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Title

Art after Auschwitz: Responding to an Infinite Demand:
Gustav Metzger's Works as Responses to Theodor W. Adorno's "New Categorical Imperative"

Abstract

This paper explores the works of German artist Gustav Metzger as a potential response to Theodor W. Adorno's dictum. It argues that culture, as understood in the Adornian sense, is inextricably barbaric as a result of simply being after Auschwitz. Culture must acknowledge the finitude in its own ability to live up to an ethical demand in response to justice, whose arrival is infinitely deferred. In spite of this, culture and art, in particular, must not refrain from the very act of writing. Metzger's works are discussed as aesthetic responses to the "new categorical imperative" of Adorno, who addresses art's failure in light of Auschwitz by pointing to aporias that constitute the inescapable condition of "barbarism." This paper suggests that Metzger's aesthetic articulations are non-barbaric ruptures in that they challenge our living on *irresponsibly* within the condition of barbarism via a constant confrontation with complicity.

Keywords

Theodor W. Adorno, Gustav Metzger, negative dialectics, art after Auschwitz, ethics

"Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today."

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (*Cultural Criticism and Society*, 1949)

"I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz. . . . The abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting; Pascal's theological 'On ne doit plus dormir' ['Sleeping is no longer permitted'] should be secularized. But that suffering—what Hegel called the awareness of affliction—also demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it."

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Commitment* (1962)

Adorno's Claims Revised

Writing Poetry after Auschwitz

Theodor Adorno's frequently cited dictum, "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch" ("Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric") and its subsequent reformulations have been misunderstood and misrepresented from their first appearance in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (1949).[1] Too often, these reformulations have been considered a verdict to silence writers or poets in the name of "that which happened," as articulated by Primo Levi, who attempted to use words to express the unnamable. While

it is generally agreed that Adorno's saying did not call for the "end of art" but pointed to an aporetic situation in which being itself is determined, this paper rereads Adorno's statement with a focus on the various facets that inform his usage of *barbaric*. The paper argues that decoding the miscellaneous resonances of *barbaric* implicit in his writings can shed light on the intricacy of the difficulties that these resonances add to responding to Auschwitz, specifically to its constitutive barbaric impulse, which continues to resonate in late modernity.

The upshot of examining the manifold frames of reference that haunt Adorno's usage of *barbaric* is that his broader concept of "barbarism" rests upon a fundamental ambiguity. Adorno understands culture to be inextricably barbaric as a result of simply *being* after Auschwitz—it is part of a barbaric "whole." This ontologically aporetic condition forces art to acknowledge its own finitude as it is unable to live up to an ethical demand in response to justice, whose arrival is infinitely deferred. On the other hand, as Adorno claims elsewhere (2005d: 268), "the sole adequate praxis" after Auschwitz is to work "our way out of barbarism." In spite of being part of this barbaric whole, he argues that culture and art, in particular, must not refrain from the very act of writing, as they constitute escape routes from the inescapable condition. This is especially true in light of what he terms a "new categorical imperative" (hereafter ACI).

This paper discusses Gustav Metzger's art as a potential "adequate praxis" that is responsible insofar as it responds to Adorno's imperative precisely by making omnifarious forms of the *barbaric* visible in a confrontational manner. Metzger is aware that he acts from within a barbaric whole; at the same time, it can be argued that his aesthetic articulations can be understood as non-barbaric in that they seek to interrupt our *living on irresponsibly* within the condition of barbarism by requiring us to respond to an infinite demand that inheres it.

Various Facets of Barbarism

While conceiving Auschwitz itself as the most radical peak of barbarism, Adorno did not tire of highlighting the barbaric facet of post-Auschwitz culture, which Adorno explicates in various senses.

(i)

On the most fundamental level, after Auschwitz, culture entangled itself within an aporia of infinite culpability. Having become complicit due to its inability to prevent Auschwitz, it has ultimately failed (Adorno 2005a: 366). As there can be no repayment to and no justice for the victims, "one wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow" (Adorno 2003a: 3). Responding positively to the desire to escape from the past, however, would confirm that *living on* is possible even after the ultimate end. Any articulation after the event is thus an affirmation of the fact that there *is* an "after Auschwitz." It becomes the tacit confirmation of the atrocity itself, as embedded in the sole fact of our *living on.* Absolute justice in the name of the victims, however, would demand a full negation of already living in the afterlife. As Heinrich Böll stated in the *Frankfurt Lectures* in 1964, "Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. I modulate the saying: After Auschwitz you can no longer breathe, eat, love, live—whoever took the first breath only lit a cigarette, deciding to survive, to read, to write, to eat, to love" (1995: 90; my translation). The Adornian paradox thus responds to the simple formula that there can be no living after Auschwitz, even though there is. Thus, barbarism is an inescapable condition of a post-Auschwitz culture in the sense of the irreversibility of its own failure.

