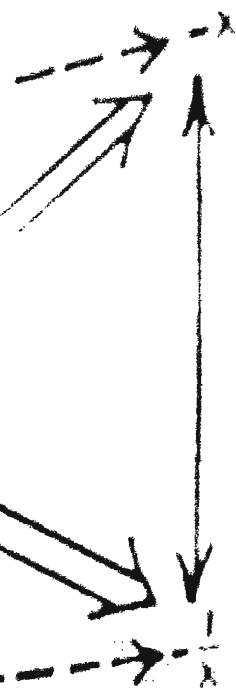


THE STONE ART THEORY INSTITUTES : VOLUME FOUR



BEYOND
THE AESTHETIC
AND THE
ANTI-AESTHETIC

Edited by James Elkins
and Harper Montgomery

AFTERWORD

THE BATHWATER AND THE BABY

Gretchen Bakke

JAY BERNSTEIN: I've been interested in this debate [the anti-aesthetic in relationship to Kantian aesthetics], and I have a certain anxiety about it, because I am afraid the baby will be thrown out with the bathwater. I'd like to say a little about what the bathwater is.

JIM ELKINS: You care about the bathwater?

JAY BERNSTEIN: Well, okay, the baby.

—SEMINAR 6

Let us imagine ourselves Freudian for a moment; let us pretend that this privileging of the bathwater over the baby was not a simple slip of the tongue but the articulation of a true preference for what is left to think with (and about) once the baby has been tossed out the back door and has landed with an ignominious thunk among the weeds of the kitchen garden. The bathwater, cooled to tepid, is a bit gray, and the tub, with a slight scum stuck to the edges of it, is then brought back in, placed on the kitchen counter, ripe for contemplation. We lean over it, all twenty-three heads of the seminar participants, and just before anyone utters a word—though several brows are wrinkled and lips pursed as if to speak—Elkins comes running in bearing the howling tot, rescued from the refuse, and plops it unceremoniously back into the tub. Everything set miraculously right again.

But is it really? What has been avoided by this refusal to let the remnants rise to the fore? And I ask this not just in reference to this one perverse moment lost (though I am curious how Bernstein might have answered his own question about what the bathwater is . . .) but in reference to the way in which the Seminars unfolded. It is at least possible that in rectifying “wrong” interests, in diverting attention from tepid, gray, scummy substrates and deleting—from the public record at least—the bodily traces left by live infants,¹ we have biased just what Hal Foster asked us to avoid, all those many years ago, in *The Anti-Aesthetic*: we have acted for reconciliation rather than against it.² We have in a word, accepted the return of the splashing, distracting howling baby to the bathwater and ensured, in the form as much as in the content of this volume, that the next time anything is tossed out the back door it will be the dull and

1. I refer here to a lengthy discussion of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, a work devoted to the traces and leavings of a baby. To my mind, at least, it was one of the more engaging and

generative conversations of the week, and it has been omitted in almost its entirety from this, the now official, record of the event.

2. Section 1 of the Seminars.

unpleasant residues that linger in the water (and that, it should be noted, were integral to the baby before it was cleaned).

If I were a cynic, I would stop here and say that the “beyond” as the spoken aim of these Seminars and this volume is sheer folly—our battles are precisely those fought by a twenty-seven-year-old Foster et al. against a regime not only of conventional aesthetics and Greenbergian Modernism but of acceptable forms of argumentation, permissible objects of care, and proper avenues of interest. But I am not a cynic, and I stand with Foster, whose claim in seminar 8 that we now live in a regime of affect makes a great deal of sense to me (a point I will return to).³ That said, I want to devote this afterword, also a “beyond” of a certain sort, to the miscarried—or perhaps aborted—question of the bathwater. I leave concern for the baby to others. After all, a baby has a remarkable capacity, most especially in late-capitalist, neoliberal, affect-obsessed America, to steal the show.⁴

A MATTER OF KNOWING

[T]o know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where “to matter” means at once “to materialize” and “to mean.”

—BUTLER, *Bodies That Matter*

We who follow upon the heels of artists, whether as critics, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, or students, are but diviners over unclear pools of grayish irrigate. Not that individual artworks are so muddied as that, and not that we don’t often have strong opinions about how lines of judgment ought to be drawn, but the expanded field has done something to our ability to speak to the centrality of particular works and movements, trends, and analytics.⁵ The baby, despite its discomfiting re-entrance here, is more difficult to locate these days than one might expect. This is as true for those who want to dispense with it once and for all as it is for those who wish to recuperate it and restore it to its rightful position smack dab in the center of things.⁶ What one has instead—in this

3. Section 8 of the Seminars.

4. Special thanks to Aaron Richmond for his council and his initial editing of this essay, to Harper Montgomery for her patience and editing, and to those seminar participants whose strong opinions were so essential to the proceedings and my experience of them and yet are almost entirely absent from this the official record: Martin Sundberg, Béata Hock, Gustav Frank, Michael Kelly, Joana Cuhna Leal, Sven Speiker, Aaron Richmond (again), and Sunil Manghani. This is a far from a complete list; these are just those whose voices I miss most in the transition from the chaotic vocalicity of the Seminars to the more static silences of the printed word.

