Imperatives:

Andrew Benjamin, *Disclosing Spaces: On Painting* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2004). ISBN 1-903083-28-1.

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Announcing the operation of imperatives in the review of a book on art has at least three registers.[1] First, there is the laudatory imperative, which calls for an appraisal of the work by the reviewer. Second, given that Andrew Benjamin's *Disclosing Spaces* is, as its subtitle indicates, a book *On Painting*, then the imperative alludes also to the rules or precepts that any critical enterprise of art calls forth. Value judgements on particular paintings would depend on such rules. However, besides these two obvious registers of the imperative, there is a further one, maybe implicit but from a philosophical perspective even more crucial. Namely, the imperative of the examination of the imperatives' extension. In other words, this is the question of the work that laws, limits, borders, and so on, do in an explication of the art work. Or, vis-à-vis the law, what are the conditions of the possibility of the art work, and of the critical act, as well as the art work and criticism taken together? How does the imperative of the imperatives unfold?

That the laudatory imperative is not merely a rhetorical gesture is something that the author of *Disclosing Spaces* is bound to concede, given two positions that are re-iterated throughout the book. On the one hand, Benjamin is adamant that context is never a sufficient ground for interpreta-

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tion. The external can never be fully adequated to the internal. On the other hand, the reverse is also the case. Starting with the internal cannot lead to a complete representation of the external. Thus, the rhetorical gesture is not merely a stylistic device that has either a purely incidental or a purely determinative function. Instead, as Benjamin insists, the presentation, what appears and becomes an object of interpretation, is severed from style. This severance is what announces the advent of modernity, and it is within this ambit that the other two imperatives are to be interrogated – even if that process will lead back to the laudatory imperative at the end of the paper.

The concern with imperatives for an encounter with *Disclosing Spaces* is not an arbitrary choice. On the contrary, it is already ushered by an argumentative manoeuvre that plays a central strategic role in Benjamin's project. This is the strategy whereby certain conceptions of art are shown to flounder when they reach their *limit*. When theories are unable to go over a line that they are nevertheless impelled to transgress, then they betray a form of *limitation* which has to be overcome. The two decisive names towards which Benjamin makes this move are Kant and Hegel.

What are the limits of Kant's conception of art? Benjamin argues that the way that the third *Critique* conceives of beauty in terms of the relation between a subject and the formal or epistemological properties of the object results in that the materiality of the object cannot even arise as an issue. Kant's aesthetics does make an argument about a generalized subject, but the object is given only through its conditions of possibility and never in its actuality. And it is this limitation that affords the Kantian project of the *Critique of Judgement* the title of an "aesthetics of art," but not that of a philosophy of art. For the latter, a consideration of the object as it is given or presented in itself is necessary. The move to the philosophy of art is effectuated with Hegel, as Benjamin shows. The detailed generic distinctions drawn by Hegel in his lectures on art demand that attention is paid to the particularity of the medium. Thus, for example, theatre, literature and painting are shown to be clearly distinguishable. Notwithstanding this achievement, Hegel's limit is that the activity of art is defined as the operation of the non-sensuous, or the universal, within the particular, the result being that art still needs something outside itself, the external presence of the universal, that underwrites its value. Benjamin is emphatic that any occlusive distinction between inside and outside has to be avoided, if the hold of representation is to be eschewed.

Of course, this is territory that has been trodden already by the so-called post-structuralism. It becomes interesting when one realizes that a limit is also to be found in *Disclosing Spaces*. This is what complicates

things and also makes the book exciting. What has to be made clear is that limits are not only impossible to avoid, but also necessary. The limit is unavoidable from the moment that a distinction is drawn between the material and the immaterial;[2] and it becomes necessary in order to avoid a structure of transcendence that would require a privileging of either term. What is of paramount importance in Benjamin's understanding of art is that the limit does not install either in the object or in the thought of that object a predetermined direction, an inherent purpose. If there is something that is allowed by the work and the critical activity, and if that something is inextricably linked to both, then the allowing can only take place given the presence of constraints, as Benjamin argues in relation to discernment, even though these constrains are to work free from an "already determined hold of predication" (133) the sentence is too long; I would break it in two, for example where I put the semicolon, and rephrase the second half. Predication, or the essentializing of either materiality or immateriality, can only be undone by and through the limit. The absence of constraints is an illusion. Absolute constraints are enslavement. A way must be found for constraints to be liberating.

