

Touching art: aesthetics, fragmentation and community

Art has hitherto been considered, in all possible ways, in terms of both 'creation' (*poiesis*, genius, and so on) and 'reception' (judgement, critique, and so on). But what is left in the shadows is its befalling or devolving, that is to say, also its chance, event, birth, or encounter – which, in other terminologies, has been called the 'shock', 'touch', 'emotion', or 'pleasure', and which participates indissociably in both 'creation' and 'reception'.¹

Throughout the history of literary and art criticism the focus has fallen, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues, on the creation or reception of works and texts. Theories of genius, authorial psychology and the material or historical conditions of production have revalued the creative processes that give rise to art in a range of different ways. Equally, important questions about reception that deal with notions of canonicity, ideology and the construction of subjectivities in texts have been generated by critical movements that seek to investigate the politics of literature, art and culture. Stripped down to a minimal point, however, the question of art's immediate impact (what Nancy refers to as its 'shock' or 'touch') remains a space for thinking a politics of the aesthetic that might helpfully be explored. Art has always been political: emerging from a given community, it comments on the identities, needs and desires of sections of its members, and criticism seeks in a variety of ways to uncover the modes in which those issues are generated by the work or text. The danger with some approaches to the work, however, is that they sideline its particularity as art, treating it as just one more commodity in cultural circulation and thereby eliding its specific transformative potential. The focus here will be to think the specificity of the aesthetic processes by which works and texts come to raise questions about the nature of community, and hence of the political problems of our being in common. The key question, then, is what is it that is particular to the work of art that raises the question of community?

The aim of this chapter is to begin to open a space for the investigation of the place of the aesthetic in the contemporary world. It will take as its object the notion of the artistic fragment that emerges within modernity, and consider the ways in which modern art functions as a fragmentary form.

The relationship between art, fragmentation and modernity is summed up succinctly by Theodor Adorno:

Ever since Beethoven's last works those artists who pushed integration to an extreme have mobilised disintegration. The truth content of art, whose organon was integration, turns against art and in this turn art has its emphatic moments. Artists discover the compulsion toward disintegration. . . . The category of the fragmentary – which has its locus here – is not to be confused with the category of contingent particularity: The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality.²

The art of modernity mobilises disintegration: in the drive to completion and closure, it opens itself to its own fragmentation not as a contingent factor pointing to its lack of completion, but essentially – as a constituent moment in its drive toward self-integration. Throughout modernity there have been numerous movements of aesthetic thought that have approached art and literature in terms of this fragmentary status. Since the Romantic period, art has been conceived over and over again in terms of the challenges it poses for attempts to construct the world as a systematically ordered totality. This disruptive potential tends to be derived from the ways in which artistic fragmentation is posited as a disturbance of or challenge to the closure and completion of systems of thought or politics. On this reading, the work of art or literature is irreducible to critical, political or cultural explanation or assimilation – it always has the potential to signify more than can be summed up in a single reading or analysis – and yet it remains indissociable from, and opens questions about, the social space within which it appears. In this respect, Adorno's formulation of art's problematic autonomy helpfully captures the disruptive relations obtaining between art, the empirical world and historical specificity: art, he argues, 'harbours what is empirically existing in its own substance. . . . Even the most sublime artwork takes up a determinate attitude to empirical reality by stepping outside of the constraining spell it casts, not once and for all, but rather ever and again, concretely, unconsciously polemical to this spell at each historical moment'.³ Art is not constrained by the structures of the actual, but figures and refigures actuality by taking it as a point of departure for aesthetic production. It is not, however, a separate realm cut off from the world, but rather acts as a potential site for a continually changing disturbance of the conceptualisation of the actual in particular historical circumstances. Aesthetic representation generates a moment in which reflection can begin because of the way its presentation estranges, disrupts and fragments the actual. But in what might this fragmentary aesthetic excess consist? And how might it be able to mobilise a critique of contemporary systems of thought, culture or politics? By tracing a genealogy of this fragmentation in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel and the critique launched against it by G. W. F. Hegel, this chapter will identify a fragmentary Romantic residue in contemporary aesthetics. It will argue that the issues that are at stake in the disagreement between these two key thinkers have not passed away into history but continue to provoke the most profound questions about the value and role that art holds for us now.

