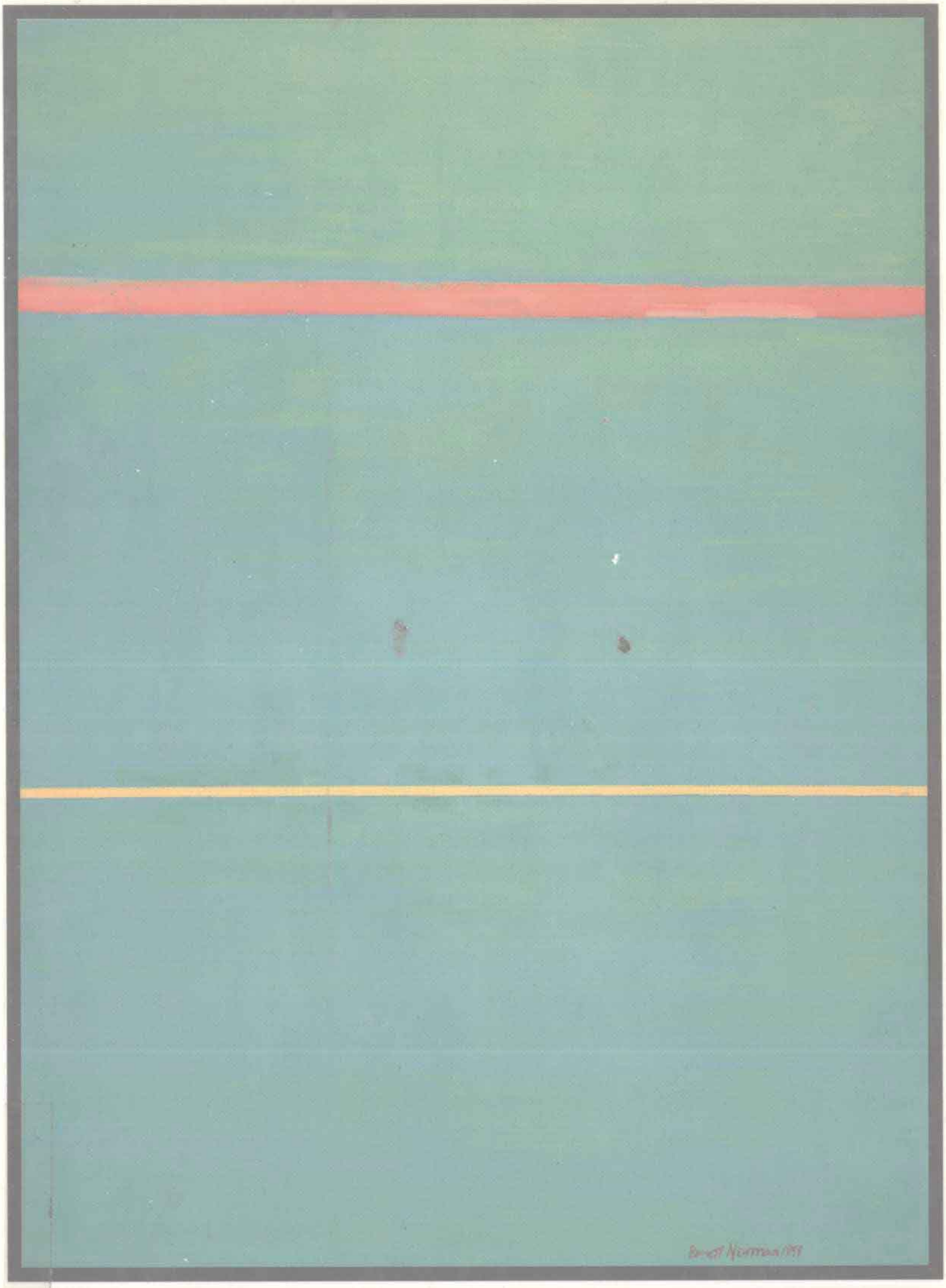
Peter de Bolla



Art Matters

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Acknowledgments

PARTS OF THIS BOOK have been gestating for a very long time; the earliest piece of writing on Wordsworth's *We Are Seven* was completed, albeit in a slightly different form, in 1986–1987. It was subsequently given as a paper on a number of occasions at universities in Great Britain, mainland Europe, and North America. Its latest outing was at the University of Copenhagen in 1999. The chapter on Barnett Newman came into shape next, and parts of it have been published, again in a slightly altered form, in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and I am grateful for permission to reprint those segments. The first chapter, again in a slightly different shape, was given as a paper at both the University of Central England (1997) and Southampton University (1998). The chapter on Glenn Gould has been given as a paper twice: at the University of Geneva in 1997 and at Dulwich College in 1998. I am grateful to the audiences on all

those occasions for their perceptive comments and to the following individuals, who were kind enough to invite me to speak: Jonathan Arac, University of Pittsburgh; Isobel Armstrong, Birckbeck College, London; Gavin Budge, University of Central England; Wlad Godzich, University of Geneva; Paul Hamilton, Oxford University; Peter Hughes, University of Zurich; Cora Kaplan and Stephen Bygrave, Southampton University; Jan Piggott, Dulwich College; and Chris Prendergast, University of Copenhagen.

Once the various chapters had come together, the book had its first full outing during the Lent term 1998, when I gave a series of lectures to the Faculty of English in Cambridge under the title "Art's Wonder." I am especially grateful to the audience on those occasions, since this was the first opportunity I had to air the full range of my argument.

Much of the theoretical basis for the book was worked out in the company of my colleagues in a research project entitled "Unofficial Knowledge" during the years 1992–1997, although neither they nor I knew it at the time. Much of the most stimulating and enjoyably creative discussion I can recall ever having was occasioned by our meetings, and I would like to thank Jonathan Burt, Maud Ellmann, John Forrester, and Simon Goldhill for their unfailing (and perhaps unusual) generosity in participating in a truly collaborative endeavor. I would also like to thank the then Conveners of the King's College Research Centre, Martin Hyland and Alan MacFarlane, along with the then managers of the centre, for the financial and institutional support that made the project possible.

I have been extremely fortunate in having been able to ask the following people to read my manuscript in its various stages of completion: Jonathan Burt, John Butt, Maud Ellmann, John Forrester, Simon Goldhill, John Henderson, Frank Kermode, Eric Mechoulan, Ian Patterson, Greg Polletta, Chris Prendergast, David