5. “The expanded field” is of course a nod to Rosalind Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” which was first published in *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30–44 and reprinted in *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

6. The conflict of how to cope with the baby and bathwater is represented in this transcript by a generational divide that is also, here, a structural one. The role of the teacher, here played by Elkins, is pitted against that of the student, here perhaps best represented by Elise Goldstein. The former wants the baby firmly in the bath, while the latter cares not a whit for either the befogged water or the beast itself. Section 7 of the Seminars.

transcript, at least, and in the many storied longings it half-misrepresents—is a certain nostalgia for surety.

A close study of the text for evocations of Kant might best reveal this longing for a system of judgment which precludes things like double rainbows, falsified subway maps, and drawings of scary monsters from getting in the way of the serious consideration of serious works of art.⁷ Such a study would, however, produce mostly a critique of the philosophers in the group, which, given the diversity of the whole and the breadth of the subject matter, would not be the most useful analytic task. Rather, one might more profitably begin with *The Anti-Aesthetic* itself—the book, not its ripples. For there is a recurrent debate in the transcript, at times overt and at others very much between the lines, about what *The Anti-Aesthetic* is, or was; about what it might have meant, and what it might still mean; about what it did, and what it might still have the potential to do. Behind all of this definitional dowsing, I posit that the book, as a *historical document*, continues to promise that it might be possible to find a single answer to what is happening in and to the arts.

In other words, in its time *The Anti-Aesthetic* served as a sort of “beyond” of its own. It was the “not X” by means of which one could argue forcibly against the “X”—where the “X” could be understood variously as Modernism, aesthetics, reconciliation, conviction, continuity, originality, verticality, structure, textuality, or even Clement Greenberg himself (mind you, this is but a partial list!). For its part, “not X” is rendered differently in different cases in the Seminars: not-modernism becomes, with time, postmodernism; not-aesthetics is cast as the anti-aesthetic; not-conviction becomes as sort of praise for doubt;⁸ not-continuity is called rupture or “the celebration of the epistemological break”;⁹ not-originality is quickly transformed into “the orthodoxy of the purloined image”;¹⁰ and not-textuality becomes the material or the corporeal.¹¹ Regardless of lexical nuance, however, the procedure for getting beyond the conventional by means of its opposite is a constant feature of the operations carried out in the name of destabilizing the theoretical apparatus “X,” which had calcified and grown stony.¹² There is, of course, a certain irony in *The Anti-Aesthetic* holding so many divergent and, as Foster takes care to point out, young voices within it that it can hardly be considered a singular instance of anything. Nevertheless, the procedural impulse that characterizes the volume—as well as, I think it’s fair to argue, the artworks which ground the discussions therein—is one of opposition,

7. Double rainbows, a falsified subway map, and the pleasures of drawing scary monsters were all issues that arose during the course of the Seminars. In the first case a Kantian argument (meant, very likely, to render Kant entirely superfluous) regarding the sublime ecstasy that natural beauty (rather than art) might inspire was made by means of a YouTube video of a double rainbow that went viral in July of 2010, just as the Seminars began; the second was a further rehashing of the long-since-dry-with-dust debate on what does or does not qualify

as art; and the last—discussed in much detail in the third section of this essay—is a reference to the participants worrying the Gordian knot of whether pleasure is sufficient justification for making art (spoiler alert: it was generally agreed upon that it is not).

8. Section 1 of the Seminars.

9. Section 2 of the Seminars.

10. Section 3 of the Seminars.

11. Section 3 of the Seminars.

12. Section 3 of the Seminars.

in which it is precisely the “opposite of” that holds the greatest analytic and aesthetic purchase.

We are left, thus, with something of a binary. The aesthetic (“X”) and anti-aesthetic (“not X”)—as one exemplary pair among many—are wedded one to the other like the front and backsides of a coin. The currency of art is not changed; it is simply flipped while continuing to be spent. It is this unity of opposition *within* the system it opposes that motivates so many of the seminar participants’ probings of Modernism’s underlying structure and its continued claims upon us. We wonder, are we still in it? Can we get out of it? It certainly seems as though we would like to. Did the “post-” of postmodernism and the “anti-” of the anti-aesthetic take us anywhere new? And if we still care about newness, how can we even pretend to claim that we have escaped Modernism’s pull?¹³ What role can we now say that, with the benefit of one score and ten years of hindsight, this text has had in moving us along—or perhaps beyond—Modernism’s own long and ravenous trajectory?

More than finding definitive answers to these questions in the transcript, or in my less-than-perfect memories of the proceedings, what is important here is to consider the impulse that undergirds them—the impulse that served as the very premise, the *raison d’être*,¹⁴ of the entire event—and that is to arrive at a point where we can *collectively* say that something is known, and that something definable and definite matters in both senses of the word. The goal of the Seminars was not to rub our thumbs through the sludge left at the water’s edge. It was not to point definitively at the murk itself, nor to plug our collective nose and plunge our common head into the lukewarm slosh of a bath abandoned. We were not flown from the earth’s four corners, fed, put up, and cared for for a week in order to put our minds together and suggest, in the end, that peripherality and marginality were all that was left of us, our professions, and our bodies of evidence. That this is precisely where we did end up is more an accident of histrionics—what Bernstein might call a “feeling that is already a matter of knowing”¹⁵—than of good intentions earnestly deployed (I say more on this below in “The Last Word”).