Modernity and fragmentation

The notion of the fragmentary artwork first comes to gain a modern formulation in the literature and thought of the Romantic period. According to Philippe Lacoue-

Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, the fragment opens up a space at the limits of modern politico-philosophical systematisation:

in the very same moment and gesture of fragmentation, the fragment both is and is not System. . . . This same gesture, which is simply the writing of the fragment, consequently serves to subtract this fragment from the Work, within the continually renewed ambiguity of the *small* work of art, thus serving, in sum, to fragment the fragment . . . and in this respect it is legitimate to recognize in romanticism's specificity a kind of persistence or resistance, within idealism, of at least an element of the Kantian notion of *finitude*.⁴

For the Jena Romantics who set out the first definitions of the Romantic fragment, the totality to be challenged was that presented by idealist philosophy, which found its most comprehensive articulation in the work of Hegel. In the journal *Athenaeum*, published between 1798 and 1800, the concept of the fragment and its problematisation of systematic philosophy are worked out. In *Athenaeum* fragment 116, Friedrich Schlegel posits Romantic poetry as a 'progressive universal poetry': an art that aims to 'mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature'.⁵ This idea of poetry, in which it both strives to become a 'mirror of the whole circumstances of the world, an image of the age' and yet also 'hover[s] at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection', figures the notion of the aesthetic as unbounded fragment.⁶ Beneath what may appear to modern ears as somewhat overblown rhetoric is a sense of the poetic that transcends generic identification and closure, and opens up a space for aesthetic self-reflection, analysis and critique. This aesthetic (and for Schlegel poetry is the supreme moment of aesthetics) is impossible to pin down and define, to grasp in a particular passage or figure from a poem, text or work but rather in Schlegel's formulation is caught up in a continual process of contextual transformation:

The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterise its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free. . . . The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself.⁷

The explicit notion presented here is that because of its resistance to subsumption under a system of critique, poetry assumes a state of constant becoming: 'free' and 'infinite', it is open to continual rereading and reconfiguration by the discourses that approach it. Never completed or perfected, the poetic fragment is orientated towards future readings and new openings: as Schlegel states in 'Ideas' 48, 'Where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin'.⁸ Because it is inexhaustible by critique, and impossible to fix with a single meaning, poetry transcends any present critical reading or philosophical definition and gestures towards a future different from what is currently the case.

In contrast to Schlegel's valorisation of a poetry and aesthetic of the future, Hegel's *Aesthetics* is premised on the 'pastness' of art. Coincident with the arrival of speculative modernity, he argues that philosophical reason has become the key means by

which the issues and challenges facing the world can be approached, and that this marks the 'end of art':

just as art has its 'before' in nature and the finite spheres of life, so too it has an 'after', i.e. a region which in turn transcends art's way of apprehending and representing the Absolute. For art has still a limit in itself and therefore passes over into higher forms of consciousness. This limitation determines, after all, the position which we are accustomed to assign to art in our contemporary life. For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself . . . With the advance of civilization a time generally comes in the case of every people when art points beyond itself.⁹

Because, according to Hegel, art's vocation is to 'unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration', the emergence of a modern consciousness from the increasingly technological, scientific and philosophical understanding of the world developed during the Enlightenment produces a modern culture in which art's sensuous presentations can no longer fully grasp and present the complexities of the life-world, and it therefore ceases to be able to provide a guide for thought and action.¹⁰ Modernity, in this respect, appears 'after art'; it represents itself as the 'after' of art, the point at which art's self-transcendence into philosophy has become necessary. It is the age in which art can no longer play the role it had hitherto undertaken for society: because art can only present the 'outward' or 'sensuous' form of the Absolute, and with the advance in Spirit that is marked by modernity, 'there dwells in the spirit the need to satisfy itself solely in its own inner self as the true form for truth to take'.¹¹ Yet, the 'end of art' does not mean that no more works are created. Instead of disappearing or becoming nothing more than the heritage of a bygone age, art, in Hegel's slightly strange formulation, 'points beyond itself'.

