



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

NIETZSCHE'S DIONYSOS

DIETER MERSCH ZÜRICH UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

Translation from German to English: Gratia Stryker-Härtel

1.

In his considerations on an aesthetic of *erscheinen*¹, which also incorporate Dionysus in the title, Karl Heinz Bohrer asserts his thesis that Nietzsche's figuration of the Dionysian advances an aesthetic of *In-Erscheinung-treten*²—and that, if anything, Dionysus is in actuality first and foremost in representing the god of *erscheinen* (*appearance*). He combines two further theses with that as well: First, that Nietzsche conceptualizes his work on the tragic—in which he introduces the opposition between the Dionysian and Apollonian as the polar struggle of artistic forces—not principally as a theory of the aesthetic but instead as a “life doctrine” (*Lebenslehre*), which at its core is, as he puts it, “the elementary, materialistic celebration of the life impulse (*Lebensimpuls*) and [the] undermining of idealistic presuppositions such as rationality, substance, subject” (Bohrer 2013, 13).³ Secondly, Bohrer continues, wherever this life doctrine is applied to the aesthetic, it primarily represents an “aesthetic of the sublime,” without ever making clear whether it should be understood “in terms of the theory of reception or the aesthetics of production” (*rezeptionstheoretisch oder produktionsästhetisch*) (Bohrer 2013, 15).⁴ It is not my wish to contradict this, at least not completely, but rather to effect a shift or re-accentuation of the basic underlying motif—whereby it is important to recall once again that Nietzsche's Dionysus, admittedly, represents a direct provocation and an attack on the interpretation of the classics accepted since Winckelmann, an interpretation that elevates the Apollonian to its central point of focus; Nietzsche's introduction of another principle to oppose it, rather than representing a genuine invention, in actuality bridges the small gap between Hegel and Hölderlin. If, namely, the Hegelian

aesthetic from the very beginning points to *Schein* and *Erscheinung*—as necessary conditions of truth, for the truth would not exist if it were not to “superficially appear” (*scheinen*) and “make its appearance” (*erscheinen*), writes Hegel—*Schein* and *Erscheinung* would still nonetheless be bound up everywhere with the criterium of the absolute; after all, the untruth of the aesthetic rests squarely in the fact that it cannot do other than to draw upon the language of *Erscheinung*. For Hölderlin, on the other hand, the Dionysian advances to become a metapoetic symbol combining itself—the enigmatic and continually transforming—with the practice of art.

Nietzsche continues along these very same lines even while giving the metaphor a thoroughly different twist. For if one wishes to express a formula describing the dichotomy or the shift I am seeking to highlight, one would have to say that, while Bohrer has a Romantic understanding of Nietzsche—or, to be more exact, understands him to be the high point and peak of the Romantic, which encompasses the aesthetic of the sublime and the “celebration of the life impulse (*Lebensimpuls*)” and, most notably, the criticism of idealism, the subverting of any accolades of the rational—Nietzsche still, however, implements a number of characteristic conversions into the terminological context that transport his art theory into an utter anti-Romanticism. With that, the question arises as to ‘what’ Nietzsche means with Dionysus—who ‘his’ Dionysus is—and to what extent art even unfolds within him, within his form—as opposed to his “beautiful appearance” (*schönen Schein*). In that, it will be revealed that the key to the upheaval associated with this figure rests in disaggregating a whole arsenal of terms constituting an exact, one-to-one correspondence with the traditional art theory of the day, revolving around the metaphor of the dream, the imagination and their dissolution, their negation—something associated with a thoroughly other metaphoricity, namely, that of violence, destruction and what one could call the “imposition of differentiation” (*Differenzsetzung*). And if the former conceptualization proves to be connected to a series of methods of form and process, the latter is satisfied to avail itself of the figure of the caesura, of “dis-formation” (*Entstaltung*) or resistance, whereupon the aesthetic concurrently discovers its reflective principle. Nietzsche hardly implements this; rather, he just indirectly insinuates it. As I hope to demonstrate, his art philosophy discovers its anti-Romantic leanings in that, rather than bring to its zenith something already applied long ago, it points to something in the future, something other, something encompassing the innate need to break with tradition.

2.

