



## Introduction: The Turn of the Avant-Garde

Talk of machines, technologies, capabilities, costs, markets, infrastructures, offers no guidance and is inadequate and irrelevant to the development of our inner lives. This is why art today, traditionally the articulation and expression of the “why” side of life, is now so important and so vital, even though it remains confused and inconsistent in its response to the new demands and responsibilities placed on it in this time of transition.

—Bill Viola, “Between How and Why”

At the turn of the new millennium, almost a hundred years after the Modernist explosion and the great promise of the avant-garde, art appears to have lost whatever meager vestiges of force and importance it still might have held in the increasingly technological and commodified culture of the twentieth century. This crisis in aesthetics, which began in the nineteenth century, has been exacerbated by the rapid growth of mass culture with its corollaries, the entertainment industry, commercialization, and information technologies. In the process, art has become increasingly marginalized, as contemporary reality has come to be determined by technoscience and various technologies of power, while the aesthetic plays at best a secondary role, as it is most often reduced to a tool in cultural, ideological, and identity wars. What underlies this sense of the powerlessness, even irrelevance, of contemporary art is the determination, firmly embedded in the fabric of modern society, that reality is elsewhere, as one might say, and that its centers of power are digital technology, economic globalization, and increasing commodification. With the speedy advances in information technologies, the Internet, and new modes of advertising, even cultural and aesthetic innovations seem to lie more in the domains of

the virtual and the commercial than in the artistic. Thus what was experienced at the beginning of the last century as the crisis of aesthetics has apparently resolved itself into the problematic contained within technologies of power, which have incorporated the advances of modernist aesthetics, transformed them, and often in the process dulled and popularized these new techniques for the sake of profit.

With the annexation of modernist aesthetics by advertising and popular culture, aesthetic issues have come to be disclosed, as the commercial collages of Web pages make amply evident, as essentially technological issues, that is, as a matter of advancing information technologies, which, far from coming into conflict with capitalist modes of production, increase their ability to translate reality and experience into data, codes, and programs in the service of globalization and the accumulation of capital. The problem at the turn of the millennium is therefore less that the radical aesthetics of the avant-garde has become popularized than that the aesthetic itself has become exposed as intrinsically technological—a situation that, ironically, may be taken to represent precisely the fulfillment of some avant-garde dreams, especially those of F. T. Marinetti and Francis Picabia. Andy Warhol's remark "I want to be a machine" and the rise of material technology in the sculpture of Donald Judd or David Smith further illustrate this increasing sense of the aesthetic as technological. In such works, the essence of the aesthetic appears to be fundamentally consonant with technicity, and thus to constitute the matter of the same manipulation, reducibility to information, and reprogramming that we see rapidly advanced in the realms of digital technology or genetic engineering. With those intensifying social and cultural changes in view, it seems almost inevitable that art would continue to lose its social and cultural status and find itself even further marginalized in relation to the technoscientific, consumer-oriented, entertainment-driven society. It is therefore not surprising that aesthetics at the beginning of the new millennium is once again dominated by visions of the end and of exhaustion, and that, as a reaction, many critics—for instance, Richard Shusterman<sup>1</sup>—turn toward areas marginal to traditional aesthetics (popular music, film, or mass media) in search of vitality and significance.

In response to this impasse and pessimism concerning art's social function, my approach aims to recover and redefine art's transformative force. I claim that we have not yet recognized how radically avant-garde