Hegel's description of the meaning of art's 'pointing beyond itself' that follows the occurrence of the phrase in the 'Introduction' to the *Aesthetics* repeats his argument in the *Phenomenology* which states that Spirit simply moves beyond art to dialectical reason and philosophy. Thus, Hegel states quite simply that, although one 'may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection . . . the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit'.¹² Art is surpassed as a means of generating truth: sublated in the movement of dialectical speculation it becomes just another one of the 'Particular interests' that are 'destroyed in the process' of 'conflict and destruction' from which reason and the Absolute emerge.¹³

Modernity's art is thus effectively excluded from the speculative system: it is surpassed as a 'way of apprehending and representing the Absolute' and thereby, in Jay Bernstein's words, 'loses its capacity to speak the truth concerning our most fundamental categorical engagements and commitments'.¹⁴ In short, art 'falls out' of philosophy as it ceases to be the 'supreme need' of the new spirit of the age. Yet, this 'falling out' seems to contradict a cardinal rule of Hegel's system because in the movement of the dialectic nothing is beyond speculation, and therefore philosophy must have no remainder, must leave no 'fall out'. Lacoue-Labarthe identifies this apparently contradictory state of affairs in the following terms in an essay on Hegel and German Romanticism:

Philosophical discourse excludes nothing, especially not what it represents to itself as being of an 'order' not its own. And even when it attempts to exclude (if it ever wants to), its 'sublating' power is such that what is excluded never fails to return, so that not only must philosophy negotiate with it, but it can also claim it, (re)adopt it, or even, at the limit, pride itself on it. Philosophy divides, decides, and *criticizes*: but what it severs, it also constitutes on both sides, and the whole as such (be it rearranged) *returns* – in all senses – to philosophy.¹⁵

Thus, despite Hegel's gesture of setting art free from the search for truth, it 'returns' to haunt philosophical modernity, sucked back into the vortex of speculation by the force of the movement of dialectical negation. What Lacoue-Labarthe calls Hegel's 'gigantic "war machine" directed against aesthetics in general' fails both to eliminate art and to exclude it from systematic thought.¹⁶

When Hegel returns to the problem of the 'end of art' later in the *Aesthetics*, he seems to recognise as much, and the meaning given to art's 'pointing beyond itself' changes significantly:

in this self-transcendence art is nevertheless a withdrawal of man into himself, a descent into his own breast, whereby art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies: i.e. the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates. . . . This is a subject-matter which does not remain determined artistically in itself and on its own account; on the contrary, the specific character of the topic and its outward formation is left to capricious invention, yet no interest is excluded.¹⁷

In this formulation of the 'beyond', art, in ceasing to be the 'sensuous revelation of truth' comes to figure a 'withdrawal of man into himself': the human subject replaces 'the Divine [as] the absolute subject-matter of art', and, as such, ceases to be truly Absolute.¹⁸ The implication of Hegel's argument here points to another sense of artistic fragmentation: for pre-modern societies, art figured the divine essence of a community (the Egyptian temple, Greek statuary, and so on), but that divine essence is no longer available for sensuous presentation and so art's figuring is refocused on the particularity of individual actors and ideas. Ceasing to present community as a whole, its focus on the individual fragments the sense of its presentation of a being in common.

Brought together, what Schlegel and Hegel formulate in their very different ways is the end of the 'total' work of art: the art that encompasses the most fundamental shared beliefs of a society, and depicts and disseminates its goals. What remains is, on the one hand, the infinitely becoming plurality of fragments and, on the other, the 'capricious invention' broken off from the path of society's progress. More than this, though, the differences between the two thinkers point to a tension in modern aesthetics that opens a space for a contemporary politics of art.

Hegel's critique of Schlegel and the Jena Romantics turns on the notion of art's withdrawal into subjectivity, and his most pressing condemnation of Romanticism pinpoints its apparent grounding of the aesthetic in the subjectivity of the artist as an

individual genius. Aside from some barbed comments about Schlegel not being a proper philosopher but a dilettante literary critic, the key concern raised by Hegel is that Romanticism substantialises Fichte's formalist arguments about the dialectical movement between the transcendental structures of the I and not-I which give rise to knowledge. This move from a formal to a substantial I transforms Fichte's transcendental analysis into an empirical-psychological positing of the personal I of the genius poet or artist who invents the world according to her or his own interest and caprice. He argues that for the positing ego of the Romantic artist, 'everything appears to it as null and vain, except its own subjectivity, which therefore becomes hollow and empty and itself mere vanity'.¹⁹ In other words, Hegel detects in Romanticism a focus on the creative genius who acts as a guarantor for the work, which in turn becomes cut off from the objective world as it explores remorselessly the joys and sorrows of the (artist's) human heart.