As is well known, the Apollo/Dionysus coupling appears prominently in Nietzsche’s work from 1871, dedicated to Richard Wagner and entitled *The Birth of Tragedy*. Around the same time, in 1870, he penned his work *The Dionysian Vision of the World*, in it reexamining the problem of aesthetic representation, which Hegel’s aesthetic placed at the center of his art philosophy and which Romantic art drove (*trieb*) to the very fringes of portraying what is impossible to portray—and beyond (*übertrieb*⁵), recalling in particular the paintings of Henry Füssli and William Turner—in a reversion to the approaches of the antique, particularly the question of mimesis. Nietzsche broached the mimesis problem not explicitly but rather masked within the dichotomous opposition of the Apollonian and Dionysian. Both concepts, their complementarity as well as their

continual interplay, supersede that which, in terms of the aesthetics of production, could be described as the actual core of the artistic process: the genesis of something or, quite literally, its exposition (*Darstellung*⁶). And that, according to Nietzsche, encompasses as a “double source” or “stylistic opposition” (Nietzsche 1999a, 119, 46) both of the “artistic drives” (*Kunsttriebe*) that “interweave” and “differ in their highest goals” (Nietzsche 1999a, 76, see also 14–15, 25–26, 59)—namely, the Dionysian and Apollonian, a complex of leitmotifs that persist throughout Nietzsche’s entire philosophical oeuvre even as they undergo numerous reinterpretations. He continues treating them in *Twilight of the Idols* (i.e. Nietzsche 1998b, 185–187) as well as in countless passages in his unpublished writings, especially those which stem from the mid-1880s and are on the periphery of what he calls the “will to power” (*Willen zur Macht*), whereby an increasing radicalization also becomes apparent. At the very beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy*, we encounter the expression “duplicity,” denoting what is still undecided (I will return to this later). What is decisive, however, is that aesthetic representation, rather than crumbling in its idea and *Erscheinung* as seemed immanent after Hegel, emerges—to adapt Heidegger’s formulation—from a ‘struggle,’ a *polemos* or polemic, chiefly encompassing form on the one hand while belonging to an excess on the other, whereby “excess,” superficially speaking, signifies the *Rausch*⁷ or, in a Platonic sense, “mania” (creative madness) and, specifically speaking, addresses the obsession of genius—or, to go even deeper, as is my aim, addresses the “ecstasy,” a word evoking a slew of associations from the protrusions of ‘Ex-istence’ (the very same word) through the budding of materiality to that which we could, in a still highly abstract way, call ‘the event.’

I will now return once again to Nietzsche’s text on tragedy in order to unearth the key characteristics. On the one hand, we see written there that the artwork is “as equally Dionysian as it is Apollonian,” whereby Nietzsche speaks of “the common goal of both drives (*Triebe*) [...]” (Nietzsche 1999a, 28) and disparate “ways to the creation of art” (Nietzsche 1999a, 128) so that the impression arises that he is discussing an alternative—two fundamentally different artistic processes yielding different kinds of works. Thus it literally attests to an “opposition” (Nietzsche 1999a, 19), to artistic stances “which differ in their deepest essence and highest goals” (Nietzsche 1999a, 76). On the other hand, Nietzsche still emphasizes in the 1880s that both elements must first of all come together in order to bring art into existence at all, though the way they actually come together still remains unclear. Now the oppositional dichotomy of the two forces—which never, of course, exist purely as forces or urges on their own but instead foster energies allowing something to emerge—owes its existence to a number of conceptual differentiations that ascribe specific attributes to both the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In reference to Apollo, talk centers on the illusion—the old mimesis problem as discussed by Plato—as well as on the *Traumbild* or “dream-images” (Nietzsche 1999a, 15)—as classic metaphor for the phantasm, the *imaginarium*—and on the “mask” (Nietzsche 1999a, 46), while in reference to the Dionysian it accords a characteristic “ecstatic” celebration and “unmeasurable excess” (Nietzsche 1999a, 27, 128). In later years, these are positioned in even clearer referential relationship to each other and delineated as subspecies of the very same eccentricity; Nietzsche asks in *Twilight of the Idols*, “What is the meaning of the conceptual opposition I introduced into aesthetics, between *Apollonian* and *Dionysian*, both conceived as types of intoxication (*Rausch*)?” (Nietzsche 1998b, 48), whereby the answer to his question leaves no room for doubt that dissociation or displacement distinguishes the Dionysian

ecstasy as the primary “basic aesthetic condition,” while the imaginary simply builds its corollary, a corollary only defined upon the artistic nature (*Kunsthaftigkeit*) of art.