When I speak, then, of orthodoxy¹⁶ or of the babe returned to its bath, what I mean is that we want to know, or perhaps to feel, that something is certain.

13. See Boris Groys, “On the New,” *Res* (Autumn 2000): 5–17. Full text also available online at <http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/espai/eng/art/groys1002/groys1002.html> (accessed October 28, 2011).

14. *Raison d’être* is also the name of a Swedish “dark-ambient-industrial-drone music project,” a description that gets me closer to where I want to be (the bathwater) than anything the X’s and not-X’s of Modernism and its aftermaths have to offer. See the Wikipedia entry, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raison_d%27etre (accessed October 28, 2011).

15. “Art is the interrogation of a possibility of how ordinary items, just things, can be

demanding in themselves; how something merely factual, just this complexion of paint on canvas, can not only be meaningful, but lodge a claim. Artworks interrupt our merely instrumental engagement with objects, and further, demand a form of knowing that is also a feeling, a knowing by feeling and *feeling that is already a matter of knowing*” (emphasis added). Jay Bernstein in Section 1 of the Seminars.

16. “Orthodoxy” here is short for “acceptable forms of argumentation, permissible objects of care, and proper avenues of interest” mentioned in the introduction.

That there is an order to things, that it can be found, and that any group of the well-intentioned and well-educated might, through the pleasures and rages of discussion alone, have the good fortune of lighting upon it. With this given, the seminar participants set about plaiting a lovely sort of bow by means of which to tie up loose ends—a bow that came, in the end, to be called by the name “affect.” This is not, I would hazard, the answer we were looking for. Rather, it was the one we were given to find.

In identifying our task in this way, I do not attribute an ardent interest in grand narratives (and their inversions) to any of the seminar participants in particular. Indeed, I can think of several who would shake an angry fist in my direction at the merest hint of such an attribution. My point is, instead, that the thrust of the event itself drew us in. We had been asked to imagine that it was possible to find a “beyond” equal in its impact to *The Anti-Aesthetic*. The promise of this beyond—a dream, a fantasy, a propellant—moved us forward through a model of history in which “forward” left “behind” what was temporally past and in which progress was defined by alighting upon something new that superseded, eclipsed, and rendered immaterial what came before. The new betters the old, not necessarily because it is a superior or more timely model for accessing and assessing the arts, but simply because it is the latest (always necessarily) penultimate theory on a timeline that never ceases its unfolding toward the future.

The Anti-Aesthetic could not, thus, have been our answer, for it is what we were specifically tasked with leaving behind. Neither, I think, could the aesthetic be thought a viable option, though some did argue in this direction. The return to beauty was discarded as irrelevant (though I tend not to agree). Rancière might as well have been the bathwater itself for all the attention his arguments were accorded, while relational aesthetics—the great white hope for a grand narrative in the morass of the expanded field—was, with a dismissive washing of hands, reduced to the socializing of socialites.¹⁷ Interest, criticality, critique, and conviction all fell by the wayside, dubbed procedures of an earlier era,¹⁸ while Diarmuid Costello’s tentative dipping of his biggest toe into theory’s potential

17. It is worth noting that the Seminars’ champions of relational aesthetics—myself, Béata Hock, and Stéphanie Benzaquen—have all had significant dealing with Eastern European artists and their undertakings. Section 6 of the Seminars.

18. Section 1 of the Seminars.

19. See Section 4 of the Seminars, in which Costello bares something of his soul regarding the centrality of a certain vision of philosophical inquiry to his own life and is immediately given a thorough and unsympathetic trouncing by the rest. It was such an immediate and unforgiving reaction that I was reminded of Bataille’s musings about the intense disrespect humans afford the big toe. It holds them upright, and yet they forever withhold the credit due for this change in perspective. Not a linear association, but one with which the issue of mattering (in both senses of the word) is intimately entangled, and

thus I deem, somewhat arbitrarily, worth quoting at length: “The big toe is the most *human* part of the human body, in the sense that no other element of this body is as differentiated from the corresponding element of the anthropoid ape (chimpanzee, gorilla, orangutan, or gibbon). This is due to the fact that the ape is tree dwelling, whereas man moves on the earth without clinging to branches, having become himself a tree, in other words raising himself straight up in the air like a tree, and all the more beautiful for the correctness of his erection. . . .