If Hegel's critique of Romantic subjectivity and genius is accurate then it is clearly devastating.²⁰ The notion of a self-creating subjectivity has little currency today outside of the realms of ultra-free-market individualism, and there is little need even to resort to theoretical concepts such as the 'death of the Author' to grasp the problems that emerge here. What it does not challenge, however, is art's futural structure: although art no longer figures the aims and goals of social progress and has ceased to be the key means of deploying truth and knowledge, it remains a site of disruption, challenge and critique.

Thus the art of modernity, which, although redundant at the moment of its inception, cannot be suppressed (repressed?) by speculation but rather 'returns – in all senses – to philosophy' is what Schlegelian Romanticism announces in the fragment. Stripped by Hegel's critique of any substantive or subjective authenticity (or genius), the work itself retains an openness to the future. In other words, the fragment is the art that exists on the threshold of speculative modernity: no longer able to tell the 'truth' in its 'true form' or ground itself in a governing creative genius, but not yet excluded from thought as a medium of mere relaxation and escapism, it holds out the possibility of difference and disturbance within systematic organisation. Appearing at the moment of the 'end of art', the fragment's attempts to 'reveal the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration' are already outmoded from modernity's perspective and result only in failure. It thus exists, in Thomas McFarland's phrase, only as 'the forms of ruin', as scraps, contingencies and 'capricious inventions' that 'remain broken or indifferent to the objective world' of philosophical modernity.²¹ And yet, even as ruin, art is continually drawn back into the speculative system by the 'sublating power' of the dialectic. Neither inside nor outside, the aesthetic fragment exists at the limit of the 'Work' of philosophical modernity, 'completing and incompleting' the universalising movement of the speculative system which it fragments through a 'continually renewed ambiguity of the small work of art': the art that has come undone from speculation's striving after the Absolute and thus has no claim to the totalising perspective of a grand narrative. For this reason, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy claim that 'what interests us in romanticism is that we still belong to the era it opened up', and in fact that, a 'veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernible today, in most of the central

motifs of our “modernity”’.²² At the opposite end of modernity from Romanticism, Adorno’s materialist thinking of the imbrication of art in the modern echoes the sense of its fragmentary nature:

Art is modern when, by its mode of experience and as the expression of the crisis of experience, it absorbs what industrialisation has developed under the given relations of production. This involves a negative canon, a set of prohibitions against what the modern has disavowed in experience and technique; and such determination is virtually the canon of what is to be done.²³

Art stands out against the rationalising and industrialising drives of the modern, fragmenting them by recapturing the techniques and experiences disavowed in the continual striving for progress and development. This, for the critics of modernity, is art’s fundamental critical potential.

Fragmenting the fragment: contemporary aesthetics and the possibility of community

The fragmentary space of the aesthetic opens up a vantage point from which a critique of the modern can emerge. Art thus holds the capacity to disrupt the closure of systematic rationality, fragmenting its categories and structures. The question I want to pose, though, is how might we think art in relation to the often-positing destruction of these modern systems? Or, in other words, what happens to the artistic fragment when the world itself becomes fragmentary? In order to begin to propose an answer to this question I want to turn now to an investigation of the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, and particularly to his notion of the singular plural.

Recent developments such as the globalisation of capitalism, gradual loss of power of the nation state, transformation of communications systems and fracturing of consensus about social structures and values that were founded on discredited gender and racial hierarchies have called into question the idea of a rational, progressive development of modernity. Contemporary thought seldom strives for the systematic rationality of Hegelian speculation.²⁴ Rather, the notion of difference – whether it is thought in terms of gender, the postcolonial, historicism or deconstruction, to name but a few approaches – provides the structure for enquiry in the contemporary humanities. In this sense, as thinkers such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Nancy argue, there is no longer a ‘sense of the world’ available for thought. At the beginning of a book that takes this phrase as its title, Nancy posits the ‘end of the world’:

There is no longer any world: no longer a *mundus*, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation. . . . There is no longer a Spirit of the world, nor is there any history before whose tribunal one could stand.²⁵