What the Apollonian-Dionysian principle actually means, however, can only be clarified in a juxtaposition of the two. For example, Apollo’s Telos—as we read in the shorter text *The Dionysian Vision of the World*—is the form, the picture, the statue (Nietzsche 1999a, 127), and its *Gestaltung* faithfully obeys the “lovely semblance” (*schönen Schein*) (Nietzsche 1999a, 15) and its “law” (Nietzsche 1999a, 26) of “measured limitation” (*maassvolle[n] Begrenzung*) (Nietzsche 1999a, 16), as Nietzsche continues to maintain in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In contrast, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian art or art energy—initially deriving it, very true to Schopenhauer, from the “imageless art of music” (Nietzsche 1999a, 14, also 21, 28–31, 76)—as emerging from the “*Spiel*⁸ with the *Rausch*” (Nietzsche 1999a, 119–121, 130). But let us inquire as to the meaning of *Rausch*—which, incidentally, is the attribute classically assigned to Dionysius in the character of Bakchos: *Rausch* entails an eccentricity, leaving the sphere of that which we could, along with Schopenhauer, call the “principium individuationis”—the ability to differentiate, accompanied by its embodiments of representation (Nietzsche 1999a, 120–122), whereupon things are, as it were, in their place; trees are trees, houses are houses and people are subjects who make their decisions autonomously and in the capacity of their own responsibility. By contrast, the *Rausch* reveals the erupting force “of the general element in nature” (Nietzsche 1999a, 120). Going far beyond Schopenhauer—who nevertheless granted music a special status inasmuch as it does not depict or represent anything but rather manifests the “will” itself—Nietzsche accounts for the experience of the Dionysian with the experience of chaos, in which distinctions no longer hold any validity whatsoever and things blur together indiscriminately. It is for that reason that Nietzsche, in examining the Dionysian, speaks of the “barbaric” (Nietzsche 1999a, 27), the “horror” (Nietzsche 1999a, 17) and “terror” or “shock” (Nietzsche 1999a, 21), whereby it can be added that “shock”—as Plato put it, that “freefall into the darkness”—belongs as much as the Aristotelian “self-astonishment” does to the “prime-ordial” philosophical feelings, that is to say, to those emotions that first teach us to philosophize. What does this astonishment, this shock effectuate? Certainly, the latter can be tied to the experience of the sublime à la the traditional schools of pseudo-Longinus and Edmund Burke—but first, at the onset, this shock creates a rupture, a shift, a catastrophë. Nietzsche, too, speaks of the “tearing apart” (*Zerreissung*) (Nietzsche 1999a, 20), a dis-rupture of all ties and points of reference as well as the destruction of the “usual barriers and limits of existence” (Nietzsche 1999a, 40). The special thing about Nietzsche is, however, that the “unsettling” nature of this rupture is not the kind to be avoided at all costs, the destruction of an order prerequisite to life, but is rather—also assuming the literal meaning of “unsettling” (*entsetzlich*)—that which “re-settles” (*versetzen*) us into another place, through that very process opening up something “never before perceived.” In short, it is the negativity of the rupture that first serves as prerequisite of the other, the new. As a result, what is decisive about the Dionysian is the wholehearted negation (Nietzsche 1999a, 138), through which—as stated in Nietzsche’s work on the tragedy—the “principle of sufficient reason [...] appears to suffer an exception” and the human being will, “suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world” (*wenn er plötzlich an den Erkenntnisformen der Erscheinung irre wird*) (Nietzsche 1999a, 17) but, through that very fact, stumble near to the “truth” of nature and of “life” (cp. Nietzsche 1999a, 39): “Apollo stands before

me as the transfiguring genius of the principium individuationis, through whom alone release and redemption in semblance can truly be attained, whereas under the mystical, jubilant shout of Dionysos the spell of individuation is broken, and the path to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost core of things, is laid open" (Nietzsche 1999a, 76).