“But whatever the role played in the erection by his foot, man, who has a light head, in other words a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has this foot in the mud.” Georges Bataille, “The Big Toe,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20.

for universality ended unceremoniously with a boulder being dropped upon his head.¹⁹ I could go on: good-bye to the Lacanian sense of the body so popular in the 1990s,²⁰ good-bye to rupture,²¹ and good-bye to the “authentically human,”²² to name just three more. But it is the procedure of looking for significance—for something that *matters* still and broadly—and not the specific instances of each individual straw man held up to scrutiny and then burnt to cinders to which I want to call attention. Or to put it differently, there may have been little agreement among the seminar participants as to *what* matters, but there was remarkable accord that something must still, despite the morass of the modern world, be felt to matter—both materially and in a more abstract realm of meaning. But this agreement was structural, or worse, it was perhaps coerced. For had the baby been left to molder, there among the weeds in the Seminars’ opening moments, had Bernstein been allowed to continue his musings on the gray indistinctions of sludgy precipitate, perhaps the search for grand narratives, questions of definition, and anxious worrying over the stakes of even the most modest of proposals would have taken up less of the Seminars’ time. I come back then, to my original question: what might we have spoken about if the bulk of a week’s talk, rather than a sliver of it, had been devoted to an investigation of insignificant remnants rather than redirected toward the presumed centrality of the squalling tot itself?

FOR THE LOVE OF SCARY MONSTERS

Brandon Evans: A friend of mine . . . is concerned only about his ability to draw scary monsters. Scary monsters make him happy.

—SEMINAR 6

Art is always about wakefulness and horror.

—SCRIBBLED IN THE MARGINS OF MY OWN NOTES TO SEMINAR I

Tilt the transcript slightly; read it as if from the side; let your eyes swim over the text until the words begin to elongate into patterned smudges and blurs; wait and watch as these too transform into a flight of weightless Rorschach blots—tempting to the eye, signifying nothing. Take as your model, if you will, the fecal stains upon baby Kelly Barrie’s diapers.²³ These smudges and smears of shit and of ink, equally, may tell us something about the state of the baby (and not only his bowels) and about the state of art—or at least attempts at art theory or philosophy or criticism “beyond” the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. Psychology is, however, lodged in a different interpretive spot in the two sets of markings. Both words and shit matter. But, if we are to stick with Butler’s split typology

20. Section 3 of the Seminars.

21. Section 4 of the Seminars.

22. Section 8 of the Seminars.

23. This is a reference to “Documentation I: Analysed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts,” in Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1974), discussed in Section 7 of the Seminars.

of “mattering” above—where to “to matter” means both to both “to materialize” and “to mean”—both matter differently (the first “materially” and the second “meaningfully”). And yet, if one tunes one’s eye to the same parameters for both the diaper and the document, the stakes of the latter slide into the same register of smudge and blemish and stain that characterize the former. Can you not see, once the distractions of the explicit and purposeful are removed from the realm of the overt, that what you hold in your hands is in fact a love story? Or perhaps love is too strong a word for it, but it is a place where the passions play out, where intimate things rise to the fore, and where pleasure attempts to have the last word. It fails, of course (as we shall soon see the last word points us in a rather different direction). But scratch the surface of the exchanges here transcribed and what you will find is not simply a conversation about the significance of a thirty-year-old book that became a movement, but a deep and abiding worry that a thing loved is in the process of being lost.

That thing—that scariest of monsters—is art. All the more so since it began to mutate and multiply, since genres began to slip through the careful fingers of those who dreamt of true typologies, since judgments of “quality” and “merit” became descriptors of a curator (or a Kantian) but not of a work of art,²⁴ and since traces rather than objects have become not only *de rigueur* but also *déclassé*. It would be splendid to build a cage²⁵ for this monstrous love and let it sing in the corner of the sitting room (this was perhaps what Greenberg was ultimately after), but art will have none of it. Nor, for their part, will artists consign themselves to being caged while continuing to sing. It may seem, at times, that they care less and less with every year that passes what paroxysms their work might inspire in the sensibilities of its would-be lovers.²⁶ But it is not disregard that moves them, but the very pleasures of movement itself. Evans’s friend, drawn into his work by the near to infinite potential of the scary monster, is far from alone in this proclivity, for this same love pulls a great many artists working now into the systems and pleasures of their labor. Or to put it more succinctly: a work of art need not look like a scary monster to be one.

During the course of the Seminars such paroxysms in the hearts of art’s lovers abounded. There were moments, mostly absent from the transcript, when individuals were moved to tears, when things broke down completely, when some laughed while others found only cause for dry impotence and fury. These moments were not those devoted to talking about the “beyond” or even about the vaunted book itself. They were those moments, few and far between, when almost despite ourselves the conversation turned away from questions of significance and toward those of specificity. They were the moments at which artworks

24. I do not mean to intimate that Kantians are particular in caring about the quality or merit of a work of art, but rather that they are particular in caring about the facility of judgment, as such.

25. This is, of course, one way one might classify what a museum or gallery space is.

26. Or to put it otherwise and by means of a quote quite worth repeating, “Aesthetics is for artists is what ornithology is for birds”: Barnett Newman in 1953, and repeated by Foster in Section 4 of the Seminars.

27. “Wakefulness” and “horror” are not categories I find useful in my own work, but they

entered the frame and with them came, in equal measure, wakefulness and horror.²⁷ And these instants, both ferocious and delicate, served to pull the rest of the seminar discussions into relief, for it was there that one could feel the stakes—nestled like a den of snakes—stirring beneath the unerring push for correct and useful definition that characterized so much of the rest of the week's talk. Things that ought to have been firm quivered and slithered, passions rose to color the cheeks of one or another of the participants, and language changed as we attempted to grapple with something that could neither be systematized nor made to produce pleasure.