Ward, and Rick Waswo. All of these readers helped me enormously in coming to see both the strengths and the failings of what I had done. I hope I have enhanced the former and, insofar as I am able, eradicated the latter in this published version. I would especially like to thank Greg Polletta, who read my draft with such exquisite attention and wrote at such length with so many acute observations that I wondered how much of what I had written was really mine. In any event, this finished version could not hope to repay the gift of friendship I have readily accepted.

Lindsay Waters at the Press took an early interest in my project and has been unfailingly supportive during the long march toward publication.

The book is dedicated to two people who have helped me, in their different ways, come to understand why I became interested in wonder. I can still recall a five-year-old's first excitement at seeing the collections of the National Gallery in London and the patience of my guide at the time, my mother. Not quite twenty years later Christine Adams, unknown to either her or myself at the time, began to call this book forth through her gentle but persistent inquiries as to what I was up to in my reading, looking, and listening. As things turned out, now twenty or so years after that, she continues to call this book forth in ways only she can know.

Illustrations

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Introduction: Aesthetic Experience

OVER THE COURSE OF FIVE MONTHS, the young British artist Marc Quinn had nine pints of blood removed from his body in order to make the sculpture *Self* (Figure 1; frontispiece), now held in the Saatchi Collection, North London. This blood, the total amount contained in the human body, was poured into a cast of the artist's head made from dental plaster and then frozen. To preserve its solidified form, the resulting cast is housed in a refrigeration cabinet that keeps the blood at a constant temperature of minus six degrees. As Figure 2 makes clear, a thin film of ice covers the surface of the sculpture, revealing distinct signs of its fragility in the form of cracks that are beginning to expose what lies below the surface of the cast, which is of course only more frozen blood. The head is encased in a perspex cube in order to preserve the temperature within, and it sits on top of a stainless steel plinth containing the refrigeration unit. It is presented at about shoulder height; the mouth and eyes are closed, and it is difficult to tell if the

features indicate something like repose—as if the artist's senses are directed inwardly, attending to the sound or noise of consciousness (or apprehension), as if an attempt to close out the world from consciousness may fail. The sculpture simultaneously seems to be stating: "Don't look (for fear of what might be seen)" and "Look inwardly."