The clearest way that the limit assumes this function in *Disclosing Spaces* is the insistence that art work and criticism are inter-related. Art work is given through its criticizability.[3] The particularity of the art work is given in the event of its enacting a disruption of the genre of which it forms part – a disruption which is in an act of innovation. Corresponding to this experimental impetus of the art work is the critical act, which is also in a process of becoming, re-inventing, or re-working its own vocabulary. What is thereby introduced is not a limit as impediment, but a limit as productive force – not a limitation but a creative delimitation that allows for the unfolding of potentiality. The value of art – a value that is determined by the critical act – is precisely the identification of that potential, that is, the possibilities inscribed in the object. In a subversion of the limit as a border that makes communication between two different realms possible only through the mechanisms of transcendence, Andrew Benjamin remains loyal to Walter Benjamin's insight that "the law of this life is the *porosity* which is to-be-determined and always appears anew."[4] The imperative of the porous imperative – the imperative in the third sense of the term as it was presented at the beginning – is precisely the establishment of ineliminable relations. The condition of the possibility of the art work as both object and activity is an ineliminable web of relations. And the ineliminability of relationality is guaranteed by criticism as an enactment of a contestation, a process that can never be foreclosed but always remains open.

It should be clear at this point why what was named the "imperative's

extension" is more crucial than the imperative as rule following within the practice of art and criticism – the second identified sense of "imperative." In Benjamin's ontology of art, the emphasis is squarely on possibility. What matters is the designation of a site – the imperative's *extension* – within which a development of potentiality is allowed to be actualized. Surely, within this site rules still have a role to play. However, it is part of the constitution of this site that the rules are not permitted a legitimation from without. This is Hume's argument which identifies rules with the "sense of taste" as it is given by the eighteenth-century cultivated gentleman – an argument explicitly rejected by Benjamin (129). Nonetheless the question still remains whether the opposite is true: are rules given from within the site opened up by the art work and its criticizability?

This question raises the issue of the autotelic quality of the work, and it is charged with a residual danger. The danger answers to the appellation "dialectic" and has at least two faces. The first is to conceive of art in a way that it "has to encounter its limit." This is a dialectic that positions the value of art, and its very purpose, in something that is outside art itself. As such, art is privileged, but only to the extent that it allows "for its own effacement" (22). The second is that of the aporetic impossibility, of a "dialectic of nihilism," which would have tried to deface the limit of art altogether in a cascading series of negations. Benjamin's counter to the former is that "art does not lament" (31): there is no dialectic of loss enshrined in the purpose of art. The counter to the latter would consist in the reminder that the infinity enacted by art still has a register, the endlessness of negotiation performed in the public sphere, and to forget this would be to rob art of its political dimension (32). The fault of both dialectics can be discerned in the meaning of the compound *telos* in the epithet "autotelic." The first takes *telos* to mean a completion that carries over onto something else, while the second takes *telos* to mean something that is an endless variation within a site – art itself – that is completed. Conversely, *telos* for Benjamin adheres to the productive potential inherent in the art work's ontology, so that the *autotelic* indicates the object of art "in the continuity of its self-realization" (70). There is no completion.

Self-realization does a lot of work in *Disclosing Spaces*, and it is worth dwelling a bit on it. Even earlier, the autotelic has been employed by Benjamin for a long time in various permutations and in various writings. To show two further instances, reference will be made to two short articles by Benjamin. The first is a piece published in *Art Monthly Australia*, titled "Vandalizing Objects, Destroying Art," which deals with the vandalizing of a public piece of sculpture by Terri Bird.[5] Once the site in which an object exists is taken to have a generative quality, thereby installing a network of in-

eliminable relations, it follows that a public work of art pertains to two registers. One is its register as an object within an environment wherein only its quidity is recognized, and as such can be vandalized by refusing to recognize it as art object, by perceiving it as something that has to cease to exist. The other register is inextricably linked to criticism and sees the object as a work of art. This does not eliminate the possibility of destruction, but here destruction is a possibility that is linked to the object as art. Destruction remains an artistic potential, something present within the work's possibilities. The second article by Benjamin, entitled "Having to Exist," was originally broadcasted on BBC Radio 3, and it proffers a series of counters to the *thanatophile* dialectical impulse.[6] What has to be avoided is any notion of negation that would privilege completion. Instead, a philosophy that takes life seriously, by the same token would also have to take seriously the imperative to incompletion, the responsibility to think on and through a plural site of relations, the site that Walter Benjamin called the porous law of life. By incompleting, becoming is made possible.