One must slightly mitigate the pathos of the formulation in order to reach the core of what is meant; for if Apollo represents the language of form—whose traditional principle is identity, whose Romantic criticism is the fragment, whose irresolvability nevertheless holds to its basic tenet because the seal of "measure" (Nietzsche 1999a, 27) applies even in those places where only the frail appears (*erscheint*)—then Dionysus signifies the language of differentiation, grounded in negation and only allowing itself to be spelled out in the negative. It is for that reason that a note from Nietzsche's unpublished writings dating to 1885 combines the divinity with *diabolos* (cf. Nietzsche, 1999b, KSA 11, 473); the word here, used in the singular, is not meant to denote seduction—the diabolical as negative principle par excellence—but rather should be read in light of the ancient contradistinction between *symbolon* and *diabolon*, "throwing together" (Ger.: *Zusammenwerfen*) and "throwing into disarray"⁹ (Ger.: *Durcheinanderwerfen*)—order and chaos as the corresponding moments of interplay in a game (*Spiel*).

3.

The negativity of the Dionysian makes a decided appearance (*Erscheinen*) here as indispensable moment of creativity. Nietzsche conceives of the creative much less as emerging from *creatio* than from the *Riss* ("fissure") or differentiation. For this reason, I speak of the transition of an aesthetic of representation or of form to an "aesthetic of difference," as is characteristic of the avant-garde throughout the transition from the art of the classical to modernity, particularly at the beginning of the 20th century. One could say that Nietzsche, within the emphatic language of the 19th century, premonished the avant-garde. Moreover, this dramatically points to an elementary "experience of difference" that also allows itself to be expounded as the *Aufscheinen* ("dawning appearance") of "ex-istence;" (cf. Lyotard 1994 and Mersch 2004) and that drama rests in its definitions of a higher truth, a higher truth itself later revealed to be an illusion just as it is heralded with fanfare and as it indicates a further dichotomy tracing a path throughout Nietzsche's work—namely, the polarity of "reflection" and "true knowledge" (Nietzsche 1999a, 40), or analysis, method and determination on the one hand and revelation on the other. Put differently, the Dionysian means the very moment of that *Riss* so literally tantamount to the *Aufriss*¹⁰ of presence—that primordial tremor, to quote Heidegger, "that there *are* beings, rather than not" (cp. e.g. Heidegger 1994, 3).

Nietzsche both attempted to capture and mystified this extraordinary moment in ever-new turns of phrase and formulations. I quote: "The Olympian magic mountain (*Zauberberg*) now opens up, as it were, and shows us its roots" (Nietzsche 1999a, 23). At the same time, he speaks of the "salvation" (*Erlösung*) into or within the "mystical sense of oneness" (Nietzsche 1999a, 19), of the "truly existing (*Wahrhaft-Seiende*) and primal unity (*Ur-Eine*)" and the gaze into "the true essence of things" (Nietzsche 1999a, 40), which the "ecstatic vision" of rapture necessitates (Nietzsche 1999a,

26). Nietzsche himself appears to be literally *hingerissen* ("enraptured") and *mitgerissen* ("swept away") by his formulations, but even in the medium of language itself we find ourselves dealing with a delirium, a futility, one that seeks less to evoke the disparity between forces or between aesthetics of form and of event than it does to demonstrate a historical disparity—the dichotomy between the legacy of tradition and that which is expressible, future, that which presages something only later to be taken up by the avant-garde of modernity: an ongoing practice of the "destructive" or "deconstruction," which presupposes the positives of the form, the medium and the representation, and therefore the elements of the classical aesthetic, in order to break with them and to chronicle within them the difference (*Differenzpunkt*) of their dissolution. At the same time, two dichotomous forms of knowledge are allocated to them. The first is the law of self-limitation and self-knowledge, which conceptualizes the artist as author and subject of his work, which bring to expression his/her *intentio*, his/her inspirations and his/her will. The second is the experience of a scar, an injury incurred upon time and its literal *unheilen*,¹¹ a scar stylizing the artist as an anomaly, stigmatized and rejected—a scar that, as it is furnished with the insignia of its victim and his madness, is nonetheless, according to the auto-descriptions of Arthur Rimbaud, Lautréamont and also Antonin Artaud, able to articulate by name a higher "truth." If Nietzsche—at least at the point in time at which he composed *The Birth of Tragedy*—appears caught within the radicalization of the late Romantic and continual formulation of its internal prolongations, it is my thesis that a deeper dichotomy is already rooted in the confrontation between the Apollonian and Dionysian, one that "exhibits" the breaking of the new epoch, its inescapable caesura that will simultaneously transport artistic practice into new terrain. Nietzsche only suggests this possibility without further explication. His reference to the Dionysian power of negation thus eases up the extreme Romantic fixation on the subject of the artist and his/her extraordinary genius, something Nietzsche himself doubtless always idealized; at the same time, however, he discards the "previous" expressive media in order to unleash that which has no endemic representation and does not tolerate symbolization—for the Other, the extraordinary, the not-yet-conceived, only "exists" in the sense of a giving, a gifting, where the language, the picture and, along with that, the forms of representation are destroyed, where the "difference" thus cleaves the medial in order to uncover in and through it a heterogeneity, an entity as invisible as it is unable to be represented.