For many contemporary theorists, the ‘grand narratives’ of modernity (to borrow Lyotard’s phrase) no longer have any legitimacy when it comes to thinking and organising the world, experience and history. In this vein, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the ‘deepest meaning conveyed by the idea of globalisation is that of the indeterminate,

unruly and self-propelled character of world affairs; the absence of a centre, of a controlling desk, of a board of directors, of a managerial office'.²⁶

In the face of the fragmentation of contemporary cultures, there is little possibility of recourse to a universal governing notion of truth or emancipation. According to Nancy, 'Our time is the time . . . when this [grand narrative] history has been suspended: total war, genocide, the challenge of nuclear powers, implacable technology, hunger, and absolute misery, all these are, at the least, evident signs of self-destroying humanity, of self-annihilating history, without any possibility of the dialectic work of the negative'.²⁷ It is not that these histories are no longer being written, or that speculative thought no longer attempts to grasp the world; rather, this thinking no longer appears adequate to the plurality that appears in contemporary worldhood and the fragmentation of experience in today's cosmopolis. For Nancy, the plurality of the contemporary presents the contemporary as the space of a radical absence of sense, or rather a space in which the absence has itself become our sense.

Nancy expands upon and fleshes out his thinking of the plurality of worlds in *Being Singular Plural*. Here he links the thought to the post-Marxist (and, again following Lyotard, postmodern) sense of the development of the 'spectacular-market society' in which 'commodity fetishism' and the global domination of capital are accomplished in 'the production and consumption of material and symbolic "goods" that all have the character of being an image, illusion, or appearance'.²⁸ Subjectivity becomes a function of wealth: the capacity to purchase new images, identities and even bodies becomes the basis of who we are. The political and philosophical stakes of this are that 'universal commerce [becomes] constituted by a representation wherein existence is both an invention and a self-appropriating event. A subject of representation, that is, a subject reduced to the sum or flux of representations which it purchases, is the placeholder that functions as the subject of Being and history'.²⁹ This is the basis for the postmodern idea of culture as it appears in writers such as Baudrillard and Jameson, and even to a certain extent Lyotard.³⁰ However, Nancy takes a different tack from these thinkers in refusing either to attempt to delve below the surface of spectacle in the hope of recovering a Marxian base (à la Jameson), or to celebrate the hyperreality of a surface-spectacle without depth in the manner of Baudrillard. Arguing that both of these approaches work through untenable notions of an opposition between good and bad representation, his move is rather to rethink the ontological structure of the social bond in terms of being-in-common, or as the title of his book suggests, being singular plural.

The notion of being singular plural sets out from the Heideggerian concept of Dasein, which Nancy argues is necessarily and inextricably tied up with Mitsein. By working through section 26 of *Being and Time*, Nancy argues that Being-with is an irreducible moment in the formation of Dasein that remains underdeveloped in Heidegger's analysis. For Heidegger, any question of the meaning of Being, any question of meaning, is necessarily communal: 'Dasein is essentially Being-with. . . . Not only is Being towards Others an autonomous, irreducible relationship of Being; this relationship, as Being-with, is one which, with Dasein's Being, already is. . . . So far as Dasein *is* at all, it has being-with-one-another as its kind of Being'.³¹ Being, for

Heidegger, is always therefore a Being-with in which the 'with' is primordial and not just a modification of a pre-established Being. Rather than being based on a pre-given self-consciousness, one's identity and existence in the world necessarily emerges from relations with others.

For Nancy, the problem with Heidegger's thinking of Being through Dasein occurs in the relegation of Being-with to 'average everydayness'. He argues: 'One cannot affirm that the meaning of Being must express itself starting from everydayness and then begin by neglecting the differentiation of the everyday, its constantly renewed rupture, its intimate discord, its polymorphy and its polyphony.'³² In Heidegger, the question of the other, or the differences between others, is not explicitly worked through. According to Nancy, on the other hand, the others who come to stand up against the self in Being-with are not only different from that self, but also different from one another in and of themselves rather than modifications of some model or archetypal other. Each other is singular, unique and irreducible to the mass (even when part of a mass). This means that what we receive with these singularities is:

the discreet passage of *other origins of the world*. What occurs there . . . is an origin; it is an affirmation of the world, and we know that the world has no other origin than this singular multiplicity of origins. The world always appears each time according to a decidedly local turn [of events]. Its unity, its uniqueness, and its totality consists in a combination of this reticulated multiplicity, which produces no result.³³