(ii)

In more specific terms, our living on is barbaric in that it is both irresponsible and irresponsive. One can at least decode three *dimensions* in which what Adorno terms a "new barbarism" expresses itself within the contemporary cultural condition. First, as Adorno claims, culture has not freed itself from, but rather it continues to suppress, its own primitiveness, which finds its fetishized expression increasingly embedded in the 24/7 production cycles that dictate late capitalism's mechanisms (2005c: 50f.). As a result, to participate in the reproduction processes that enable the homogeneity of "mass culture" (Adorno calls this *das Immergleiche* [the always-the-same]) is to reengage in the suppression of impetuses that were constitutive of the utmost excess of barbarism itself. Second, and probably most aporetically, cultural criticism also risks becoming

conflated with this primitiveness, precisely as it falsely assumes an "objective" viewpoint that renders its object inferior (2003a: 161). Thus, reason itself, starting at the point where it becomes positivistic, bureaucratic, systematic, or conceptual, namely, hegemonic—or in Deleuzian terms, where it suppresses its own possibility to become minor—is complicit with barbarism in reinscribing a mode of thinking that renders impossible a non-exclusionary approach toward the object to which it relates. More broadly, barbarism here becomes articulate as a mode of inconsiderate thoughtlessness that tacitly assumes a position superior to that of the object, in finally judging it without allowing it to speak. This "violent" (*gewaltsam*) incautiousness suppresses the Other—*ein Drittes* (a Third), as Adorno (1958: 154) terms it—in relation to the exclusive force that inhibits the Aristotelian *tertium non datur*, which escapes my intellectual grasp. Thus, a barbaric culture is one that arbitrarily excludes and relegates elements that discomfit the priority of the individuated and hegemonic I within a possessively individualist and product-oriented ontology of supply and demand chains.

Barbaric in a third sense, which is tied to the second, is also the thoughtless refusal to critically reflect upon the status quo of a self-declared "reasonable" society, that is, to refuse to radically apply the critical force of Enlightenment reason onto itself in the sense of a Foucauldian critical ethos (cf. Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: xvii). This ignorance of the nature of critique as necessarily unfinished explains why, as Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002: xiv) claimed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism." Thus, the "primitiveness" in ourselves cannot be overcome through reason and a blind reliance on linear progress; a relapse into it is always already possible. Strikingly, the tendency toward barbarism becomes reinforced even within an objectified world, because instrumental reason deems itself superior to primitiveness (Adorno 2005c: 155; cf. Hullot-Kentor 2010). However, the "truth" is that civilization is not predominant over its declared Other; it essentially relies on the Other. This is illustrated in Adorno and Horkheimer's insight that the Enlightenment itself finally reverts to mythology (2002: xviii).

Along these lines, one might even have to argue with Walter Mignolo (2011)

that the brutally exclusionary force of Western civilization has been pivotal since the Renaissance, while the suppressive tendency of its "darker side," most exemplified in coloniality, was essential to—if not a condition of possibility for—the unfolding of its own modernization process. In this light, Auschwitz was not a *terminus ad quem*—as Adorno points out, and as his dictum tendentiously suggests—but is all the more permanent insofar as modernity continues to carry its destructive impulse, as it has always done. In line with Mignolo's arguments, one would have to decode in poetry a barbaric tendency starting from modernity's first lyrical saying. Nevertheless, in some of his writings, Adorno highlights Auschwitz as Enlightenment's perverted acme in the form of a caesura. Certain ethical implications that one might draw from *Negative Dialectics*, however, might correspond to Mignolo's intentions. Here, Adorno hints at the truth that, to assume a universal "we of a prescripted universe" in accordance with a progressive approximation toward an absolutist enlightened end state based on "reasoned individuals" (Benjamin 1991: 376–77) is exclusionary and has always already excluded its Other. He calls instead for more attention to those voices and subjugated knowledges suppressed by reason.

Ambiguity of Barbarism

To sum up, when Adorno claims that "the whole thing is truly barbarism" (2005c: 107), he refers to beings's whole ontology as shaped by instrumental thinking, which not only underpins the sciences but also governs society itself in its sole reliance on mass production, together with the dominance of exchange relations. Robert Hullot-Kentor (2010: 23) describes the dimensions of this aporetic condition with simple but striking straightforwardness: "If the whole itself really *is* barbarism then nothing less than all things *are* barbaric." The ambiguity of the barbaric, however, starts from Adorno's invocation of the possibility to "restore an unbarbaric condition" on the grounds of what he terms "barbaric asceticism . . . towards progress in technical means" and "mass culture." (2005c: 50). A similar allusion reoccurs in *Critical Models*, in which he claims that the "sole adequate praxis would be to put all energies toward working our way out

of barbarism" (2005d: 268). Here, a double bind that is characteristic of the barbaric condition is illustratively articulated: working toward a less barbaric condition can only be achieved from within a barbaric whole, as no outside from barbarism is conceivable, although it is to be envisioned. Adorno emphatically calls for what he terms "the unbarbaric side of philosophy," characterized by "its tacit awareness of the element of irresponsibility, of blitheness springing from the volatility of thought, which forever escapes what it judges" (2005c: 127). This thought is closely related to his claims in *Negative Dialectics* and *Einführung in die Negative Dialektik*, in which he fears the suppressive force of reason and conceptualization that he, for instance, decodes in the Hegelian absolute or the Cartesian I. Here, Adorno frequently refers to an emphatic distance to the object that remains ungraspable in its essence. As with Kafka's Odradek, which for Adorno is a creature that illustrates the gap separating the concept from the object, the I from its Other, so too does the object (*die Sache Selbst*) escape any recognized conceptual scheme. The object only speaks to me if I remain attentive toward its own language, which is alien to my own, and to frame it in a Derridean manner, if I await its arrival. Arguably, such an ethos of fragile responsiveness toward the I's Other is what Adorno hints at when he refers to this "unbarbaric side," and it is the latter that must be invoked if one is to respond to the ACI, as illustrated below.

First, however, this unbarbaric side that welcomes the Other from a sensed distance finds itself entangled within what I term an "aporia of articulation" that is embedded in the "general aporia of *living on*." As mentioned in (i), the infinity of the ethical demand imposed upon us is due to the irresolvability inherent in its aporetic ontological structure. However, in light of Adorno's various ways of calling for us to work toward an unbarbaric condition in spite of the whole being barbaric, it can be argued that the irresolvable aporia underlying ontology's infinite demand necessitates art's response from within the being. One of Adorno's calls for immanent action is articulated in the ACI found in *Negative Dialectics*: "A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen" (2005a: 365). Here, in spite of poetry's barbarism as part of a barbaric whole, Adorno implicitly

demands constant writing, that is, "actions." The same demand can be found more explicitly in *Those Twenties*: "Because the world has survived its own downfall, it nonetheless needs art to write its unconscious history. The authentic artists of the present are those in whose works the uttermost horror still quivers" (Adorno 2005b: 47).