The distinction thus made virulent correspondingly straddles on the one hand the *Schein* and the *Erscheinung* in terms of the significance of the "what," which draws its execution and determination from its individuation, and on the other the "*Erscheinung* of the *Erscheinung*" in the sense of the "which" (*quod*), that eventfulness of a presence which never "makes its appearance" (*erscheinen*) in the positive but rather can only be grasped in the negative (cp. Mersch 2002, 355ff.).¹² This also means that as long as art is working with form, representation or *technē*, it remains media-bound and proceeds as Apollonian; but as soon as these are dethroned and traversed by art, that which lacks conceptualization and fails in purpose is allowed to emerge. This, and none other, is the meaning of the Dionysian: The medium constitutes, shapes and makes sensory; its fracture or breaking, on the other hand, confronts with a gap, a *Durchriss* ("a rupture, having been torn through"), whereby the "unfitting"—unfitting in the sense of something stepping "outside itself"—reveals itself. We are then dealing with "another" present time, not one whose presence is already hidden in its *Zeichen* ("sign") or *Auszeichnung* ("distinction; sketching or characterization"), its

framing or staging, one which Jacques Derrida designated as “deferred action” and the unavoidable a-presence (Derrida 1978, esp. 310–311), but rather one in which the experience of the negative and of alterity intersect, one which only exists where a contradiction, an aporia occurs. It is for that reason that Nietzsche speaks of the “detonation” of the principium individuationis as well as—in easily misunderstood adherence to terminology from the philosophy of subjectivity—of the “grow in intensity, [which] cause[s] subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting (*Steigerung des Subjectiven zu völliger Selbstvergessenheit*)” (Nietzsche 1999a, 17), the “being-driven-outside-oneself” state of “ecstasy” (Nietzsche 2009, 10), as he later describes it, which can only appear beyond the medial while still existing through media, undermining and subverting its mediality; the aesthetic of difference supposes the aesthetic of form in the same measure as it shatters it. Hence, we can only speak of an “grow in intensity, [which] cause[s] subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting” where the subjectivity of the subject as well as the mediality of the medium are as equally salvaged as they are shaken and transcended. The transition from the aesthetic of form to that which I call the aesthetic of difference thus implies the desubjectification of creativity; “subjectivity disappears entirely before the erupting force of the general element in human life (*Generell-Menschlichen*), indeed of the general element in nature (*Allgemein-Natürlichen*)” (Nietzsche 1999a, 120). As stated in *The Dionysian Vision of the World*, “The artistic force of nature, not that of an individual artist, reveals itself here” (Nietzsche 1999a, 121). With that, Nietzsche anticipates with equal intensity that dictum of the “death of the author,” which only later came to actuation via the theories of poststructuralism and intertextuality. At the same time, however, he holds to a systematic ambiguity or indeterminacy, because overcoming and being “sanctified” (*geheiligt*) are possible for the subject only on the basis of the subjectivity of “life” and for the artist only within the disempowerment of the *Rausch*. It is in the Dionysian principle, thus, that a foreshadowing becomes apparent and, even as the time and its expressive possibilities are not yet ripe for such an emergence, we see Nietzsche steering his thoughts toward that end. The question arises as to what can serve as a replacement where the subject is missing—and, equally, what art and the artistic process can mean in those places where the medial has tumbled right through its fracture, its *Riss*.

4.