Described in this manner, clinically and without any attempt to color a first impression, this sculpture might appear to be coldly intellectual. It clearly raises a number of issues concerned with life and death, the permanence or fragility of art, and the act or forms—indeed the fact—of representation. But that coldness, in part prompted by the material temperature of the sculpture, is merely a surface, an epidermis that is easily punctured, thereby allowing something else to fill the viewer, something more elemental than a process of intellectualization. This book is about that "something."

I have come across viewers who, on seeing *Self* for the first time, describe a sensation akin to tingling, a kind of spinal over-excitation, or a curious shudder—that involuntary somatic spasm referred to in common speech by the phrase "someone walking on one's grave." And for some these immediate somatic responses may quickly give way to a variety of thoughts associated with formally similar presentations of the human head or face: the death mask, waxwork, funerary sculpture, embalmed body, or anatomical model. When this happens, the frisson of the physical encounter rapidly mutates into a jumble of thoughts, as if an impulse—call it a spark of affect—sets in motion a series of reactions that leave their trace in whatever permeable surface they encounter. For some viewers that surface is identifiable as "emotion," for others it is more like "ratiocination." I have witnessed some people, for example, blush on first encountering the sculpture; others turn away with a blank expression. For me the experience lies in a register for which Wordsworth had a form of words—

he characterized this state of thinking-feeling as having "thoughts that lie too deep for tears"—for I can identify an involuntary somatic impulse to weep that is nevertheless stifled by the almost equally involuntary habit of intellectualization. Much as one might stifle a yawn, thought here stifles the outward demonstration of emotion.

This state of "in-between-ness," as it were, part physical and part mental, in the orbit of the emotive yet also clearly articulated or potentially articulatable within the higher orders of mental activity, is one way of describing wonder. In the course of this book I will propose some slightly different ways, but the aim or object in view remains constant throughout. Put simply, my task is to arrive at a better understanding of what it is to be moved profoundly by a work of art. For reasons I will set out below, I have attempted this by working through three examples, three experiences or encounters with three works, each taken from different media. I call such experiences "affective" or "aesthetic," and the greater part of my discussion will be concerned with the elaboration of specific affective responses. These elaborations, however, take place both within a general set of beliefs about the nature of such responses, and within a specific context provided by the general topic of the book: art's wonder. The reasons for writing this book are deeply embedded in my desire to understand more about the practice of wondering or the poetics of wonderment. My curiosity in this regard was prompted by recognition of a common feature in my initial encounters—spread over some twenty-five years—with the three works presented in the main body of the text. I call that feature "mutism": being struck dumb.

Within the long tradition of aesthetic inquiry this state of inarticulacy has had varied fortunes: some writers have singled it out as *the* distinctive aspect of aesthetic experience. Others have relegated it to a sideline on account of a number of other issues that, according to

these writers, ought to take center stage in any discussion of art and aesthetics. I will have more to say about the various arguments around this issue below, but for the moment I would like to stay with my initial observation. I believe this "mutism," the sense of running out of words or not knowing how or where to begin speaking in the face of the artwork, to be the most common initial response to works of art (and there is, accordingly, no great originality in noticing this). Almost as common is the sense that any attempt at verbalizing a response to an artwork diminishes the experience or even destroys it. Indeed, I have encountered students who refuse to talk about their responses for fear of losing something very valuable to them (it should be said that this fear may also be based in the rather more mundane mechanics of the Cambridge supervision system). A reason for this "mutism" is sometimes given within the technical literature on aesthetics: since, it is claimed, affective experiences do not lie within the realm of the cognitive, there is nothing, as it were, to communicate. The only language that might be appropriate is that of interjection or exclamation—the ah! of surprise. This observation is also sometimes connected to a theoretical elaboration of the concept of art. According to this way of seeing things, the very definition of art is tied to this inarticulacy.