Even more explicitly, Adorno claims in *Negative Dialectics* (2005a: 362) that "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream." Here, it is art's responsibility to respond to that which is being requested, namely, to work toward an impossible restoration of its response-ability (to use Levinasian terminology), precisely as "the suffering . . . demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids" (2003a: 3).

The aporia of articulation, however, rests in art's limited capacity to respond, due to its own finitude to formulate responses that are adequate presentations of the unpresentable.[2] Adding to this difficulty is the problem discussed in *The Culture Industry* (1991), namely, that art always risks wringing pleasure from aesthetic stylization. At the same time, it must "not surrender to cynicism merely by existing after Auschwitz" (2003b: 251–52). To avoid any response in the name of the "unspeakable" is to avoid confrontation with the barbarous happenings of the past—which, being the present's own condition of possibility, continues—and thus also to not respond to the ACI (252).

As Jacques Derrida argues, there can be no "no" without a former "yes," no outside of discourse or reality, no rejection without a former affirmation (Bennington and Derrida 1999). This is why Adorno demands that art refrain from staying within the "yes," as this would affirm the event through its inscripted reality; this is also why art cannot deny any form of response. It needs to enact an articulation of rejection or negation, even if it is a form of negation that is always the product of the former, more fundamental affirmation in the sense of (i)—a negation that, in the face of Auschwitz, can no longer be absolute. Nevertheless, our response to the ACI in the sense of (ii) must be articulated as a form of negation to the most absolute extent possible. Thus, art must constantly articulate the unnamable; it must define a space that provides possibilities for a newly emerging, politico-critical agenda while not denying its own

"still being within the condition of barbarism" (in the sense of [i]). According to Naomi Mandel (2001: 209), art's remaining task is to "confront complicity."

Speaking the unspeakable is demanded here in the sense of an immanent criticism, that is, as "determinate negation" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 18). The latter entails constant, non-ideological thinking that attempts to discover the causes of contradictions resulting from the perversion of Enlightenment reason into the instrumental rationality that led to Auschwitz (2002: 18). An act consistent with the thought that embraces the concept of determinate negation thus demands that the artist point to the aporias underpinning the conditions of our *living on*. Adorno emphasizes the importance of not resolving these antagonisms in a Hegelian dialectic fashion. Rather, artistic articulation is demanded to negate—to point to—the *differend*—the irreconcilable—while seeking new idioms and ways of expressing the ungraspable. In doing so, it is vital that culture and art both acknowledge and understand their "complicity" in the Adornian sense.

Critical awareness is also demanded by cultural criticism that is at equal risk of becoming causally "complicit" with ideology, depending on the culture it is trying to reject (Adorno 2003a: 161). Any response to the ACI must not assume an objective stance apart from that against the society it attempts to negate, as any distance from one's own complicity is inherent within the response.

Following from this, any aesthetic response post Auschwitz must act from what Simon Critchley (2004: 92) terms an "interstitial distance," thereby allowing for "the emergence of new political subjectivities who exert a universal claim." For Adorno (2005c: 127), the ability to maintain distance was essential for critical thinking, and he regarded distance not as a "safety zone" but as "a field of tension." In a way, this is a form of distance that enables nearness to the object because it is aware of the gap between the object and the concept, and it is precisely this awareness of and respect toward the object that constitutes an open field of possibility for the object's becoming, without it being suppressed by an externally imposed concept. In spite of art always being embedded within that which already exists, a distance from it is demanded. The articulation of distance itself, however, must be seen in light of the challenge of aesthetic presentation and the limits of what is sayable. The imperative which demands

that art speak is thus pointing to the challenge inherent in aesthetic representation after Auschwitz.

Aesthetic Challenge

"The critical image . . . must not only fail to capture its referent but show its failure."
—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (2004)

Aesthetic representation seems to be confronted with the irresolvable dilemma that it must overcome itself in the Nietzschean sense of becoming *Über-*. To escape representational complicity, it must reject any pre-Auschwitz modes of expression. The illustrated aporia resembles the Lyotardian notion of the *differend*, marking Auschwitz as that which is unsayable within the context of conventional notions of language (Lyotard 1988a: 13). In the sense of (ii), both in art and language, Auschwitz demands articulation. It thus surpasses the limits of that which is sayable and unsayable: it is not not sayable because it has to be mentioned in the ethico-political sense of (ii). Here, it marks an impossible possibility: we know how to stay silent but are ethically demanded not to. Conversely, it is not sayable in the sense that it cannot (yet) be adequately formulated in an exact aesthetico-representational sense. Here, we are confronted with a possible impossibility: we need to speak, but we do not (yet) know how nor are we able to speak. The impossible here seems to exist in that we cannot rely on conventional definitions that distinguish between the unsayable and sayable, as Auschwitz interrupted all categorical fragments of representation that existed beforehand (Wiesel 1977: 7). Jean-François Lyotard, who draws heavily upon the necessarily conflicting speakable and unspeakable in light of Auschwitz, highlights that the "not-yet-sayable" itself becomes a space (1988a), which, according to Mandel, "cannot yet be filled by any single discourse of story, politics or philosophy" (2001: 205). Following Anson Rabinbach's (quoted in Adorno 2003a: 536) characterization of Adorno's thoughts regarding "human suffering as the precondition of thought and as the undoing of all claims to totality," one might claim that Auschwitz has become another a priori, an all-encompassing precondition of life and humanity made possible within an a posteriori: it

is the "there" of a negative vacuum space, a possible impossibility in terms of the Kantian categories of representation and thought.[3] In light of Adorno's claims, art, rather than needing to make us aware of the emergence, the coming-into-being, of a new category emerging on the line of the irreconcilable, needs to be an acknowledgment of the nothingness and infiniteness of the "not yet," inhabiting what Mandel (2001: 205, 2006: 24) refers to as "space," dominating and predetermining all existing categories. It is marked by a totality that is cognitively ungraspable but that demands that we grasp it nevertheless.