art redefines the problematic of power and freedom, and how this redefinition makes it possible to rethink art's force beyond the boundaries of aesthetics. The single most important problem raised in this book concerns art's relation to power, and it hinges on how one reads the current—de facto correct and widespread—diagnosis of the powerlessness of art in contemporary society: does one take it to mean that art is without force, barely important, and thus hardly worth the effort in the global culture of the twenty-first century, or that perhaps a significant and unexamined “truth” addresses itself to us in the idea of art's powerlessness? To phrase it differently, how to understand the relation between powerlessness and power in the context of art? how to read the all-important yet often unthought suffix “-less”? Unexamined, this suffix is almost always taken for granted as signifying absence of power, and so the word “powerlessness,” in the context of art, suggests that artworks, when compared with social, political, or even physical forces, lack any effectiveness in changing reality. Art, determined by power, is without a critical force of its own; and, in the world defined by exponentially increasing technopower on the macroglobal and microgenetic scales, this means that art is progressively drained of significance. In particular in the context of capital accumulation and consumption, the suffix “-less” will always be construed as privation, loss, or lack of “profit”—will be construed, that is, as Theodor Adorno was quick to note, exclusively in negative terms. Yet when we take the notion of the powerlessness of art not as an all too obvious product of contemporary technocratic society but as a question posed to us and our culture, the possibility of a different understanding opens up: a different understanding not only of art but also, and perhaps more important, of power and its relation to art. Insofar as art discloses an alternative to the paradigms of production, mobilization, and technical manipulation at the core of contemporary operations of power, art's work is never exclusively negative but constitutes as well a “positive,” albeit paradoxical, articulation of the possibility of freedom. The “-less” in the adjective “powerless,” when attached to art, does not necessarily mean lack of power but instead indicates an alternative economy of forces, which changes the very make-up of power. In this view, the powerlessness of art is not a negative judgment rendered on artworks but a provocative indication that art functions otherwise than through dominant articulations of power. Though art, like everything else, is produced and regulated within the power-driven econ-

omy of modern being, art can become disencumbered of the governing configuration of power and open an alternative modality of relations. This ability to let go of power, to transform relations and enable their alternative configurations, constitutes the paradoxical force of contemporary art.

It would be hard to deny that modern reality is increasingly characterized by the intensifying play of power. Recent developments in globalization, as well as in genetic and information technologies, testify to the unprecedented reach of power on both the macro- and microscopic scales. Already in the late 1930's, Martin Heidegger described modernity as a constant drive toward the intensification of power, whose sole aim is to spread its domain and increase its magnitude. Power thus became the defining momentum of modern reality, a fluid complex of operations and relations whose increasingly technological character allowed it both a continuously expanding reach and greater flexibility. Later Michel Foucault, through his readings of Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power" and Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche, confirmed this diagnosis and extended the scope of modern power: technological power became biopower, reaching from individual bodies to the life of the population. At present, we have moved even beyond Foucault's horizon as power operates simultaneously on both the molecular and the global level. Power is understood here not only in terms of domination and violence but also as creation and production. These various aspects of power are two sides of the same coin, which has an increasing purchase on modern reality, determining its value in terms of the ability to make and manipulate. Power thus refers to the various flexible operations of producing, managing, and (re)programming, in which entities and relations come to be constituted into the modern world, whose standards of "reality" and "importance" are determined with a view toward a greater penetrative and formative reach of power. Such power, though often described in terms of efficiency, calculability, and normalization, certainly among the most important parameters of power today, is much too fluid and productive to be thought of simply under these rubrics. Its "domination" is more subtle, often blurring the distinction between creation, on one side, and manipulation or normalization, on the other. Modern genetics is one of the fields where contemporary operations of biopower efface the boundary between invention and manipulation, fluidity and calculability, crossing paths with technological calculus on the level of molecular codes, that is, with unprecedented efficiency and pene-

trative reach. It is such programming that appears to be the effective measure of what it means “to be” in contemporary culture.

Since contemporary forms of power are increasingly infotechnical in their modes of operation, the force of art, as I formulate it in this book, bears upon the modern technicity of power, interrogating its forms and flows, calling into question its increasing flexibility and reach. As Bill Viola suggests, contemporary art finds itself in a transitional stage, no longer capable or willing to play the old aesthetic and cultural roles assigned to it and yet uncertain, even confused, about its place in the technoworld of the twenty-first century. Technology, machines, and tools, as Viola remarks, function always as engines of “how” rather than “why” or “what for,” and the centrality of technology in modern life and art evidences a shift not only in the manner of art’s production but, more important, in the very direction of the aesthetic. This displacement at the heart of the aesthetic goes far beyond the occlusion of the aura, which Walter Benjamin diagnosed at the beginning of the twentieth century, as it now marks a much more fundamental and wide-reaching emergence of technicity as the “essence” of the aesthetic. In the face of what looks like a gradual disclosure of art’s basically technological constitution, of the “how” replacing and altering the “why,” Viola reawakens the dilemma of art’s continuing (or disappearing) difference from the technological. The disorientation to which Viola points indeed signals the central dilemma facing art today: is art part and parcel of the continuing technological acceleration of modern culture, an aesthetic branch of technopower, as it were, or does it mark the possibility of a critical turn, even transformation, in the play of power? The impasse in contemporary discussions of art, our discomfort with the very term “aesthetics,” stems in many ways from the evasion of this crucial question about the force of art in today’s reality.