With that, Nietzsche is aiming at every turn for something threatening in the selfsame moment to slip out of control; only the radicalization to come later will resolve the ambiguities between the Apollonian and the Dionysian as artistic forms and aesthetic principles. “[I] was [...] the first to understand the marvelous phenomenon of the Dionysian,” he writes in *Ecce homo* (Nietzsche 2007, 46); it was he who, in utter furtiveness and solitude, presented a “victim” in his debut work. “I found no one who understood what I was doing then,” he adds in *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche 1998a, 176). Nietzsche himself thus discarded *The Birth of Tragedy* as “Romantic”—not only in the “Self-Critique” he appended to it later, which particularly castigates “linguistic kitsch,” but also, more importantly, in his notes between 1885 and 1886 under the heading “Regarding ‘The Birth of Tragedy,’” where we find the following remark: “A book [...] with a metaphysics of the artiste in the back-ground. At the same time the confession of a Romantic” (Nietzsche 2003, 80). It sought to pin

down the *Erlösung* of illusion and *Schein* as the classic goals of art through the force of becoming, whereby the “*annihilation of even the most beautiful illusion (schönen Schein)*” signifies the peak of “Dionysian happiness” (Nietzsche 2003, 82). A commensurate dichotomy is constructed here between classical and Romantic art on the one hand and Dionysian (Nietzsche 2003, 80–83) on the other, the latter endowed with the flora of a practice as destructive as it is life-giving, as equally creative as it is destructive, one which leaves behind the conventional aesthetic of form and representation. What is to take its place? Just what is the meaning of “aesthetic of difference”?

I will make a cautious attempt at accessing this. Nietzsche first removes the artist from the art and thus thinks his way toward an understanding of art requiring as little of the self-sufficient “intention to form”—the principle of all art until the Romantic—as it does of the anticipatory inspiration. “The work of art where it appears without an artist, e.g., as body [...],” reads a fragment from Nietzsche’s unpublished writings, “[h]ow far the artist is only a preliminary stage. What does ‘subject’ mean—?” (Nietzsche 2003, 82) Both purposes belong together: the Dionysian as the negative—and the Dionysian as desubjectification, as withdrawal of self-sufficiency. The notations cited above are made around the same time that the *Rausch* reaches its emphatic peak as aesthetic principle in *Twilight of the Idols*. If Nietzsche still spoke in the *Dionysian Vision of the World* of the “*Spiel* with the *Rausch*,” for example, he says from now on, “[f]or there to be art, for there to be any kind of aesthetic doing and seeing, one physiological precondition is indispensable: intoxication (*Rausch*)” (Nietzsche 1998b, 46–48). And what he sees as the most important thing about the *Rausch* is the delimitation, the negation of the will, which on the flip side corresponds to an “feeling of increased power (*Kraftsteigerung*)” (Nietzsche 1998b, 47); one could add that “force” here is used in the sense of an “overabundance of life.” Accordingly, Nietzsche’s entire later philosophical body of work characterizes itself via extension of the Dionysian principle; Heidegger tied into this in his interpretation of Nietzsche, construing the “fill” and “feeling of increased power” as the “will to power,” and art as its “distinctive form” (Heidegger 1991, 92), one that designates the exact “opposite” of Kant’s “disinterested pleasure”—in two ways, in fact: once in view of the aesthetic judgment that binds the experience of art to receptivity, and once in view of the passivity of the perception and the “release” (*Freigabe*) of that “which is” (Heidegger 1991, 109). The first, thus, is desubjectification, or better, disempowerment of the subject; the second, its correlate, is the centering of the aesthetic on the body. The a priori of the lived-body (*Leibapriori*) does not mean that precedence is assumed by intensity, surplus, or that which Nietzsche again and again accounts for with the expression “force” (*Kraft*) but, rather, that “eccentricity” of a positionality outside one’s self, which Heidegger, in turn, connects with a “being embodied” (*Leiben*) of a “body” (*Leib*) (Heidegger 1991, 99). One could say the body here induces a productivity from affect, an unintentional dynamic touching on the phatic autonomy of an “obsession,” that is to say, on the passivity of alterity (Mersch 2006).

Thus—as Heidegger also emphasizes—Nietzsche asks not about the work as a result, as place of reception, but rather, primarily, about procedures and their implementation, their impact, about that which is not an intention and its embodiment but instead signifies an aesthetic thinking in and through deed, as it were—thinking not set in dichotomous opposition to action and interrupting it but rather springing from it as its own form of recognition, a knowledge that is non-discursive and