The art work's *autoteleia*, and the broader philosophical project that is implied therein, leads to a significant notion of *autonomy*. Caution is called for here, especially since the history of a piece like "Having to Exist" links it to a public broadcast. The caution demands to follow Benjamin in distinguishing between art and ethics. A philosophy that takes life seriously is not also a populist philosophy. There are no easy fixes here, no panaceas. Thought is no consolation – consolation for some lack, since, as already intimated, it precisely rejects a dialectic of loss. Specifically in relation to art, Benjamin refers to the art work's autonomy in relation to any possible ethical message that it might carry. He shows that David's painting of *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Body of his Son* (1789) opens a series of possible readings if the eye is allowed to travel along the canvas, and if these possibilities are associated with the three realms of the public, the private and the intimate. The inter-relation between these three realms is indeed a mark of the painting's concern with Republicanism, although is it thus simultaneously also a mark of its modernity. But Benjamin insists that, despite the complex relations that arise between the public, the private and the intimate laws, art – and specifically David's painting – is not concerned to prescribe a form of decision that would lead to specific actions. "Art is not concerned with this form of decision if art is to maintain its autonomy and thus its capacity for political intervention. Art demonstrates the complexity of this site. This is not an argument about the aestheticisation of art" (52). In other words, David's work is not concerned with the politics of 1789, the year of the painting's composition, but it remains inextricable from the political dimension nevertheless, to the extent that it discloses the complex

site of Republicanism that underlies daily politics. So long as it does not prescribe decisions, the painting continues to interrogate the complexity of the relations. And so long as these relations have a bearing on the political, art's autonomy is not art's absorption into itself. With the complexity of relationality and the political dimension, the art work's autonomy becomes a locus of negotiation and incompletion.

Autonomy, so far, has been shown to denounce the art work's reduction to an external context. The next step taken by Benjamin is to demonstrate that autonomy – while retaining incompletion – is connected to the work's interiority. When Benjamin raises this issue explicitly in the chapter that deals with Cézanne and Richter, every precaution is taken so that interiority is not in a determining opposition to exteriority. Surely, the relation between the inside and the outside cannot be eliminated, in Cézanne's landscapes there is always such a relation. However, the important point is that this relation, which announces the structure of representation, is only an effect of that which is truly interior, truly autonomous in an art work, namely its particularity and materiality, as well as the way that they are connected to technique. Thus, autonomy and interiority designate the field of action that the work itself makes possible. An example from *Disclosing Spaces* will clarify this point: it pertains to the way the figurative is shown to work in Cézanne's paintings. Benjamin demonstrates that what these landscapes produce is "the presence of borders that are given by relations, which are not, themselves, determined by lines" (76). A number of implications follow: First, the denial of the predominance of line entails that there is no one particular way with which Cézanne prescribes the depiction of landscape. Style and appearance are held apart. The second point follows from the first: if technique is no longer an effect of style, then what matters is not the simply technical aspect of depicting and applying of pigments; rather, what matters is the way a painting's activity is built around the "colouring sensations" – to use Cézanne's own phrase – that are built into the work. However, and this is the third point, it follows that the "colouring sensations" are structured by a network of relations which, while they are given by the work's materiality and particularity, still retain a reference to something immaterial. This is necessary so that the productive nature of the work, the work's incompletion and self-realization, are maintained. Thus, the interiority that is made possible by the work's autonomy is still grounded on something infinite, while the infinite is only ever present(ed) through the work of the particular. Returning to a question that has remained in suspension, it would be correct to say that rules are given from within the site opened up by the work and its criticizability. However, the "within" should not be understood as pure interiority, but as the space allowed by interi-

ority's inter-play with infinity and particularity.[7]

Benjamin here has been working out the productive limitation that the relation of the art work has to its criticizability. Auto-nomy, self-regulation, is precisely the work's creative imperative. Now, it will be recalled that Benjamin insists that this productive relationality channels a continuous renewal of the vocabulary of criticism. But this should not be seen to operate solely on the level of criticism. Philosophical rigour demands that this same operation is shown to take place in the work of art itself. This is precisely what Benjamin demonstrates in chapter 4, by examining the productive relation between painting and photography. Basically, what this means is that, with the advent of photography, painting's own self-realization is affected. Similarly, the autonomy of photography is only ever disclosed in relation to painting. This is not to say that there is a causal, one-directional relation between new and old genres – Andrew Benjamin specifically rejects that possibility while discussing Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (121). Rather, the point is that the very particularity of a specific genre is only ever made possible through the registration of the other genres. Relationality implies re-working and repetition, or what Benjamin calls here the "after-effect."[8] Another way of putting this using an example from chapter 4, is to say that painting and photography are related but not in such a way as to be dialectically opposed. Thus, if the capturing of the instantaneous image is thought to be the province of photography, a work of photography that concentrates on the instant is limited to be presenting merely the negation of painting. An example of this state of affairs is Jeff Wall's *The Stumbling Block* (1991). While the photograph narrates an incident in the city, by emphasizing instantaneity as a means of presenting the "truth of the world" depicted, the photograph functions merely as a disavowal of painting (106-7). However, what is elided is precisely what narrative painting itself acknowledges, namely that such a truthful depiction of the work is chimerical. Thus, in Wall's photograph, there is no registration of the after-affect.