Rather than employing modern categories to think experience through a subject-object distinction or politics through the relation between an individual and society (oppositions that always privilege one side or the other of the binary), the analysis of existence is opened to the workings of a singularity that is always already in relation to a plurality of other singulars. What emerges from this is an analysis of community conceived in terms of the singular plural in which subjectivity does not occur on the basis of some form of modified Cartesian identity, but rather happens in the moments of encounter with each unique and irreducible other. Subjectivity is irreducible and unique, and yet indissociable from relations with the plurality of others (each of whom will also be singular). Community thus obtains in this plurality of singularities each existing on the basis of its relations with others, which makes it irreducible to systematic universal analysis or, as Nancy puts it, inoperative.³⁴

The question this raises for my account of artistic fragmentation is what space does this notion of the singular plural leave for a thinking of art? In debates about the post-modern, two versions of the place of art dominate, which (for want of a more detailed analysis) might be identified as the Jamesonian and the Lyotardian. In the former, the critical edge of modern art has fallen into the self-ironising sentimentality of pastiche that is cut off from the political and social developments of late capitalism.³⁵ Those following Lyotard, on the other hand, argue that art continues to play the role that it did within modernity – to 'wage a war on totality' by opening up the system to disruption.³⁶ The alternative that I want to explore here, however, returns to the Schlegelian/Hegelian conflict that was outlined in the last section in order to think art's relation to community.

Nancy returns to artistic fragmentation in *The Sense of the World*, where he begins to open the question of what is at stake for contemporary thought in the notion of 'romantic incompleteness' developed in *The Literary Absolute*. In the light of the collapse of speculative or systematic totalities, the status of the artistic fragment is transformed, which means that:

One must know first of all what remains in the fragments. . . . In other words . . . if one supposes that fragmentation has properly dislocated the essence on which it supervened, one must ask oneself if this 'essence' has not itself been delivered, thrown, projected, and offered like what one would have to call, twisting Benoit Mandelbrot's word, a 'fractal essence'. . . . In still other words, in what direction are we to take the step from a fragmented cosmetics to an aesthetics of a sensible tracing [*frayage*], and beyond this to the fragile permanence of 'art' in the drift of the 'worldly'?³⁷

As the quotation with which this chapter began suggests, the response to this question lies in the reading of art as event. This draws on the Heideggerian notion of art's ability to disclose the world, to open the setting into work of truth in the appearance, birth and encounter of the event of disclosure. However, in distinction from Heidegger, Nancy's notion of what is disclosed by art draws on the sense of the fragmentation of our already fragmented Being-with. For Nancy, art 'neither operates nor ensures the continuity and homogeneity of being', but is rather 'the presentation of presentation' insofar as this presentation is 'without presentness . . . does not possess a truth as does (the subject of) being. Rather, presentation itself *is* truth'.³⁸

What does this notion of artistic presentation as 'truth' consist in? Thrown back on the fragmentary nature of our being singular plural, we are called upon by art to respond to its interruption of the circle of signification and its exposure of the fragility of signified sense. The argument that presentation itself is truth does not ascribe to it some transcendental status, but rather posits art as a disclosure of truth as 'the secret of that which comprises nothing other than the multiple, discreet, discontinuous, heterogeneous, and singular touch of being itself'.³⁹ This is not therefore the presentation of or that there is an unrepresentable, but rather the presentation that presentation is itself singular plural, that there are multiple origins of the world, that the world is constituted in and by our Being-in-common, which itself is finite and fragmented. For Nancy, what remains of the Romantic fragment is the sense of incompleteness and the lack of a Work. Now, however, the fragment discloses 'the fragmentation of sense that existence *is*'.⁴⁰ Without guide or rule we as viewers, listeners or readers who are ourselves exposed to our singular plurality are called upon to respond.

On the basis of this thinking of the aesthetic, art responds to the fragmentation of the contemporary with a presentation of the difference at the heart of being-in-common. It intervenes in the present, opening up identifications (be they ideological or psychological) to difference: works present the discontinuities implied in the process of communal existence and question our everyday sense-making procedures. This presentation is intrinsically political as it provides a ground for questioning the rules, conventions and customs that strive to govern this existence, sort groups and

factions from each other under the banners of homogeneity, and direct the behaviour of each towards a unified end (whether that end is national, racial, gender, religious or political identity). Art, whether it is classified as high or popular, activates the sense that difference is. If it doesn't do this, it isn't art. It doesn't matter whether the work exists as part of a canon or recognised collection; art is what touches upon the differences between us that form the basis of community, and reminds us of the necessity of being in common. In the surprise fragmentation of sense elicited by the work there is the possibility of touching on the sense of a plural community.