In order to move beyond this impasse and read the suffix “-less” in “powerless” as a paradoxical possibility of transformation, we need both a different understanding of power and a different conception of the artwork. For me, the transition from traditional cultural roles to new future(s) for art, which Viola mentions, is more than an indication of a period of instability and change in aesthetic practices, precisely because it draws attention to the transformative character of art. Current approaches to art tend to underestimate this transformative force and give up the attempt to articulate a notion of the artwork that would reflect this poten-

tial. Taking an overall view, contemporary approaches to art can be roughly divided into five categories: (1) post-Hegelian scenarios of art's death and exhaustion, (2) attempts to revive the old terms of the beautiful and the sublime in order to define the essence of art, (3) conceptions that put art on the "back burner" and concentrate on instances of subversiveness and aesthetic import in popular culture and mass forms of entertainment, (4) the apparently progressive fusion of art with technology, as in electronic or transgenic art forms, and (5) isolated but interesting attempts to think of art beyond or after aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps with the exception of the last category, these often quite different views—whether attempts to refurbish "classical" aesthetic terminology, shift aesthetic concerns and critical legitimacy to popular culture, or explore the increasing proximity between artworks and technology in the age of informational and genetic revolution—all but confirm the "end of art," confessing the apparent absence of critical force in contemporary art. However, such judgments either overlook or abdicate the project of a radical critique of aesthetics, opened up by such twentieth-century thinkers and artists as Adorno, Heidegger, Benjamin, Luce Irigaray, Marcel Duchamp, and Gertrude Stein, to name a few.

Even though Heidegger and Adorno are often regarded as antithetical and incompatible thinkers—a perspective that leads to unfortunate retrenchment and self-enclosure of both Adornian and Heideggerian approaches—I argue that some of the most interesting possibilities for considering art "after aesthetics" emerge from the space between their work. In reflecting on the paradoxical force of modern art, I have found both Adorno's negativity and Heidegger's radical revision of the idea of *poiēsis* particularly useful for rearticulating art's transformative potential with regard to technological forms of power. Taking Heidegger's and Adorno's insights as the point of departure, I argue that art discloses the possibility of thinking not only beyond the currently existing forms of power but also, as I will explain later, beyond the very idea of being as power. Heidegger's and Adorno's engagement with art, in the context of the intensification of technologization and its modern forms of power, mandate a thorough reworking of aesthetic categories, which continue to dominate discussions of art. Until such a revision takes place—a revision only intimated and not carried through by these thinkers—art's relation to power will continue to be misunderstood and will remain constrained

by aesthetic categorizations of the artwork. Yet in explaining the force of art in contemporary culture in a post-aesthetic manner, as a redistribution of force relations and a transformation of the operations of power, my approach goes beyond the limitations of both Adorno's and Heidegger's thought.<sup>3</sup> It is meant to change the aesthetic optics that still determines much discussion of art, and to offer a new way of understanding art's intimate yet critical relation to the very modalities and operations of power in today's society.