I do not use these two notions, that of systematization and that of pleasure, lightly. For it often seems, if one takes care with the transcript, that the only things that are really being allowed to matter—that is, to be *of significance*—are those that escaped the easy boxes of systematization and pleasure. It is for this reason that affect as an “a-signifying non-sign” could be posited as the answer to what lies “beyond.” Far from being an emotive or emotional quality, affect is here something that exists outside the grid of systematization or administration. “Affect,” Meltzer says, quoting Sianne Ngai, “renders visible different registers of a problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) [and] conjoins these problems in a distinctive manner.”²⁸ Continuing on in her own voice, Meltzer elaborates: “This is to say something about *how* it emerges, the fact that it is the conjoining of valences in a new way that is revelatory of something otherwise not registered.”²⁹ Affect is, by this definition, a sort of excess given off by systems and processes of administration, an excess that becomes palpable—that is, made capable of being “registered”—most especially when captured in aesthetic projects that rely upon systematization for their content and often also for their method. Meltzer spoke of the work of Robert Morris or Mary Kelly in this vein, while Foster pointed us toward sociopolitical regimes that encompass much more than art worlds.³⁰ But as a theoretical suggestion, affect thus defined would also seem to subsume the likes of Jacques Lacan (with his structured love of the mathematical formulae)³¹ and Claude Lévi-Strauss (with his almost crystalline charts of human symbolic life) within it. Just as none of this work, nor these postulates about politics, are reducible to systems, neither is it possible to reduce this particular way of reading affect to the pleasures of hyperbolic aestheticization of the systematic as such. Something *does* emerge; something is made visible; something can be registered; something has been revealed. But this “something”—whatever its

were, like Bernstein's instance upon liveliness and deadness, of particular salience to many of the Seminars' participants. I make use of them here because they have a real explanatory purchase within the limited context of the week's discussions. Bernstein cites Deleuze in Section 6: “Abjection becomes splendor. The horror of life becomes a very pure, and very intense life. ‘Life is frightening,’ said Cézanne, but in this cry he had already given voice to all the joys of lines and color. Painting transmutes this cerebral pessimism into nervous optimism.” Gilles Deleuze,

Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation (1981) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 52.

28. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2005), 3.

29. Section 8 of the Seminars.

30. Section 8 of the Seminars.

31. Meltzer makes this point in “After Words,” chap. 4 of *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

positive qualities—is not collapsible into a commonsensible reading of “affect” as simply “pleasure” or “feeling.”

We need go no further than back to the transcript to see the difficulty of this procedure—this *how* of an affect that is neither systematization nor the satisfaction of pleasures taken—in action. For it is here, as Costello shows us, that the quintessence of the problem *as a problem* arises. What is more, we are allowed to glimpse this process—of seeking pleasure, presuming to find it, and belatedly understanding that what has been found is not pleasure at all—in its entirety in that, the rarest of beasts, a transcribed parenthetical.³²

COSTELLO: Eve uses the expression [a-signifying non-sign] to speak of the affect of representing administration; it allows her to demonstrate that works like Robert Morris’s *Card File* do not need to be read solely as acts of administration without a surplus of pleasure. (Although “pleasure” might not be the right word. “Corrosive irony” might be better.)³³

If we follow the model offered up here, we see that even if one’s first impulse is to seek what looks like pleasure, in this case, in the aesthetic excesses of hyper-systematic artworks, it only takes the shallow space of a breath to understand that this seemingly easy recognition of known quantity (the pleasurable) has been reached in error. A blunder has been made. Misrecognition has come to stand in recognition’s place. It is precisely here in this moment of correction, away from pleasure as an effect of art, as a slippage off the grid, or as a “conjoining of valences in a new way,” that “something otherwise not registered” emerges into visibility. We can speak *of* affect, if not always by means of it.

I am not suggesting here, as Costello may be, that “corrosive irony” is a better explanation for the excess emerging from artistic acts of representing administration than pleasure. Rather, what is worthy of note is that pleasure is clearly, *for him*, not quite the right answer. I would argue that this is a generalizable statement. For at no point in the transcript—cordoned off, as it was, from talk about systems of art—that pleasure is, in and of itself, considered a viable analytic force. As Dakota Brown asks in response to the purported happiness brought to our artist-as-foil by the drawing of scary monsters: “Is the point of theory and criticism simply to describe what makes people happy, whatever that might be?”³⁴ The implied answer here, which was never explicitly given, is “No, it is not.”

32. A procedural note: the conversations that make up the body of this text were recorded and then transcribed and edited in a way meant to make them more streamlined and focused than they actually were. Participants were then given the opportunity to edit the transcript. They could, in other words, change or amend what they had said in the body of the transcript,

as if they had spoken differently at the time. I suspect, though I cannot confirm, that this is how such an anachronism as a “parenthetical” in what is supposedly an official record of a recorded conversation might arise.