Notes

- 1 J.-L. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. J. S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 133.
- 2 T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 45.
- 3 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5.
- 4 P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Bernard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 50–1.
- 5 F. W. J. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 31.
- 6 Schlegel, *Fragments*, pp. 31–2.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 9 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), vol. 1, pp. 102–3.
- 10 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 55.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 These quotations are taken from the passage on the 'cunning of reason' in G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 89. Jay Bernstein provides an excellent gloss of this sense of the end of art in *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992): 'To speak of the end of art is to claim that art is no longer for us the place in which the truth (of who and how we are, and of how 'things' are for us) occurs; art is no longer unavoidably formative for our experience of ourselves or the world; it no longer constitutively presents or even represents what is absolute for us. The death or end of art denotes not the halting of historical movement, nor, then, the cessation of an activity and the concerns surrounding it; but a dislodgement, as it were, of those activities and concerns from the (metaphysical-historical) centre to the periphery.' (p. 73).
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 15 P. Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The unrepresentable', trans. C. Sartillot, in *The Subject of Philosophy*, ed. T. Trezise, trans. Trezise *et al.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 150–1.
- 16 Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The unrepresentable', p. 151. A similar discussion of the deconstructive potential of art for Hegelian philosophy is generated in J.-L. Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. P. Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996). See especially the essay entitled

'The girl who succeeds the Muses' (pp. 41–55), which makes a similar case to the one I am attempting to develop here about the inextricability of poetry and philosophy: 'poetry finds itself confronted with the *prose* of thinking. This prose would therefore be, by rights, the element in which it would finally come to be dissolved, and all art and arts with it. . . . But this non-art shows a singular ambiguity: it is at once the index of pure interiority withdrawn into itself, of the 'pure element of thinking' that receives into itself a thoroughly sublated exteriority. . . . [Thus, it turns out that, confronted with this prose,] art is again 'given body', reincarnated as it were at the very limit of its dissolution, and that in 'reincarnating' itself, it again grants a place to the set of 'particularizations' that are essential to it.' (p. 43).

17 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 607.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

20 The conditional in this sentence is deliberate. A number of writers have made convincing cases that Hegel misrepresents Romantic subjectivity. Perhaps the most accessible argument against his reading of Schlegel comes from Judith Norman's 'Squaring the Romantic circle: Hegel's critique of Schlegel's theories of art' in W. Maker (ed.), *Hegel and Aesthetics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 131–44.

21 T. McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), see especially the chapter entitled 'Fragmented modalities and the criteria of Romanticism', pp. 3–55.

22 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, p. 15.

23 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 34.

24 Clearly there is a sense in which the system has never been more total than it is in the present climate of a capitalist 'new world order' where IMF and World Bank projects bring those on the margins under the sway of free-market economics – frequently with devastating consequences. Modern notions of totality still hold sway in the world, often in the noxious forms of fundamentalism, whether of the Muslim or Christian variety, and the conflicts between them affect peoples throughout the world. An emancipatory politics cannot, however, be based on such fundamentalist assumptions. What I am trying to think here is an alternative critical/aesthetic stance to what seems to be the increasing tribalisation of contemporary politics.

25 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 4.

26 Z. Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 59.

27 J.-L. Nancy, 'Finite history' in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. B. Holmes *et al.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 144–5.

28 J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. R. D. Richardson and A. O'Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 49.

29 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, pp. 49–50.

30 Lyotard's version of this position defines contemporary capitalism as 'a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanising it'; see J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 63.

31 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp. 156, 162–3.

32 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 9.

33 *Ibid.*

34 See J.-L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. P. Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), especially pp. 1–42.

- 35 The basis of this position is set out in F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 36 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 82. Lyotard develops a more nuanced account of the critical capacity of art in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991) and, in a way that is most interesting for this chapter, *Soundproof Room: Malraux's Anti-Aesthetics*, trans. R. Harvey (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- 37 Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 124.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