To indicate the scope and the implications of this turn or transformation in power that characterizes the artwork, I approach art as a force field, where forces drawn from historical and social reality come to be formed into an alternative relationality.<sup>4</sup> I call this transformative event "forcework" and understand it as a specifically artistic redistribution of forces, in which relations are freed from power structures and the unremitting, intensifying manipulative drive characteristic of modernity. Force has a double valence in my argument. On the one hand, the term refers to Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's approaches to force, which understand force on the level of nonformalized functions and flows of energy, that is, in terms of the elemental constituents of "being" prior to their actualization into substances, objects, or bodies. On the other hand, force is seen in the Heideggerian perspective as rupture, change, transformation, that is, as the very dynamic of being and unfolding. In short, it is the force of the event. Thus the term "forcework" refers to the manner in which artworks redistribute relations on the microlevel of forces—underneath the sedimented relations, so to speak, between objects, bodies, substances, and the operations of power forming them. Such transformation cannot be described in traditional aesthetic terms, because it is not a matter of form and content, of images and statements, of the seen and the said, or of the sensible and the intelligible. The rupture and transformation that art's forcework occasions describes the specific artistic force with which art "acts" in historical and cultural context. And the "occasion" of such a change constitutes art's event. The notion of contemporary art as forcework highlights the dynamic, transformative momentum of art's work over and against the notion of artworks as objects and/or commodities. It also revises art's relation to the "outside" world as well as its effect on the audience. What the artistic forcework occasions in the world around it and in its viewers cannot be explained either in traditional aesthetic terms of

affect, perception, and judgment or through the sociocultural categories of production, manipulation, and critique. Rather, the *work* that takes place in art—"work" understood here not as a produced object but in the active, transformative sense—needs to be approached on the level of force relations. To develop such an understanding of art's transformative forcework, I consider a wide range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century artistic practices: from those of the Italian Futurists Marinetti and Boccioni to those of the Russian avant-garde artists Velimir Khlebnikov, Liubov Popova, and Dziga Vertov to the practices of Dadaism, Duchamp, and Stein to those of such contemporary artists as Bill Viola, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Amiri Baraka, Seiko Mikami, and Eduardo Kac. As such, my approach responds to and even further radicalizes Fredric Jameson's call for a nonreified, nonobjectified conception of the artwork.<sup>5</sup> Such a "post-aesthetic" approach accounts for the *force* with which art redispenses relations and alters their mode of being in the world, releasing them from flexible and penetrative flows of technopower. This new way of thinking would suggest a radical and transformative significance of art vis-à-vis the predominance of power-oriented relations, not only in the realms of commerce, politics, and technology but also in the everyday practices of living. Yet this power-free relationality, to the extent that it occurs in art, can be called artistic.

As forcework, art can no longer be conceived as an object but instead should be understood as an event, that is, as a dynamic, "force-ful" redistribution of relations inscribed in it through the sociocultural determination of artistic production. The emphasis placed here on the "event" of art does not cancel the inevitable, and necessary, materiality and objectification of artworks but points to their double character as both "act" and shaped product. It is the "fact" of the physicality of artworks, their necessary existence as objects with their apparent constancy, that in fact highlights the "inconstant," volatile, and transformative event at the core of art. In Viola's installations, the juxtaposition of such objects as chairs, tables, jugs, television monitors, projection panels, and so on, with virtual, electronically generated or processed images gives these works their particular force in terms of the exploration and questioning of the boundary between the aesthetic and the technological. This interplay (to evoke Heidegger's terminology) between the thing-character and the work-character of works of art, their necessary interrelation and mutual determina-



tion and differentiation, foregrounds the fact that art's force is not at all abstracted from its material existence. On the contrary, materiality performs an active role in art's "work" precisely to the extent that the overt immutability of the thing-aspect of the work (the work as object) puts into play its active, verb features.<sup>6</sup> The "fact" of the work's existence as a thing both shelters and reinforces the "act" of its *working*, the event of transformation, the dynamic forcework of art. Thus the notion of "artwork" comes to play a double role here, not just an art *object* but also an art *work*: its "labor," performance, act, in a word, its force. Revealed in its full complexity, the artwork is the reciprocal animation of the nominal and the verbal sense of "work," the event of the actualization of art's status as an object into the performance of its work.