unable to be made discursive. Thirdly—in the literal sense of *meta hodos* (following a path), or perhaps even better, in the sense of *poros* (a passage always traversing the material and bodily) or of *metaporos* or even *diaporos* (which demands permeability)—a vital method for this, besides desubjectification and the consummate pathicism seeping through every single pore (the same word!), is what I have attempted multiple times already to delineate as a break or interruption, the literally unfathomable depths of a *Riss*. This *Riss* follows from the artistic production just as it passes through it and comes to pass from it. The correlation Nietzsche draws between art and event, established upon the aesthetics of production, is based on this “imposition of difference” (*Differenzsetzung*). The aesthetic event is the difference and follows it just as, conversely, the difference proceeds from the innards of the aesthetic process, as it were, after a *Riss* has been made within it. How can this be made comprehensible? With Nietzsche, much remains too undefined—because, as Heidegger also states in his commentary, for Nietzsche, “all [is] proper to art. But then art would only be a collective noun and not the name of an actuality grounded and delineated in itself” (Heidegger 1991, 122). Clearly, the problem rests in the fact that the creative productivity thus avouched cannot actually be understood; rather, it resembles life, the presence of the body and its mystification, attributing to it a “will to power” and thereby arguing no less metaphysically than the artistic concept it is battling—especially when it comes to the artistic concepts of Plato and Hegel. Nietzsche, in opposing both, totalizes the full of life and stylizes its unfolding as an artistic deed. Contrary to that, the ability to even posit any given “event of difference” would depend on an appropriate reconstruction of the particular strategies of artistic production—that is to say, the concrete underlying figures of difference.

5.

In closing, allow me to sketch out a few further thoughts. I will use the term ‘aesthetic strategy’ in doing so. This catchword concerns artistic work and the artistic working method and can—although it does not necessarily exhaust itself in it—also mean working with the body; if anything, I use it with the intention of calling to mind the conceptualization of a combination of practices that play a central role in Adorno’s aesthetic and that initially, at the very moment of constellation—that is to say, a scattering or “foreordaining” (*Fügung*) of positions (*Stellungen*)—do nothing other than to reveal their unfitting mismatch, their gaps or (again quite literally in the German) their “dislocated faultlines” (lit. *Verwerfungen*¹³) and “misrepresentation” (lit. *Entstellungen*¹⁴). For this, it is necessary to enable the experience of an ‘in-between.’ This “betwixt” happens in the performative by virtue of those clefts and “chiasms,” which posit an event of difference just as the unfitting mismatch of those foreordinations (*Unfügliche der Fügungen*), their self-denial, and even the force of synthesis are opened up, eased and rent asunder (*aufgerissen*). The preferred means for this is contradiction, which only allows itself to be manifested indirectly—within intra-scenic intervals or in their empty spaces and gaps, such as in the unwieldiness of pictures, words and tones as well as in the disruptions and dysfunctionalities through which media reveal their mediality. Nietzsche’s “ecstasy” could be applied here—in the resolution of contours, such as through the contrary use of figurations; in inversions; in such a way, namely, that the materials brought into play reveal their materiality and the techniques applied their ambiguity. To

state it differently: In what I term the aesthetic of difference, the production of paradoxes assumes a prominent position. Paradoxes prepare the way for the previously alluded paths, passages or even jumps, which cannot be planned or anticipated but only tested and tried out. At the same time, they keep work with the aesthetic in such instability as to allow that which is repressed and unreproducible to come to light. My wish is to emphasize the word “allow” here, which designates a possibility and not a necessity; within such “ex-periments”—making noted reference to the actual hidden meaning of the expression, namely, “passages” or “journeys”—artistic practice has its exercises, i.e., its reflective asceticism. What these might be cannot be stated in advance, nor can they be canonized, nor can they be learned; they emerge with the full force of neutrality. What is the definition of “aesthetic of difference”? It is the duplication of clefts or divisions; and from those gaps and “contrasts”—literally, the *contra-stare*, the “composite” (*Zusammensetzung*) as “opposition” (*Gegenstellung*)—“breaks forth” the inconceivable, the other, without obeying or deriving from the laws of causality—a singularity of event that simultaneously makes something able to be seen, experienced and recognized that could not be accessed in any other way, i.e., the “wresting” (*Erringung*) of preternatural knowledge that could not be won by any other means.