33. Section 8 of the Seminars.

34. Section 6 of the Seminars.

Theorists and critics, philosophers and anthropologists, artists and historians may all well be driven by a love for the fearsome, difficult-to-cage, lively, engaging, shape-shifting, and occasionally horrific monster that is art. We may all have found ourselves in that room, with its white ceilings, exposed duct work, and wraparound windows, for the span of that week because of art's draw (call it "wakefulness" or "seduction" or "horror"). Yet neither systematization nor the simple rightness of pleasures taken managed to account for the whole of what art imparts.³⁵ In this, a certain application of affect theory is right.³⁶ When someone grows red in the face, when laughter rings forth, when ulcers jump in protest to that third cup of coffee, when stony eyes and set jaws come to characterize once animate participants, and when what is said lingers in the air a short sharp shadow of what has been left unsaid, then one might best begin approaching things symptomatically rather than literally. That is, rather than looking for the inherent truth of the situation, the grand narrative that will put it right, or the baby splashing mightily in its bath (to return briefly to that metaphor), what might serve us best is an examination of *how* certain valences come together so that something emerges into visibility. It is not visibility per se that matters here, nor even the specificities of the thing emergent, but rather, the conditions of possibility themselves—the joints and conjoints—that allow visibility to happen at all. These are what ought to attract our scholarly attention.

One could end here. Indeed, the goal of the Seminars was that one *would* end here, for it was no accident of conversation that affect became the "beyond" of choice. If you like this answer, and I admit it has a certain undeniable purchase, I would suggest you stop reading now.

A BRIEF MEDITATION ON THE IMPORTANCE OF COWS

In Switzerland, as in other mountainous regions with cows, each spring people and beasts peregrinate from lowland valleys to high mountain pastures and then, when the weather turns toward bitter, they travel back down again toward stable and home. This twice-yearly migration is called the "transhumance"—a word signifying both a movement and a breadth of species "across" rather than "beyond" or "against." Humans with cows; mountains with valleys; stables with pastures; dried hay with fresh alpine flowers. Neither term in the pair stands out, neither is privileged, what is important, always, is the movement between the two, the

35. Eitan Wilf speaks of the rise of pleasure's identification with "proper action" during the eighteenth century: "The revolutionary factor in this development [the identification of beauty and the formulation of the good], however, was the introduction of pleasure as an indicator of proper action: 'the fact that a course of action not only "felt right" but also gave pleasure could now be advanced as a forceful argument in favor of its propriety.'" Wilf, "Sincerity Versus Self-Expression: Modern Creative Agency and the Materiality of Semiotic Forms," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (2011): 470, quoting Colin

Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 152.

36. I would argue that Žižek and Lacan's notion of the *objet petit a* does the task just as well but that is a project for another day. See especially Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 12, though the notion is pandemic in Žižek's work, and almost any text will bring you round to it somewhere along the way.

rhythmic swing of displacement that is simultaneously a *re*placement within a different order of things. As the brass bell swings around the fat of the cow's neck, so too does the cow's own motion along mountain pathways and through alpine seasons map out a space and time, *not* in terms of a beyond (post-) or an against (anti-), but rather by means of an "across" which nevertheless remains a verb of accounting.

I am not suggesting that this is the answer to the problem of *The Anti-Aesthetic* thirty years on. What I am suggesting is that there are several different sorts of ways to look at cows. One can consider them as a part of a *dispositif*, an operation, or a complex network of human and nonhuman actors (kudos to Rancière, to Bataille, and to Latour, respectively).³⁷ Or one can consider them beasts, with a ring through the nose to be led by the tugging of a rope wherever some two-footed agent with more agency pleases. One can see it both ways. The cows are led to spring grasses or they are accompanied there. They are dragged reluctantly home again or they are set on their own meandering way back down into the valley to the warmth and security of the winter stable. Though it could be argued that both sets of interpretations are equally apt, that it is just a matter of the semantics of painting (i.e., that valley, that story, and that transhumance) that casts cows and humans into a series of different relationships of power, such an approach as this would leave out the fact that on the way up, the cows, they dance.

So it was for the seminar participants, and so, it has been argued, it usually is for humans engaged in a common intellectual cause.³⁸ Indeed, the reason one even bothers with the often intensely frustrating project of collaboration (read: putting up with the peculiarities, personalities, and varying competencies of one's peers) is that there are moments when all that is disparate and impenetrable is bridged and thoughts move between or across what had seemed a vast gulf with the ease of spring cows happily rushing up the side of an Alp to summer's green pastures. It does not matter that the terrain is difficult or the path narrow and steep, when one's own mind finds a certain purchase in the minds of others things are seen and known *collectively* that could not have been seen or known otherwise. The arduousness of the path is forgotten in the fleeting serendipity of the moment. It is not, thus, solely the task of finding the answer that causes people to come together across whatever (structural and base) divides them, it is also the possibility of working in concert—of working, if only fleetingly, *as if* with a single mind that provides the collaborative impulse. For it is in these moments of movement-in-companionship that we humans also dance the dance of the transhumance. Intellectual, bovine. It is the same.

37. Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory (ANT), the last of these models, would also notably include the *cause célèbre* of migratory cows (i.e., the cheese). Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Both Eve Schürmann and Gary Peters urge us in their comments to this volume

to take Bruno Latour's work into account in relationship to the problem of the modern (and its aesthetics). I could not agree more.