Perhaps the most significant, and yet most difficult, aspect of rethinking the work of art as forcework is the radical critique of the logic of production and the modalities of power that together regulate modern social praxis. The idea of production implicit in the aesthetic notion of art as "formed content" remains inadequate for the type of performative displacement involved in art. The creation of an artwork, while it inscribes both the forces and the relations of production that regulate its social context, not only exceeds but also revises the very modality of transactions and relations between forces that obtain within the paradigm of production.<sup>7</sup> Production and action inscribe violence in their very mode of operation in this specific sense: that, as modalities of making or effecting, they shape and recast material that is regarded as passive. Artworks encode in their forcework the possibility of a different, nonviolent mode of relation, which does not saturate force relations with either creative or restrictive manipulation. It is true that many modern and contemporary works rely heavily on the aesthetics of shock, but the violence and power in art, as Adorno is right to contend, happen for the sake of nonviolence, even if this is ultimately unintentional and even counter to the artist's aims or interests. Even in works explicitly relying on the shock produced by power and violence, there is, I would argue, another dimension, in which the artwork has a force that is no longer violent, that is, not dominating through production or reconfiguration but rather releasing forces into reciprocal shaping and becoming.

For example, Amiri Baraka's recent poetry can be seen as an instance of work involving such a paradoxical role of violence and power in con-

temporary art. On the one hand, Baraka must be understood as quintessentially invested in power, as seeking alternative modes of power or strategies of resistance and counterpower, which are forcefully brought into the foreground both in the themes and in the rhetoric of his poetry, plays, and essays, all sharply critical of the modern technocapital. On the other hand, Baraka's remapping of art in poems like "Art Against Art Not" hearkens back to the idea of *poiēsis* and transformation at the heart of African art, as discussed by Léopold Senghor in his work on Negritude. The funky rhythm Baraka infuses into his poetry becomes not simply an alternative mode of power but, more radically, an alternative *to* power, a story of being ("is' story") whose language is not technological, not the lingo of capital and power, but a transformative reweaving of relations. Let me be clear here: the force of art does not exclude the shock effects associated with power games and violence in modern art, on the contrary, it often incorporates such power games as part of what nevertheless works, overall, as a transformative and power-free redistribution of relations, for the force that I associate with art has a paradoxical effect of dissipating, annulling, or desisting from power. What art's forcework does is to open, inside relations of power, an inverse of power: not powerlessness but desistance from power, not to be misunderstood as indifference or passivity but to be seen instead as a transformation of the very nature of what it means to work and to act. We can describe this transformation as a shift from the active to the middle voice.

Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of production underlying modern technicity captures this nonviolent modality of being in the middle voice, in its suggestive distinction between making/producing (*machen*) and letting/releasing (*lassen*) as two fundamentally different ways of disposing relations. Intrinsic to *machen* is the formation, production, and manipulation of relations and objects (*Machenschaft*) into the terms of an ever-intensifying power (*Macht*) whose operations become increasingly flexible and fluid. Traditionally, making is any form of praxis with a view to the realization of well-defined goals, or a *telos*. As such, it includes a modality of self-realization, which of course can be blocked, postponed, or derailed by opposing forces. Even in the postmodern fluid or fragmentary conception of power, the idea of making, as genetic manipulation suggests, is a type of relation in which a dominant active force shapes, pro-

duces, or subjugates either a passive material or a weaker force. By contrast, *lassen* refers to an active release from power, to a transformation in the very mode of relating, which becomes articulated through a reciprocal interaction of forces. Insofar as *lassen* is a departure from the binary articulation of domination and submission, from active form and passive matter, it enables a becoming, in which forces unfold through each other in a continuously reactivated field of reciprocal shaping, because in this type of articulation all forces are both affected and affecting: they unfold in the middle voice, eschewing the passive/active opposition. And it is precisely this modality of relation in the middle voice, predicated on a reciprocal enabling, that I refer to as power-free. *Lassen* signifies, therefore, an event in which forces are reactivated into an alternative modality of mutual enabling and becoming.

