltzer proceed the other way round: they start out by asserting that the aesthetic is only another effect of the political. But the greater the insistence on the identity between the two areas, the greater also the eventual need for distinguishing one's object of interpretation from other material by resorting to a notion of the aesthetic, now redefined, as in the New Historicism, as theatricality. In both cases, a radical redefinition of the aesthetic takes place that successfully links the political with the aesthetic. But this victory comes at a price, because in the process, both of these concepts change their meaning and identity. To the same extent as the aesthetic becomes politicized, the political becomes aestheticized. Both concepts come to resemble each other in unforeseen ways: namely, as performative options in the service of a new stage of expressive individualism.

To criticize recent discussions of the aesthetic dimension of literary texts as "not very elaborate" and thus as a form of evasion may appear as an attempt to impose an aesthetic norm of one's own. Clearly, one could argue that an "elaborate" analysis of aesthetic experience does not necessarily, and by definition, provide a more adequate description of an aesthetic object than an unelaborated one. Moreover, there is a strong possibility that this criticism only serves as a disguised plea for a certain kind of aesthetics. What may very well be argued, however, is that the recognition of a special need for elaborating aesthetic effects would also increase the need for self-reflection and, thus, self-justification. And this, in turn, could serve as a form of resistance against the dangers of a mere narcissist projection of one's own agenda. However, such an elimination of resistance is precisely the point and, I think, the ultimate reason for recent radical attacks on the aesthetic. In eliminating the need for a reasoned argument on specific dimensions and effects of aesthetic experience, the road is paved for a direct and unmediated appropriation of the text for one's own purposes of self-definition and self-esteem. In this sense, it would be ahistorical to merely criticize the development I have described. Rather, it has its own historical logic and significance. What it does is to signal another change in the expectations with which each generation draws on fiction and art in order to meet its own cultural needs. The current – inconsistent and "unelaborated" – way of dealing

with the aesthetic has its own functionality, in other words. It serves the needs of a new stage of individualism in which self-realization and the cultural construction of self-esteem is beginning to become the major goal and function of fiction and its criticism.

This, then, I take it, is the future of aesthetics in our time: In the culture of expressive individualism, politics and aesthetics increasingly take on similar functions as forms of cultural self-definition, cultural self-expression, and, in the final analysis, self-advertisement. In this respect, the radical subversion of the idea of the aesthetic promises to be successful, but with not quite the results cultural radicalism had in mind. As in other instances of left activism (for example, in the reform of German universities) attempts at radical dehierarchization and deauthorization only pave the way for accelerating processes of modernization. There is good news and bad news in this. The good news is that culture becomes more and more democratic. One person, one vote must ultimately be extended to one person, one aesthetic. The bad news is that this development may pose new problems of consensus which, one may argue with good reason, will be the crucial social problem of the years to come. Cultural radicalism does not have much to contribute to the solution of this challenge. Rather, it – and its inconsistent critique of aesthetics – remains part of the problem.

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