38. Stacia Zabusky, *Launching Europe: An Ethnography of European Cooperation in Space Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

What was foreclosed during this week ostensibly devoted to the intellectual peregrinations of disparate minds over the rough hills and through the bramble-filled valleys of the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic (and perhaps even their beyond) was precisely the possibility of real intellectual collaboration. What is more, this barring of a certain sort of highly uncertain and potentially totally unproductive concerted movement was procedural, rather than overtly ideological, and it was so twice over. First, the pressing need to arrive at an answer for what might lie "beyond" pushed the conversation toward the litany of grand narratives detailed above. Second, "affect" as an acceptable, indeed compelling, answer to this problem of the "beyond" was not arrived at by common conversation but was, in fact, planted, as surely as false evidence in a crime, as the answer to be lit upon as the Seminars drew towards their close. The participants did not discover affect, they did not choose it, it was there all along buried in the shallowest of holes and marked by a giant, three-dimensional X so blatant that only the willfully blind could possibly have avoided happening across it. The search, that is to say, may have been real, if channeled, but finding the reward was never in question. Or, to put it differently, the necessity that the Seminars progress toward a definitive (and predefined) "beyond" trumped the various attempts made by individual participants over the course of the week to move more companionably and collaboratively "across" uncharted yet (if hunches can be trusted) fertile terrain. The goal was thus not discovery so much as arrival.

My complaint, then, about affect is neither that it fails to provide a fascinating way to proceed, nor that it leaves any number of doors, both intellectual and theoretical, locked up tight, their far sides utterly inaccessible to even the most inquiring of minds. Far from it. Affect, especially when posed as an a-signifying non-sign, appears as nothing so much as an interesting key to further thought. Nor is my complaint really that affect did not arise as an organic proposal home-grown in the fertile ground of collaborative effort, though I do think this bears both mention and critique. Rather, my problem with affect as a given answer (instead of a found object) is rooted in its effects. First, its effect upon the Seminar proceedings, which of necessity had to be channeled toward a definitive end—no place here for the sludgy, half-stagnant indeterminacies of the bathwater. And second, its even greater effect upon the final, heavily edited form of the transcript. For, despite the structural constraints necessitated by affect as suitable "beyond," there were occasional moments during the week's discussions when minds began to dance, when passions rose, and when the thoughts and knowledge of selves and others intertwined and intertangled for reason and perhaps, even, toward an end. Almost none of these interchanges, however, made it through the editorial sieve and into the final product. One of the few that did slip through, because it is funny and thus worth keeping for color if not necessarily for content, was Bernstein's early studied contemplation of the bathwater, and it is for this reason that I have made much of it here. It is a crack in the

document that shows something of what might have been had the ebbs and flows of conversation not been tied to a deliverable.

The Seminars were, in other words, a forge, not a garden, and its results were never meant to be a dense weedy mass of collective thought or a herd of cows dancing around high mountain crags. Its results were meant to be and indeed are, this very book—the one you are now holding in your hands or are speedily scanning upon some sort of electronic screen. This structure of the economy of thought, of collaboration, of answer finding and argument making, of editing and of publication is intimately linked to the very real power, not of affect (our given answer) but of market. Or to put it more plainly, the Seminars needed to arrive at a viable “beyond” in order to assure a tenable, salable, citable, and otherwise proper sort of end product to the process. In the contemporary world of the academy, a place where almost all the seminar participants live and work, the most proper product of all is still a book.

Affect, whatever its organizational and inspirational potential, was not thus particularly important in its particularities. It works, rather, as an answer (to the foil of what lies “beyond”) that can be parlayed into a product (this book) because it is both a believable and very rarely maligned analytic at which thinking people in conference might reasonably be expected to arrive. Affect is, after all, a pretty hip theoretical maneuver at present, and there is therefore relatively little risk associated with tying the skiff of our “beyond” to its august hull and allowing ourselves to be pulled out into the sea of professional contributions by the power of its cross-disciplinary appeal. Affect, in other words, was both a very safe proposal and a decidedly nonrevolutionary one. It assures that a book called *Beyond the Aesthetic and Anti-Aesthetic*, while having none of the critical impact that a book called *The Anti-Aesthetic* can claim for itself, will also not sink like a stone into the disreputable muck of scholarly miscarriages.

Despite the editing of the proceedings in real time, the editing of the document after the fact, and the editing out of the very possibility of a collaboration that moved “across” rather than toward a definitive “beyond,” the Seminars did come to their own conclusion. Unlike affect, however, this unbidden, unpalatable, and largely ignorable end point offers little hope for redemption. Like the bathwater, it is a murky presence of seemingly secondary import, lurking around everything else we were being led to find. Like the bathwater, it might be a far wiser thing to ignore, for it will only transfer its tepid grime to every finger held probingly out to test it for relevance and warmth. There is no comfort here.