The Adornian aporia as outlined above has to be situated in a neither–nor, going beyond that which is sayable and that which is not. An aesthetic attempt to respond to the ACI would thus not fully represent but rather point to a present nothingness conditioning our impossible *living on*. It would be an articulated nothingness, going beyond the "absence," marking an interruption of any potential "thoughtlessness" (Arendt 2006: 285–88) inherited in our afterlife. At the same time, making the nothingness present is to integrate the "extreme," or to speak in the terms of Lyotard, the irresolvable *differend*, back into the barbaric ordinariness of the everyday.[4] This form of articulation would not live up to the infinite ethical demand inherent in (i), but it would exclude the rejection of any response to the ACI as outlined in (ii). It would point to the condition of barbarism (i) from an articulated interstitial distance.

Consequently, in correspondence with the Derridean ethics of the aporetic and the Levinasian ethics of infinite responsibility, it is our inability to live up to the ethical demand that marks the possibility of an unconditional ethic, the experience of the impossible, which makes possible the ethical subject. It is not to simply obey orders but because the aesthetic rules are not yet written that art is confronted with the infinite responsibility inherent in the obligation to formulate itself. Art is confronted with the need to think. In this sense, a possible form of writing after Auschwitz must mark the beginning of a possible responsibility for responding to an infinite demand.

Responding to the previously outlined dilemma of *living on*, I assume that art is doomed to stay within barbarism (i) as an inescapable condition. However, I see the potential for non-barbaric responses to the ACI in the sense of (ii). As I illustrate, a non-barbaric act in Adorno's sense arises from barbarism's excluded Other, thus

corresponding to what Adorno terms the unbarbaric side of philosophy. This aesthetic correspondence would then confront complicity with barbarism in the context of the manifold facets of modernity's primitiveness. As shown in relation to Metzger's works, such confrontation can be attempted in imposing a sense of infinite responsibility upon its bearers. This aesthetic experience is reinforced by viewers's failure to adequately respond to a demand whose response is necessitated within the context of address. Specifically, I examine three aspects of Metzger's work: his theory behind, and realization of, *autodestructive art*, the *art strike* from 1977 to 1980, and the series of *historic photographs* on which he worked for over a decade starting in 1990.

Metzger's Response

Autodestruction—Arranging Actions

Figure 1

South Bank Demonstration July 3, 1961. © Hulton Getty Picture Collection. Photograph: Gustav Metzger

"Painting is impossible. It has gone too far."

—Gustav Metzger

Metzger's first manifesto *Auto-destructive Art* was published in 1959—in a period widely dominated by "new America's" non-objective abstract expressionism and pop art's banalization of the trivial. Metzger's first lecture/demonstration, *Acid Painting on Nylon*, took place at London's Temple Gallery in 1960, followed by the *South Bank Demonstration* in 1961, in which a self-destructive acid action painting was initiated as a happening close to the International Union of Architects Congress, which it was originally meant to be a part of until the organizers rejected it. As Justin Hoffmann (1999: 26) notes, Metzger's *South Bank Demonstration* was the first art happening of its kind to take place in the United Kingdom. According to Metzger (1996: 59), autodestructive art was "a form of public art for industrial societies." He applied acid, for him a symbol of technological progress, to the canvas, marking the starting point of an irreversible process of autodestruction, intended to indicate the totality of the destructive potential and great likelihood of future misuses of biopolitical power. In publicly demonstrating the process of autodestruction in a manner that Wolf Vostell termed "Dé-coll/age," Metzger renders visible what German philosopher Hans Jonas (1984: 20) terms the "unforeseeable side-effects" caused by a technologically progressing instrumental rationality that irreversibly conditions our way of living in the long term. Moreover, the dissolution of the canvas can be seen as challenging the spectator's perceptive consciousness in that the latter must confront the task of grasping the hidden complexity of power structures, seen here in the form of acid leaving traces of destruction on the canvas until it completely dissolves. Metzger confronts us with the urgent need to overcome the barbaric inability to think, which is especially the case when the ordinary and the extreme are so intertwined as to render us ignorant of the facts. He points to the psychological mechanisms addressed by Adorno (2003a: 29), who questions "how the fetishization of technology establishes itself within the individual psychology," finally leading to a point "where one who cleverly devises a train system . . . forgets what happens . . . there." Metzger's idea of autodestruction can be seen as a reflection on the aforementioned thoughtlessness, which, following Hannah Arendt's arguments, was constitutive of the Holocaust itself. After Auschwitz, a time marked by a distinction between "facts" and "truths," between "verification and

comprehension" (Agamben 1999: 12), Metzger confronts the viewer with the continuing prevalence of the barbaric impulse in the form of technical progress. It is precisely the public nature of his performance that illustrates his ambition to confrontationally interrupt everyday thoughtlessness, as the performance points to culture's extremism hidden behind its habitualized modes of repressing externalities. Here, Metzger emphasizes the moral urgency of continuously confronting the viewer with traces of the truth of a still-present conflation between the extreme and the everyday by visualizing the contrast between them. He also implicitly hints at a contrast that was not visible in the Nazi era as the regime blurred the boundary between the banal and the evil (Bauman 2012; Arendt 2006). Metzger's strategies of autodestruction situate the artwork itself as constituting an event of extremity in which he reveals in eventual site subtle traces of the essence of a barbaric whole's suppressed real in order to create critical awareness. In the terms of Lyotard (1988b: 141), ideally, this is "the event of . . . a possibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it."