But what if this were not the case? What if this "mutism" were *merely* the result of a fault in our language—the lack of a lexicon for dealing with such experiences—and not a constitutive aspect of art as a category? Although the observation that we have very few words, hardly any at all, for talking about *affective* experiences certainly seems accurate, it does not follow that such a lexicon is beyond invention. While it may be true to say that this aspect of aesthetic inquiry has been ignored (for reasons I will outline below) even though various writers have intermittently called attention to this particular feature of encounters with art, it should not be taken as

self-evident that the attempt to construct a more supple and subtle lexicon will inevitably fail. Indeed, this book should be understood as an invitation to join forces in addressing this lack. I am keenly aware that for some people this invitation, attractive as it may or may not seem, cannot be responded to without a great deal of further elaboration, given that it is grounded on a large number of assumptions that, again for some, may be highly suspect. At the very least such assumptions need to be brought into the light of day.

What is an aesthetic experience? How might one set things up in a such a way as to have this kind of experience? Would one be able to recognize it as distinct from other kinds of experience? What would such an experience be *of*? What might keep it in the realm of the aesthetic, or allow it to be open to (or alternatively close it off from) other registers or forms of experience? And, assuming that one might be able to settle all these questions, is this form of experience communicable to myself or to others? Much of the rest of this book is an attempt to answer this last question through the force of example.

My first question, however, in part asks about the particular sense of the qualifier "aesthetic." The difficulties here derive from the fact that the word is used in a variety of ways (often for different purposes or ends and without those purposes or ends being made clear). In common speech one may, for example, speak of X's "aesthetic" as if such a thing were the distinct property of an individual. What is meant here is something like one's "taste," but the contingent and individual aspects of that term are muted in deference to the universal pretensions of the category "aesthetic." When the term is used with respect to an artist it is usually taken to refer to something like the artist's principles or particular program of making art. The term also has currency in the history of philosophy or ideas; in this context philosophers and intellectual historians speak of a tradition of "aesthetics" that began, so the story is often told, in the eighteenth

century with Baumgarten's coining of the word itself (where the derivation from the Greek, meaning "sense perception," is uppermost in its use). Although there are different accounts of this tradition and it may be contextualized in varying ways, most would agree with the observation that it is focused not on the single topic of "art," understood either in relation to "the question of art," that is, what makes one thing an artwork and another not, nor on the peculiar properties that artworks may be taken to contain (often referred to as "aesthetic properties"). Nor is this tradition solely dedicated to a discussion or analysis of the specific forms of experience aroused by our encounter with artworks (Kant, for example, is famously as interested in natural forms of beauty as those that are man-made). We find, for example, space given over to the connections between aesthetics and other forms of judgment, such as ethics, or to the detailed discussion of the relationships among the various fine arts.

Yet another use of the term "aesthetics" can be found in professional philosophy, where it is sometimes used interchangeably with the phrase "philosophy of art." But even here there are shades of meaning or differences in emphasis. Within the branch of contemporary philosophy engaged with the arts that is allied with the analytic school—known as analytic aesthetics—one finds questions like, "What is art?" "What is it to understand an artwork?" "What is the value of art?" Here the word "aesthetics" is most often taken to refer to a theory of art, since the primary objective of inquiry is the delineation of the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be regarded as a work of art. But there are some philosophers who regard the question "What is art?" as badly formulated, or unanswerable, or of no interest. For these writers the "question of art" cannot be understood in isolation; it only makes sense when seen in relation to aesthetic experience because the only way we might know what an

artwork may be is through a specific kind of experience (called "aesthetic"). For so-called aesthetic theorists of art there is, then, a distinct difference between a "theory of art" and a "theory of aesthetics"; indeed, the former is dependent upon the latter. Philosophers who take this view see art as a vehicle for aesthetic experience, and they typically formulate questions like, "What raises the sensation of beauty?" Or "Are there specific qualities that inhere in beautiful objects that arouse such responses?"