There is no space here to present in more detail Benjamin's analyses of further particular paintings and photographs. These incisive analyses are perhaps the most affecting aspect of *Disclosing Spaces*, and the pleasure of discovering them for oneself should be left to the reader of the book. However, a return has to be made to the initial point, namely the laudatory imperative. The argument will be that it also is linked to the imperative's extension, the imperative of the imperatives. To demonstrate this, it has to be made clear that what secures the nexus of the work and its criticizability, as well as the autotelic and the autonomous quality of the art work, is a very specific philosophical conception of immediacy. Benjamin is committed to

the position that there is no pure or absolute immediacy. But this is not merely to assert the presence of mediacy, the primordiality of relations. What is needed in addition is to find a way to register the immediate so that particularity and materiality are retained. To this effect, Benjamin draws a crucial distinction when he discusses the ontology of the art work: immediacy has a double register, it is both the instantaneous recognition, and the cognition in the absence of a concept or a rule (26). Immediacy functions in terms of temporality and in terms of conceptualization. The argument that displaces immediate or instantaneous recognition is always related to the function of criticism within the art work. It is in its criticizability that the work's potential is released, and it is this potential that opens up a site of ineliminable conflict. Moreover, the argument that displaces conceptual immediacy is linked to the way that the work can always create a distance from the viewer, it can effect its own decontextualization. It hinges on the objective quality of the work.

What is operative here is a chiasmus of vital importance. It is the chiasmus that guarantees the singularity of the object by arguing through possibility and incompleteness, while the singularity of cognition is guaranteed through objectivity and materiality. What, then, becomes of the subject in this set up? Where is the artist? And where is the critic? While Benjamin does not address these questions directly, an answer could be formed if the chiasmus is taken to present a more general position about ontology.[9] In which case an artist (for instance Cézanne) and a critic (for instance Benjamin) are not merely related as self and other, but also chiastically co-implicated in the unfolding of the activity of the work of art. They become co-producers. This is the conclusion that has to be reached if the productivity of the imperative installed by the chiasmus is to be followed through.

However, the same point can be made regarding the laudatory imperative, if it is viewed in a similarly productive fashion. What is opened up here is a relation between author and reviewer that is productive and evolving. This ontology places a demand on the reviewer: it is an imperative that prohibits him to "sing the praises" of the one reviewed as if that one were an autonomous subject. Instead, it is the work that has to retain autonomy – in this instance, the book *Disclosing Spaces*. As such, what is called for is a decisive decontextualization, whereby the external situation becomes an effect of the reading of *Disclosing Spaces*. It is a decontextualization that articulates the book's own incompleteness. Author and reviewer are no longer two subject bound in an encomiastic dialectic. Instead, adhering to the laudatory imperative, their activity is confined to one – yet complex – action only: they collocute.

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NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Elizabeth Presa for the invitation to present this paper at *Painting and Philosophy: A Symposium to Mark the Publication of* Disclosing Spaces: On Painting *by Andrew Benjamin*. The symposium took place at the Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, on 11 November 2004.

[2] Cf. ch. 3 "The Ideal of Pure Reason" of the Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is at the point when Kant considers God as an immaterial presence that the issue of the limit arises.

[3] The work's criticizability is a direct reference to Walter Benjamin (84).

[4] *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 4.1: 311, my trans., emphasis added.

[5] Andrew Benjamin, "Vandalizing Object, Destroying Art: Notes on Terri Bird's *Recycling Fictions of Being*", *Art Monthly Australia*, 163 (2003), pp. 28-9.

[6] Andrew Benjamin, "Having to Exist", *Angelaki*, 5.3 (2000), pp. 51-6.

[7] Andrew Benjamin's adumbration of interiority as it is given through the work's autonomy, as well as the formalism implied in this position, is markedly different from a Greenbergian understanding of the same terms. Greenberg is interested in the way that an interior is constructed by the formal properties of pigment applied to the canvas. Thus, on the one hand, Greenberg understands the interior in opposition to the exterior, and, on the other, he remains concerned with the merely technical element. The upshot is that style and appearance remain inextricable and interarticulable. From this connection, the possibility of pure painting emerges. Conversely, Benjamin insists on the severance of style and appearance. Benjamin's formalism consists in the relations that are established at the moment of this severance. For Benjamin's critique of Greenberg's "pure painting," see his *Object Painting* (London: Academy Editions, 1994), pp. 99-101.

[8] Two additional points are called for here. First, Benjamin's argument here is premised on his development of a philosophy of time, and in particular a philosophy of the present. See e.g. his *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1997). Second, specifically in relation to painting, Benjamin is following here a tradition of reading the registration of history in a particular work precisely in terms of productive repetition. One of the better know sources of this way of thinking can be found in Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), see esp. ch. 14.

[9] This is a position that Benjamin has developed in *The Plural Event: Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 1993), although using a different vocabulary.