Furthermore, Metzger poses the question of the limits of the representation of Auschwitz in order to find new forms of aesthetic articulation, which are abstract yet political. He claims, "If autodestructive art ends with nothing, with the historical photographs we begin with nothing" (Metzger, quoted in Copeland 2011: 18) and points to both elements of creation and destruction as being fundamental to his art. He thereby responds to Adorno's (2003b: 244) claim that "the elucidated and concrete dissolution of conventional aesthetic categories is the only remaining form aesthetics can take." Metzger's art thus attempts to situate itself anew, to write and rewrite its being within barbarism in the sense of (i), while it seeks to set free "the transformed truth of these categories" (Lyotard 1988b: 141).

Thus, Metzger's interventionist approach can be seen as an interruption of our *living on irresponsibly* (ii), an event of pure negation, which—although happening in the here and now—combines both past and present elements in experimenting with the coming into being of nothingness over time.[5] In filling the "now" with the trace of absence left by the past's inherent absolute loss, it becomes a necessary reminder of the barbaric whole embedded in the condition (i) in which we paradoxically and

irresponsibly—and thus barbarically—go on living (ii). Here, art becomes a matter of "resisting . . . the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the head of human beings" (Adorno 2005a: 17–18). It hints at our tacit, namely, continuous, affirmation of that which we, in the name of an infinite loss and the loss of a universality, would have to but cannot negate because we are still "human" in the most anthropological sense of the word, and it is thus illustrative of our own failure in light of that which happened. Moreover, Metzger presents an art form that "is as it happens," resulting in its complete dissolution, "withdrawing any possibility to fetishize what could have remained" (Copeland 2011: 20). Thus, Metzger avoids "the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it" (Adorno 2003a: 252) by rendering it impossible to reify it in order to make it a commodity. Clearly, Metzger here addresses another facet of the barbaric.[6]

Art Strike—Arranging Thoughts

A remarkable attempt to articulate the need for resistance against commodification is Metzger's call for an art strike, which lasted from 1977 to 1980. Here, Metzger addresses art as being embedded within a "new barbaric" culture of complicity, in which, according to Adorno, the distinction between art and mass culture is no longer recognizable (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 103–15). In his corresponding manifesto, Metzger asserts that even art's "political activity often serves to consolidate the existing order, in the West, and in the East." (Metzger 1974: 79) It is imperative to note that in the Cold War climate, abstractionism—as only loosely, if at all, grounded upon signifiers—hinting at political and existential struggles soon became the US government's ideological tool against communism. For many European avant-garde émigrés, post-World War II art, with its newly designated center in New York, was primarily preoccupied with the search for a "new language" rather than with confronting the Holocaust. Precisely because it had been banned as *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art) and expelled or perverted for its own sake by barbarism, art sought a new, liberating beginning. As Serge Guilbaut (1985: 113) states, the American avant-garde "held fast to the notion that with a tabula rasa they could save Western culture,

purify it, and rebuild it on new foundations." The desire for incommensurable idioms that could not be perverted by politics, however, became entangled in a broader dilemma. On the one hand, artists "were no longer interested in covering their canvases with signs linked to the visible world, because, Rothko said, society always succeeded in twisting the work's original meaning" (Guilbaut 1985: 158). On the other hand, abstractionism's intentionally expressed, somewhat apolitical, non-objectivism—specifically its longing for empty signifiers and the mythical—was vulnerable to the absorptive powers of new America's ideology that promoted freedom and abstract universals. Soon after World War II, expressionist abstractionism became conflated with both commercial interests, owing to the increasing privatization of the American art market, and realpolitik concerns. In addition, Germany transformed into a cultural-political battlefield between "new American art" and Soviet socialist realism, in which abstractionism was advocated by the US government in opposition to Eastern influence (cf. Dengler 2010: 75ff.)—with the Central Intelligence Agency supporting the touring of Hilla von Rebay's exhibition *Gegenstandslose Kunst in Amerika* (*Abstract Art in America*). Art thus became complicit with ideology to a certain extent. Most notably, cultural critics also became ideological tools in solely, and mostly unwittingly, discussing exhibitions indirectly promoted by the government (cf. Guilbaut 1985: 132).

Taking this into account, Metzger's intervention seems all the more crucial, and it can be understood as a reaction to the increasing popularity of abstract expressionism, which he rejected on similar grounds as Adorno. For both, in being solely imaginary and entirely subjective, it inhered a certain idealism and thus lost its function to critically comment on realpolitik (cf. Flint 1999: 11; cf. Adorno 2003c). By contrast, Metzger's art strike tested the limits of that which is sayable within an ideological culture, which is capable of commodifying all that is sayable, whereby he continued to explicitly confront barbaric complicity. Metzger was convinced that a pause in writing was needed to redefine writing and rearticulate a space from which writing, that is, aesthetic articulation, can be what it ought to be. Thus, a reformulation of the relationship between art and society, a newly emerging art being independent from society, was necessary as "the use of art for social change is bedeviled by the close integration of art and society" (Metzger, quoted in Walker 2002: 126). As Metzger

believed that the state was depending on the arts for aesthetic fetishization, he identified huge potential to redefine the arts in the aftermath of his three-year strike (Walker 2002: 125). If Metzger's theory of autodestruction responds to the ACI in that it "arranges actions," the art strike might be seen to "arrange . . . thoughts that Auschwitz will not repeat itself" (Adorno 2005a: 365), explicitly confronting art itself with its own complicity and its infinite responsibility.