In another domain of contemporary inquiry—now standardly referred to as "theory"—"the aesthetic" most often refers to *a theory of aesthetics* whose most important thinker is generally assumed to be Immanuel Kant. But matters are equally complicated here by the lack of consensus regarding the term "aesthetics": for some writers Kant's very precise articulation of the difference between determinant and aesthetic judgment is taken to provide a definition of "aesthetics." Other theorists work within the post-Kantian tradition in which the term gains a broader set of senses. This is further complicated by the subsequent "back formation" of the term, whereby the later uses are read back into what is standardly taken to be the founding text for the entire discussion, namely, the *Critique of Judgment*. Thus in some hands a "theory of aesthetics" is taken to be completely independent of any instances of art. Theory in this guise is uninterested in the specific works of art for which a "theory of aesthetics" might initially have been thought to be useful. In its place one finds accounts of the concept's historicity (that is, its origin in a particular concatenation of Enlightenment discourses on the sublime, taste, moral sense theory, rhetoric, the fine arts, economics, and the public sphere), and this historical dimension is often taken to be decisive with respect to the notion that there might be a "pure" realm of "the aesthetic" unencumbered by history or ideology.

According to this way of thinking, the category "art" can only be understood in relation to the prior concept of "the aesthetic": "artworks" only become visible once one has a fully formed concept of "the aesthetic." As a result, the category "art" must be equally contaminated by the ideological interests of the historical formation of the concept "the aesthetic." Thus, it is held, there can be no world of the artwork that is cut free from the impurities of the historicity of "the aesthetic," since one needs the latter category in order to identify the former. In some accounts this observation is extended into a general proposition about the nature of artworks, namely, their grounding in the ideologies framing the concept of "the aesthetic." In popular terms this frequently gets transformed into the statement that artworks are merely ideology in disguise. I will have something to say about this understanding of the relationship between "art" and "the aesthetic" below.

Although I began by stating that the aim of this book is to inquire into affective experience, in the discussion so far the terms "aesthetic" and "affective" have tended to slide into each other as if they might be used interchangeably. Common speech has it that "affective" experiences include those aroused by artworks but are not defined exclusively in relation to such objects, which is to say that one's "affective" life is commonly thought of as comprising more than just the "aesthetic": emotions and our emotional lives are based in a much wider range of experiences. Throughout this book, however, when I refer to affective responses or experiences I mean to call to mind only responses *to art* (though I do not mean to imply by this that other kinds of affective response are to be denigrated). These encounters are, in the strict sense I will give the term, aesthetic, and so I will also refer to them as *aesthetic* experiences, with the italics signaling that I am using the word in this restricted way. This slightly clumsy procedure is necessary because, as I have pointed out, the

word "aesthetic(s)" is used to refer to a range of phenomena and is attached to a number of different theoretical and conceptual projects.

What distinguishes affective or *aesthetic* experiences from others is the fact that they are occasioned by encounters with artworks. This proposes a mutual definition, so that what elicits *aesthetic* experience is an artwork and an artwork is defined as an object that produces *aesthetic* experience. This mutuality is sometimes taken to be damaging for an argument—so-called circular reasoning—but it need not be. Many arguments depend upon feedback in order to gain greater clarity with respect to their initial premises. The decisive criterion here is what epistemologists call "evidential priority." In the case at hand what prompts the definition is the evidence of an aesthetic encounter: this comes first both logically and temporally, and it is only subsequent to the experience that I find it necessary to reach for a concept of "art" that might enable me to understand it. This, of course, begs the question what "the evidence of experience" might consist in, something to which I will return below.

It can fairly be said that this is not a particularly helpful way of approaching the *definition* of the concept of "art," and a number of philosophers have pointed out the problematic nature of proceeding toward a definition of art in this way (and in this instance the argument *is* circular). Furthermore, some writers would claim that affective experiences of artworks cannot take place if one lacks a definition of the general concept of "art," but I take this to demonstrate bad faith in the project launched by Immanuel Kant in his Third Critique, which precisely sets out to account for how we come to have understanding of those things for which there are no *a priori* concepts. This is to say that Kant's starting point was that some things—call them works of art—cannot be understood by moving from a general concept to a particular instance of the concept, and