It is important to underscore here that this event in no way means leaving things as they are, because as they are, things are always already incorporated into the various layers and flows of power. Still, this sense of letting go and release indicates neither a forcible reshaping of forces within the nexus of power(s) nor a conferring of external identities upon them. Rather, letting go operates in the middle voice, neither active nor passive, neither forcible nor ineffective. This middle-voice tonality, as I show in chapter 1, does not refer to the ways in which power can change, produce, or reshape relations from both within and without—always inevitably into a new form of power—but rather to a new mode of relating, which emerges from the interaction and reciprocal shaping of forces. This alternative relationality is not some illusory beyond to power but instead indicates a critical inflection in the tonality of power, a change of momentum whereby forces become released from the circuits of power and are given a free space of occurrence. In this context, the artistic forcework can be seen as an enabling, transformative work, which radically changes the very momentum of relations. Artworks seek what Deleuze, commenting on Foucault, calls “a ‘power of truth’ which would no longer be the truth of power, a truth that would release transversal lines of resistance and not integral lines of power.”<sup>8</sup> This power or, better, force of truth, which is no longer a truth of power, signifies, in my reading, a distinctive field of relationality, an event that grants forces, against the pervasive formative operations of power, a space for reciprocal shaping and becoming. This capac-

ity, transversing the workings of power without either becoming a party to power or being rendered powerless by power's domination, constitutes the "event" of art.

To further explain this characteristic capacity of art to exceed aesthetic parameters, I adapt the Greek notion of *aphesis* for the purposes of my argument. My use of the term "aphesis," which denotes a releasing, a letting be or a letting go, and even liberty, is an attempt to describe in positive terms this alternative mode of disposing the relations at work in art. The register of meanings brought into play by *aphesis* begins to outline the forcework through which art, while borrowing from social relations of power, acquires its capacity to desist. The *aphetic* character of forcework indicates that relations become disencumbered from both disciplining and generative power, which means that art frees forces into a becoming, which is apart from the habitual relations of representation, action, and knowledge that form and regulate social praxis. Gertrude Stein's writing is often *aphetic* in this sense: in her linguistic freedom and inventiveness, Stein does not negate grammar or the power of signification but rather releases words and meanings from their investment in the various forms of power existing on syntactical, semantic, or cultural levels. Stein's language is written "merrily" and for pleasure, beyond the intention "to spell or spend," beyond articulation and profit (of meaning and the power that accrues with it). Avoiding the well-known idiom of power (grammar, meaning, name, image, narrative, and so on), Stein finds a new way of writing—using such devices as the continuous present, composition as explanation, naming without names, to mention just a few—that remains within power and yet does not comply with it. Stein's work shows how the customary practices that shape forces into the operational nexus of power come undone, and how a possibility of a new occurrence is opened up. The term "aphesis," with its connotations of releasing and liberation, indicates here how art's force is not an alternative power but an alternative *to* power, which releases forces into the element of reciprocal free play and becoming.

It is in terms of this tension between *machen* and *lassen*, between power and *aphesis*, that I explain art's forcework as the space where power-oriented dispositions of forces into the practices of calculation and production become transformed into an alternative modality of relation, in which forces enable each other's becoming. The difficulty that such an

explanation entails is the impossibility of a positive translation or representation of art's forcework. Yet this "impossibility" is not at all negative; instead, it constitutes art's paradoxical capacity, its truly idiomatic force. Since art's forcework marks a critical inflection in power, it cannot be articulated in positive terms, for it would then enter the field of representation and become inscribed within the very flows of power that it reorients. But this (in)ability should not be misconstrued as a lack in art, as a moment of art's powerlessness or of negation of its power. Rather, it is a paradoxical capacity that art has to *not be* positive, or posited, and thus also to remain beyond the scope of negation. To be neither powerful nor powerless is the enigmatic force of art. What Adorno calls "enigma" I redefine as a "third," in-between modality, which transverses the very essence of power. When social and cultural relations enter the "field" of art, art's "work" transforms their character, releasing them from the formative (either productive or restrictive) hold of power. Artworks instantiate an interface between the "external," social world and the "internal," artistic space, an interface that allows art both to be embedded in social praxis and yet to remain autonomous. It is this double character that endows art with critical and performative force. Art's forcework lets be by rupturing and displacing the patterns of power governing social praxis. As such, forcework defines the transformative dimension of art, which lies beyond the complicities with and/or resistances to regimes of power and ideologies that mark both the content and the formal aspects of artworks, and which also, so to speak, lies beyond power's ability to exercise and reproduce itself.