THE LAST WORD

Given that Hal Foster is the one who started this great debate, it would only seem fitting that he have the last word here, some thirty years later, And indeed he does. The easiest way to find this last word is to bypass all that I have done

39. I am borrowing a lovely turn of phrase from Melzer. The full quote reads, “the sterility of a specimen . . . the affective charge of a

memento . . . the alienation of information, and the longing of a document.” “After Words,” 7.

thus far in this afterword (i.e., better to ignore all of the details of the transcripts oft-aborted conversational threads, turn a blind eye to the participants' own misguided searches for surety, leave to the side the longing of the document,³⁹ forget about the joyous movements of cows, and disregard the turn toward affect entirely). Instead, I would suggest that a far more profitable strategy would be to turn to the last lines of the last page of the transcript and simply read what is written there. To make things easy, I'll quote them for you here:

FOSTER: Thirty years ago, in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Said said that the task of the humanities was to represent "humane marginality." Forget about the humane; maybe now it's simply human marginality.⁴⁰

The last word is "marginality," literally. Though it might as well be "bathwater." For, once again, albeit by Foster's speech rather than Bernstein's, we see the human(e) jettisoned from the realm of immediate concern. And this time there is no opportunity to pick up the pieces and set things right, simply because there are no more words to be had. Marginality is where it ends. No space remains for attempted orthodoxy, for intervention, or for setting the twenty-three pairs of the seminar participants' feet upon the correct path.

In the end, then, in one brilliant and fell swoop, the emancipatory potential of the "beyond" is swapped in for the precarity of the edge—there where the soap scum and sloughed skin sticks until scrubbed off by some earnest and underpaid employee who lives and works at the fringes of a system that still dreams itself modern. Nor is the impulse to put things right as strong here as it was in the beginning, for even Elkins agrees "that the academic arena has a persistent lack of interest in aesthetic issues."⁴¹ His love, too, his arena of care, is defined not by the emancipatory potential of "beyond" but by its marginality. This, then, is perhaps Benzaquen's point regarding precarity: that the stakes are much higher than they might appear at first glance, for we are not talking only about socioeconomic marginality and the power differentials known to be associated with such disparities in status (e.g., to be a tenured professor at Princeton or a long-term adjunct at Nowhere-in-Particular University), but about something that has happened to art (as a field in which one is trained, as much as a substrate of material culture).⁴²

Or to put it more bluntly, everyone in the Seminars seems to be suffering from some sort of loss. The breadth of these complaints, often only symptomatically present, is both vast and spectacular. There is the loss of the normative claim, the loss of art's redemptive potential, the loss of liveliness, of the sublime, of the modern, of theory as a universal explanatory apparatus, of criticality (and of critique), of sharp edges, of resistance, of interest in aesthetic issues, of practice and of care in the realms of production (both scholarly and artistic). Even the loss of affect comes up now and again. So much is gone that it all feels at

40. Section 9 of the Seminars.

41. Section 9 of the Seminars.

42. Section 9 of the Seminars.

times like a country-and-western song: the dog died, the wife ran off, the truck done broke down, and the guitar has but two strings left upon it for the skillful playing of the lament.

Not that anyone in particular is melancholic. And though nostalgia may be spied now and again hawking its rose-colored, backward-looking glasses (for a fair price, mind you), there were not many takers. The past is not in these conversations some idealized golden place where art was fully and contagiously alive but, following an early formulation of the *October* group, something summoned to clarify the present.⁴³ It is by paying careful attention to which bits of the vastness of the past continued to be recalled and redeployed in the service of the just now that we can know what remains essential to the present. (Kant, for instance, much like the dog of our fictitious country singer, cannot simply be left to rot in his grave.) What is important about loss (as we learn from country music) is that it is rarely about the emancipatory potential of the beyond, but rather about a marginality that is precisely the result of being displaced from one regime of the sensible (a wife, a dog, and a truck) into another (a bottle of whiskey, a one-night stand, and cold, driving rain). Here, in this formulation, “X” is not replaced by “not-X” but by something else entirely. This “something else” is not easy to situate, systematize, or make good sense of, nor is it necessarily true that one is wiser, or better off, for having made the switch. The margins, after all, are a place of secondary relevance. It is both difficult and risky to cultivate these margins or to inhabit this limit, and, I might add, once one finds oneself there it is a state of being that makes for a very hard sell.

When we look at the problem of the bathwater and the baby from this countrified angle, it is easy to see how perfectly the baby as metaphor represents the purposes of a system which, though it has largely disappeared from the everyday life, continues its attempts to govern the realm of recognition.⁴⁴ The wife may be gone, but he still wears that ring upon his finger; the dog may be dead, but the leash still hangs on its hook by the door. This lack of recognition of a substantive change that has already happened is the equivalent of attempting to theorize the baby, when all there is really left is the bathwater. It is ripe for examination, but who really wants to admit that this is where—for the moment at least—it all ends? Foster does. Benzaquen maybe. But what of the rest of us?

43. Section 3 of the Seminars.

44. This lost system is characterized by things like full (rather than un- or under-) employment that is meaningful and respected; by adequate remuneration for one's labor; by access to affordable and quality health care and education; by progress in the material arena from one generation to the next; by growth, fulfillment, potential, and hope. It was a world in which an examination of the bathwater did not

matter, because the baby itself was so ripe with potential that all that was required to ensure its flourishing was care and an adequate allocation of resources. It was a world in which all that was derivative had little purchase, a world in which one could walk into a gallery and recognize what is art by where it hung and how it looked, while letting slip off to the edges of one's consciousness the motes of dust gathered in the gallery's dark corners.