His argument when considering art's location within society resembles Adorno's idea of complicity and the general aporia outlined above: "Even when deployed against the interests of the state, art cannot cut loose from the umbilical cord of the state" (Metzger, quoted in Walker 2002: 126). Nevertheless, and here he refers to barbarism in the second sense (as necessarily responding to the ACI), he claims that "artists will go on using art to change society" (quoted in Walker 2002: 126). Metzger thus articulates art's need to rethink its own fundamentals by publicly calling for a break, thereby responding to Adorno's claim that if thinking "is to be true . . . it must also be a thinking against itself" (2005a: 365). This articulated need for art to redefine itself can also be regarded as an attempt to express an interstitial distance both within and from the state. Then, Hoffmann (1999: 26) is correct in perceiving in Metzger a "precursor of institutional critique." Moreover, the art strike can be seen as a radical interpretation of Adorno's call for art that articulates itself within an absolute negation. Metzger's silence in this case, however, is not silence in itself; instead, it is an articulated negation of speaking that results in non-speaking, which is articulated as absolute nothingness. It is more of an active affirmation of the negation that then follows and is intended to openly question, specifically, the barbaric impulse underpinning the privatization of the art market as well as art and art criticism's complicity with political ideology.

Historic Photographs—Confrontation with an Infinite Demand (1996/2011)

Figure 2

Historic Photographs: To Crawl Into—Anschluss, Vienna; March, 1938, 1996/ 2011. Black and white photograph on vinyl and cotton cover, 124 x 167 ¼ in (315 x 425 cm). © Benoit Pailley. Photograph: Gustav Metzger

In *Historic Photographs: To Crawl Into—Anschluss* (1996/2011), Metzger confronts the viewer with a photograph of Viennese Jews being forced to scrub a pavement. It is remarkable that Metzger used a dramatically enlarged press photograph that seemingly illustrated the post-Auschwitz media industry's complicity in the Adornian sense. The photograph was installed on the floor of the gallery and was covered by a blanket that rendered it invisible at first glance. In solely showing a fragment of the picture, cut loose from its context or any grand narrative, Metzger implicitly acknowledges the necessity of the failure to adequately represent a barbaric whole. Metzger's aesthetic strategy is not to articulate the artwork as an absolute totality of transparent representation. As he claims, the photographs "reveal by hiding" (Carrion-Murayari and Gioni 2011: 10). Therefore, he leaves space for an unarticulated, not representable unrepresentable, a *négatif non niable*, potentially hinting at an

ungraspable truth that goes beyond the factual, although he refuses to clarify or judge it. Viewers are encouraged to crawl beneath the blanket, and Metzger's intention is to force them to witness the uncanny gap between history as an undeniable past and the present, wherein they find themselves in exactly the same position as the Jews in the picture. By requiring viewers to crawl, Metzger confronts them with a trace of a broader ungraspable real that illustrates viewers's own epistemological, historical, and moral distance from that which happened. In doing so, Metzger implicitly addresses another dimension of art's failure to construct a situation that can reveal this unbridgeable gap between late modern, consuming subjects crawling on their knees and the Jew. Metzger foreshadows the incommensurable horizons and conceptual schemes by separating the here and the there, the "us" and the "them," and "the past" and "the present," warning that any claim to grasp, to make sense of or to represent on our behalf would amount to an allusion to a misplaced, barbaric superiority. Being in utmost proximity to the picture and yet so far from the whole truth that it hints at, the constructed *dispositif* poses an ethical demand that is glaring precisely due to viewers's being trapped.

In being dependent on the participant before constituting the event of total confrontation, the artwork is inherited by an asymmetrically relational aesthetics. As a spectator, I unknowingly consent to being confronted with my own failure to fully grasp the totality of an irreversibly bygone past. Being under the blanket, the I is confronted in a manner in which I "can't move away without being close to feeling trapped" (Wilson 1998)—viewers face an infinite responsibility that they have not chosen to bear.[7] Metzger's aim here is to constitute an address that binds only me, constitutes only me, calls only on me as an I, silently demanding that I overcome the *differend* to understand and grasp, while in the moment of the address, the refusal of confrontation becomes impossible. Here, the singularity of the imposition cannot hide behind a bureaucratic apparatus in which "taking orders is a very comfortable life indeed," a way of living that "reduces to a minimum one's own need to think" (Eichmann, quoted in Cohen 1999). Metzger constructs the site of the artwork such that once one "crawls into" it, it is hard to immediately escape the space, in which one is denied any normative comfort of already followed rules that might guide one's behavior. Interestingly, Hans-Ulrich Obrist (1999: 49) also observed that "the usual relationship

between artist and audience shifted quite perceptibly."