Whenever one claims a transformative potential for art, the question inevitably arises about the relationship between artistic transformation and radical political change. In response to such a question, I would like to make two claims. First, contra Adorno, I argue that the event of transformation is not a mere potentiality or semblance but that it occurs and has effects in the world. Second, I suggest that for this work of transformation to reach beyond the realm of art and not be subsumed into the matrix of power, it has to be continued by social and political transformation. This is how I propose to radicalize what Heidegger calls "preservation," understood as a continuous reactivation of the transformative work. And it is clear that such an ongoing reactivation of transformation requires radical democratic politics. Yet my task in this book is to articulate the specific

role that art can play in regard to this political process, and this is why I do not theorize the process itself.<sup>9</sup> To that effect, the conclusion of this book presents, through a discussion of Khlebnikov, Vertov, Baraka, and Wodiczko, a conception of revolt in art, one that sees art's import not in its political engagement or its subversion of aesthetic forms but in the radical nature of its forcework. In this context, the task is not simply to "preserve" the work of art but also to continuously reactivate its transformative force in political life. This is also how I inflect Benjamin's call for the politicization of aesthetics, the process that ultimately necessitates the move beyond aesthetics.

Adorno, in terms different from Heidegger's but in a similar spirit, claims that art, deploying the forms of domination constitutive of modern society, turns this domination against itself and, beyond the confines and ideological stakes of any politics, opens the possibility of freedom. Thus what is at stake in art's forcework is not simply freedom from specific political, cultural, or technological forms of domination but release from the more fundamental "domination," or mobilization, of forces in service of the overall "politics" of the continuous intensification of power. What art recognizes is that the very inscription of force relations into the operations of power, with this inscription's corollary endorsement of power as the characteristically and inescapably modern way of life, is the political gesture par excellence, a gesture that "politicizes" being beyond any ideology or political statement. Since forces, in the artwork, are no longer "in the service of power"—whether for positive or negative purposes—but instead become realigned, as it were, for the sake of freedom, art is an event of a different "political" praxis. This praxis radicalizes politics by undoing what I have described here as being's primary politicization in service to power. In this specific sense, art can be said to instantiate not only an alternative politics but an alternative *to* politics. Art can do so because it instantiates the event as free from the most fundamental and pervasive kind of domination: the originary mobilization and shaping of force relations for the sake of power. This critical distinction between mobilization/production and transformative forcework constitutes the pivot of my analysis, in chapter 2, of art's relation to modern technology and forms of power, from the twentieth-century avant-garde, especially Italian Futurism, to contemporary Web-based and genetic art.

Art's transformation of the notion of production is particularly

important to consider in the context of commodification, since it illustrates the way in which the redistribution of forces performed by art offers an alternative to the global commodifying effects of the productionist logic of modern power. As an aesthetic object, art is of course part of the production paradigm—that is, it is obviously formed and produced and thus already predisposed for commodification—but as forcework, it opens the different modality of an event, irreducible to a product. This event desists from power and constitutes an eminently political instantiation of transformative force. Performing a critique of the commodity culture, the event character of art, the forcework “at work” in it, is not reducible to the parameters of exchange. While the artwork’s features as an object easily become inscribed into commodity exchange, art’s dimension of forcework, its transformative “act,” exceeds it. Thus, as I argue in chapter 3, art, in its forcework, escapes the logic of commodity, both its paradigm of exchange and its corollary tendency toward fetishization. Though it is increasingly important to nuance our understanding of how art comes to function as a commodity, and thus as an element in the global economy of power, it is even more vital to flesh out the way in which art calls this dominant practice into question and opens the possibility of a nonproductionist (in the widest possible sense) way of being.