In all this, Nietzsche’s intuition remains utterly groundbreaking—a guide, if only suggestive or indicatory, like the intimation of a nod or a slight touch in passing. Applied differently, and again in reference to the words of Nietzsche himself: It is not the form, the *gestalt*, the ‘what’ and with that, the determinable and individualizable that appear to be crucial but rather the undetermined, the destructive, which ‘emancipates’ (*freigibt*) in furtherance of a new, other emergence (*Erscheinen*). Both aesthetic differences and practical paradoxes trace the path toward that end. They signify not an end in themselves, not an uncommitted *l’art pour l’art* upon which art realizes its pleasure principle, but rather build the media of a reflective practice that exists in the singular and whose pores and passages, in the sense of *diaporos* and *metaporos*, resemble insinuations or directives. In their thoroughly preliminary nature and experimental status, they induce the specifics of an aesthetic episteme birthed from the practical itself. The artist retrogresses behind it, understanding him- or herself in this less as one who creates or works on effects than as an arranger of the surprising and unpredictable—in short, no longer functioning as *maître de Plaisir* but rather as *maître de paradoxe*.

Notes

¹ *Scheinen* (verb), *Schein* (related noun): 1. Shine, glow. 2. Appear, seem (sometimes only superficially, as in an illusion). *Erscheinen* (verb), *Erscheinung* (related noun): To make an appearance (as in “emerge”); or, an appearance/phenomenon (with no illusion implied).

² *Treten*: To enter into. Thus, *in-erscheinung-treten* means “entering into *erscheinung*” (cf. previous footnote).

³ [Passage translated from the German original by Gratia Stryker-Härtel.]

⁴ [Passage translated from the German original by Gratia Stryker Härtel.]

⁵ *Übertrieb*, v.: exaggerated; translated here as “drove beyond.” At its root is *Trieb*, n.: 1. Instinct, impulse, urge, drive. 2. Sexual drive. 3. Plant shoot.

⁶ *Darstellung*, n.: Representation. Lit.: *da*: There (i.e., “Right there, before your very eyes”) + *stellen*: To place, posit.

⁷ *Rausch*, n.: Ecstasy, rapture, delirious state; inebriation.

⁸ *Spiel*, n. (*spielen*, v.): Play, game, performance.

⁹ From the Greek. *Bolos* (from *ballein*): throw; *sym*:- together; *dia*:- across, through.

¹⁰ *Aufriss* (n.): 1. Laceration, tear, opening. 2. Sketch, layout, outline.
Aufreißen (related v.): To rip open, tear at, lacerate.

¹¹ Combines *un*- (prefix) + *heilen* (v., “healing”) to create a new verb while also evoking the nouns *Unheil* (“bane, disaster”) and *heilig* (“sacred, holy”).

¹² [Passage translated from the German original by Gratia Stryker-Härtel.]

¹³ The root of the German word *werfen* is also related to the aforementioned *zusammenwerfen* and *durcheinanderwerfen*.

¹⁴ The root of the German word *Stellung* is also related to *stellare*.

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Biography

Dieter Mersch studied mathematics and philosophy at the University of Cologne and the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. He worked from 1983 to 1994 as associate professor for mathematical economics at the University of Cologne and the TH Köln-University of Applied Sciences. Also he worked as freelance author for several public radio broadcasting agencies between 1983 and 1997.

He earned his doctoral degree (*Dr. phil.*) in 1992 at the Technische Universität Darmstadt with a dissertation in philosophy on semiotics, rationality and rationality criticism. From 1997 to 2000, he worked as research assistant in philosophy at the Technische Universität Darmstadt and graduated in 2000 with the habilitation *Materialität, Präsenz, Ereignis. Untersuchungen zu den Grenzen des Symbolischen* (lit. transl.: "Materiality, Presence, Event: Inquiries into the Limits of the Symbolic"). From 2001 to 2004, he was guest professor of art philosophy at the Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design in Kiel. Between 2004 and 2013, he held a professorial chair for media studies at the University of Potsdam. Since October 1, 2013, Mersch has been head of the Institute for Critical Theory (ith) at the Zurich University of the Arts.

Dieter Mersch is a member of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Philosophie, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik, Society for Music and Aesthetics (Freiburg), Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft and Deutsch-Ungarische Gesellschaft für Philosophie. He is also advisory board member of the *Zeitschrift für Kulturphilosophie* ("Journal for Cultural Philosophy") and Editor of *Internationales Jahrbuch für Medienphilosophie* (International Yearbook for Media Philosophy). His working encompass the areas of media philosophy, art philosophy, the philosophy of language and 19th- and 20th-century philosophy as well as semiotics and aesthetics.

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