Thus, as Andrew Wilson (2005: 70) claims, Metzger "forces the viewer into an often unbearable proximity." Strikingly, Zygmunt Bauman (1993: 87) defines proximity in a Levinasian manner, as "not a very short distance, it is not even the overcoming or neglecting or denying distance—it is . . . a suppression of distance." Metzger thus constructs the situation so that it seems to be happening around viewers, almost within them, confronting them with the guilt inherent in the irresolvability of the general aporia outlined in (i). What Metzger seeks to reinforce here is a state of absolute closeness, which can be read in relation to a Levinasian trace of the pre-ontological confrontation with the Other, in which the Other demands, confronts, challenges, and questions the priority of one's autonomy. However, as evident in Metzger's work, it is because of our being within Being as a matter of factuality that any positive response to the Other's demand "Thou shalt not kill" is unavailable to us: it is too late for that response-ability to originate in the Other. Following Emmanuel Levinas (1991), the relationship between the I and the Other is asymmetrical, which, in relation to Auschwitz, is and must always be infinite, as the Other is forever excluded. However, the demand of the Other is still imposed on viewers, with the voice of the artist—himself a survivor of the Holocaust—attempting to speak for the Other, responding to Adorno's (2005a: 17–18) claim that the "need to lend a voice to suffering is the condition of all truth." Metzger thus creates an existential experience of failure: viewers fail to adequately respond to the Other's demand as they sense the gap separating them. To invoke a Derridean term, the confrontation is an experience of the impossible. Strikingly, for Derrida, however, it is these experiences that enable responsibility.

Metzger's artwork reinforces an experiencing of the impossibility of any dialogue with the Other due to the Other's infinite absence and the reality being shaped by our own infinite superiority as survivors. The viewer is confronted with an infinite guilt that is inherent in the future, which necessarily excludes the possibility of restoring the symmetrical reciprocity with the Other, that is, of arriving at a dialectical synthesis. Metzger here situates the non-negotiability of the negative by pointing to the non-existence of a result, that is, the infinite deferral of the synthesis (i.e., of our response reaching the addressee), whose dialectical weight is imposed upon the viewer. The

artwork addresses the singular I that is being confronted with the guilt inherent in the almost invisible,. It hints at a truth that does not claim to be universal in addressing the failure of universality itself (Copeland 2011: 27).

In this sense, Metzger's *To Crawl Into* necessitates viewers's singular response to the confrontational event. A constructed imposition of the ethical demand is thus followed by a confrontation with individual responsibility. Simultaneously, Metzger's artwork reemphasizes that there can be no full understanding of the victims's fate, as this would equate to a relapse into a false assumption of superiority, which had enabled the Holocaust itself. Metzger, as an artist, avoids assuming such a stance. He consciously starts from implicitly committing his own failure to fully represent the real. Moreover, in attempting to recall the lost voice of the survivors while he cannot adequately speak *for* them, Metzger confronts viewers with the ethical demand to reverse the irreversible, thus compelling them to experience their own failure. Metzger's confrontational aesthetics of asymmetry responds to the ACI in that he radically confronts us with traces of an incomprehensible barbaric whole, which is still among us. Metzger hints at the ungraspable truth inherent in the event itself, which happens among us, both within and outside us. Metzger's intention was not to let viewers, "someone who should have died" (Lifton 1991: 221; Slade 2007: 1–10), to externally observe a Kantian sublime nature overwhelming them; rather, the immediate engagement with the work of art is intended to overwhelm the viewers.

Concluding Remarks

Metzger's works can be seen as an attempt to seek forms of expression that help approximate a truth bound by the finitude of the human. Moreover, his art imposes an infinite ethical demand on the spectator, for example, making us aware of our own responsibility in light of an inescapable past. To stretch the irresolvability of the aporetic situation, we are compelled to respond in Metzger's works, but we cannot. He makes us aware of the "silence of the Other that makes me speak" *for* the Other; this makes us realize our own finitude in the face of an infinite ethical demand. What eventually remains is our unbearable awareness of our failure to completely understand,

or judge, as well as the impossibility of doing justice to the victims.

Following Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Metzger articulates art as a form of "thought" (Adorno 2004: 129) that might establish new, non-rational forms of understanding and heavily questions late capitalism's dominating instrumental rationality. Metzger's aesthetic articulation is irreducible to mass culture, and it escapes any potentiality of reproducibility to deny ideological instrumentalization. In it, he remains both sensitive and thoughtful toward potential intimacies between politics and culture.

In the mode of Adorno's rejection of Hegelian idealism in the sense of a false reconciliation, Metzger critically corresponds to Adorno's demand for an absolute negativity within the dialectic. He must thus be understood as an artist who constantly confronts complicity by enacting the art of negation, which points to the aporetic situation that Adorno highlights. At the same time, Metzger's activism attempts to overcome a passive nihilism. In the sense of his concept of autodestructive art, he achieves this by obtaining the truth of a negative aura that provokes aesthetico-political confrontation (Rush 2010; Adorno 2004: 56).

One might assert that certain limitations of Adorno's dictum become apparent if one takes into consideration the role of poetry as a refuge that Holocaust survivors might have longed for in order to come to terms with their own horror (which might indirectly apply to Metzger himself as a refugee). However, it is crucial not to forget Adorno's (2004: 322) response to Paul Celan's poetry, as articulated in *Aesthetic Theory*: "His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes a negative." Here, it is strikingly obvious that Adorno is calling for a response from art. At the same time, for both Adorno and Metzger, "writing poetry after Auschwitz" remained in the never-ending process of rewriting, in our never succeeding in doing ultimate justice to it, as history cannot be reversed. Thus, the ultimate justice for it is infinitely deferred; it is that which is yet to but will never come. However, Metzger's thoughtful and constant responsiveness to the ACI, which one might term the practical counterpart to Adorno's "unbarbaric philosophy," must be seen as articulating an ethico-political art that is

highly aware of its own responsibility in being after Auschwitz. Metzger's responses must be seen as non-barbaric articulations acting from an interstitial distance. While they cannot change the condition of barbarism as a whole (i), they can break with the irresponsible manner in which one lives contemporarily, precisely in addressing the various barbaric aspects on which Adorno sheds light: barbarism as a form of thoughtlessness that suppresses, yet does not overcome, its primitive impulses; barbarism as a refusal to critically question one's own hegemonic stance; barbarism as ongoing participation in consumerist mass culture; and barbarism as rendering objects that one judges as inferior. While Metzger's actions might not reach the addressee, they can at least respond to the ACI and attempt to speak for the victims in that they are based on an ethico-political agenda after Auschwitz.