Since the logic of power/production is inextricably linked to the subject-object dialectic, the notion of forcework displaces this model and its various heuristic roles in formalist, materialist, and cultural analyses. It delimits the scope of these approaches by pointing out that what makes art art—that is, its forcework—remains outside the scope of aesthetic and cultural critique. With such questioning of the subject, such corollary notions as pleasure, desire, aesthetic experience, judgment, the beautiful, and the sublime, though appropriate for aesthetic appreciation and critique of art, lose their binding relevance for the concept of art as forcework. Instead, the postaesthetic understanding of art approaches art as a certain type of transformation, engaging it on the level of the formation and redistribution of forces. In chapter 3, I discuss how this idea of art’s forcework allows us, in the context of the work of Irigaray, Paul Gilroy, and Frantz Fanon, to rethink the notion of the subject after aesthetics. As Gilroy (in his analysis of race), Irigaray (in her thought on sexual difference), and Fanon (in his idea of “actional man”) point out, the notions of production and labor cannot serve the emancipatory function in relation

to raced and/or sexed subjects, because the subject- and power-oriented paradigm of production is itself responsible for patterns of racial and sexual inequality and oppression. In very different ways, they point to *poiēsis* rather than to labor as a source of liberation.

It is in relation to the operations of modern capital and its practices of production that we need to examine the problem of revolt in art. As Adorno would say, such a possibility of revolt is not a question of political subversiveness or radical ideas but, instead, of a certain redesigning of the modes of relation, one that happens in art on the level of force.<sup>10</sup> In Wodiczko's projections and performative instruments there is a dimension of "revolt" underneath social and political critique, a revolt in the aphetic mode, whose radical nature lies precisely in desisting from power and enabling a different modality of relations: a modality that is poietic and transformative precisely by virtue of being nonproductionist and power-free. Thus where art "re-volts" or "turns" against the logic of power is not, as I argue in this book's conclusion, in its explicit proclamations or formal innovations and subversions but in the very event of transforming relations, which disallows the fluid grip of power on experience while letting forces issue into configurations free from power.

This approach questions the position of critics who, like Raymond Williams, offer a rather dismissive evaluation of what Williams calls the "once liberating Modernism" and reduce its radical art to a phenomenon of merely historical importance without much relevance for contemporary life. My view, by contrast, is that we have not yet sufficiently addressed the problematic of freedom and power as it has been redefined in avant-garde artworks. Consequently, we need to consider how the avant-garde—and I employ the term to refer both to the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes and to the continuing avant-garde radicalism in contemporary art and poetry—contests power and redefines freedom. To put it simply, the avant-garde does not simply endorse, by attacking the absence of freedom in bourgeois society, the liberal notion of individual freedom; rather, it tries to change, amidst the galvanizing technological developments of twentieth-century culture, the very notion of what it means to be free in the face of growing technologization. Disagreeing with those who see art as exhausted or finished, I contend that art has never been more significant than it is now. I see art's "marginalization" in our technological society not as a judgment on art's importance but, conversely, as a disquieting



confirmation of our narrowing and uncritical understanding of experience. A good example of this inverse relation is the video installations of Bill Viola—for instance, *The Crossing*, *The Greeting*, and *Migrations*<sup>11</sup>—which use the latest computer and video technology to show that experience cannot be reduced to a technoscientific calculus or, broadly speaking, to information. The force of radical art is, in my approach, its ability to call into question this restricted, technicist view of being, experience, and action.

The present volume, pointing to this revolt in art in relation to modern forms of technopower, constitutes a decisive departure from the current climate of discussions about avant-garde art. Against claims about the exhaustion and irrelevance of contemporary art, I postulate the growing importance of radical aesthetics in the face of the rapidly intensifying technologization of life, both in its global proportions and at the most basic level of genetic codes. The crucial point here is not just that art, in its most recent forms of electronic or transgenic artworks, and whether in critical or celebratory fashion, continues to be preoccupied with the most recent and culturally formative developments in science and technology and thus keeps pace with the “real” world. Rather, the point is also that art in its characteristic mode of existence, here called “forcework,” remains centrally and critically engaged with the “nervous system” of contemporary forms of relationality: technicity and its evolving modalities of power. Elsewhere, I have underscored the continuing relevance of the modernist and post-modern avant-garde to our understanding of modern experience.<sup>12</sup> In *The Force of Art*, I offer a new conception of radical art as a transformative force in the midst of the globalizing work of power.