Almost 70 years after the end of World War II, few aspects should raise our attention from a viewpoint embedded in "late modernity." If, as Mignolo claims, a genocidal impulse itself is constitutive of modernity, Adorno's newly formed categorical imperative is no less important today than it was shortly after the Holocaust as well as before it was even articulated by Adorno in *Those Twenties*. Certainly, the ACI was made explicit far too late—too late for Auschwitz and for the atrocities that had already been committed before Auschwitz in the name of modernity, such as Germany's earlier genocide in Namibia, where the first concentration camps were built as the predecessors to Auschwitz. In this respect, one must radicalize Adorno's claims to correspond to what Mignolo calls the "darker side of modernity." Thus, Auschwitz is not only the perverted product of Enlightenment but also a consequence of the very principle upon which modernity has always already been founded since the colonial expansion of Europe in the fifteenth century: its adherence to an overall rationalization. Similarly, it has always already carried its genocidal impulse, which has revealed itself in the context of Auschwitz in such a way that it could no longer be ignored. It is this principle that has always founded and continues to found modernity and its possessive individualist ontology. From this perspective, Adorno's ACI carries contemporary relevance in that modernity continues along with its inherent destructive impulse.

Hence, there is an even greater demand that poetry, existing within a barbaric whole as an ongoing condition, be written from within its own peripheral center, that it

continue its search for new idioms precisely on the grounds of what Adorno termed the unbarbaric side of philosophy, which emphasizes the voice of the suppressed Other. While doing justice to the victims of the Holocaust itself remains impossible, it is because we continue living on the grounds of a barbaric impulse that Adorno's ACI remains relevant in its most literal sense: it is first an imperative, and it is categorical, meaning that it is an infinite demand. Most important, this new categorical imperative is grounded on the radical quest for a universality that welcomes the particular, a universality that is *truly* universal.

Metzger's exhaustive search for new ways of expression can be seen as an attempt to find idioms in an adequate language of confrontation that overcomes mere abstractionism. As with Adorno, Metzger probably never deemed himself capable of explaining what happened in the death camps. However, Adorno chose to speak while knowing that, as Derrida claimed, there could be no "no" without a former "yes"—he knew that he would fail. He writes out of the aporia of articulation, using words, phrases, and prose, which could, akin to poetry, easily slide into the banal and barbaric. However, he spoke—in spite of his being a refugee who did not *live* the Holocaust—to declare his own will to face the infinite responsibility in light of Auschwitz, specifically with respect to his own failure to adequately speak and the pain that this failure caused him. At certain points in his writings, one can sense "the uttermost horror" reverberating in his own words. Adorno spoke out of a necessity to act, and a shimmer of utopian hope to break the thoughtlessness in articulating "no" as often as possible never abandoned him. As Rolf Tiedemann (2003: xv) correctly points out, Auschwitz remained "a never-ending" task. That the same likely holds for Metzger's thought and actions, which constantly confront our own, is evident in the following remark by him, which can be understood as a direct response to both Adorno's imperative and his dictum: "I came to the country from Germany when 12 years old, my parents being Polish Jews, and I am grateful for the government for bringing me over. My parents disappeared in 1943 and I would have shared their fate. But the situation now is far more barbarous than Buchenwald, for there can be absolute obliteration at any moment. I have no other choice than to assert my right to live [...]." (Metzger, quoted in Ford 2003)

“After Auschwitz
There is only poetry no hope
no other language left to heal
No language & no faces
Because no faces left no names
No sudden recognition on the street”

—Jerome Rothenberg

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Endnotes

[1] Examples for misreadings of Adorno’s claims can be found in Bonheim’s (2002) *Versuch zu zeigen, daß Adorno mit seiner Behauptung nach Auschwitz lasse sich kein Gedicht mehr schreiben, Recht hatte*, as well as in Gubar’s (2003) *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering what one never knew*. Moreover, German novelist Wolfdietrich Schnurre (1978: 454-457) referred to Adorno’s claim as “niederknüppelndes Verdikt” [“devastating verdict”; my translation].

[2] For a detailed account of the complications inherent in aesthetic representation, see also Hartman (1994).

[3] For a reflection on Auschwitz in rather ontological terms, see Žižek (2002), pp. 138-139. Žižek explicitly draws on Kantian categories here.

[4] I am partly drawing on Michael Rothberg's (2000: 5) distinction between realistic and antirealistic articulations of the Shoah here.

[5] As Adorno (2004: 50) claims: "To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality. Radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black."

[6] Seen in the context of Metzger's autodestructive art, it is astonishing that it was Adorno (as quoted in Tiedemann, 2003a: xi)–not Metzger–who claimed: "Practice, which emasculates theory, reappears at its heart as a destructive force, without even a glance at any possible practice. Actually, it is no longer possible to say anything. Action is the only form left to theory."

[7] This sort of aesthetico-moral confrontation Metzger imposes upon us seemingly opposes the rather alienating aesthetic experience Virilio (2004: 27-28) refers to when quoting Lichtenstein's impressions accompanying her visit to the Museum at Auschwitz. As she claims: "What I saw there were images from contemporary art and I found that absolutely terrifying. ... I didn't collapse. I wasn't completely overcome by the way I had been walking around the camp. ... I took the train back, telling myself that they had won." Accordingly, Virilio goes on to ask: "Did the Nazi terror lose the war but, in the end, win the peace? " (2004: 28)