2
The Ethicoaesthetics of Affect and the Bloc of Sensations
Reaffirming the Specificity of Art (Against Representation)

In this chapter I put forward a polemical argument for a kind of ‘return’ to aesthetics, the latter understood here as the deterritorialising function of art, its power to take us outside our ‘selves’ – a return, via Deleuze and Guattari and a number of different allies and precursors, which reaffirms the specificity of art. It is then a return to the terrain of the previous chapter in terms of its utilisation of an expanded and immanent notion of aesthetics and a foregrounding of art’s asignifying potential, but it is also a turn away, one might even say a revision, in terms of its focus on the art object understood as a particular kind of ‘made’ thing. One might also think of this latter turn as a strategic move from opening to closure, or even from speed to slowness (in this sense it tracks the move Deleuze and Guattari themselves made from the wildness of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to a more sober account of the impasses and possibilities of thought in *What is Philosophy?*). As with the previous chapter I do not refer to specific practices, rather, my argument is directed at the field of contemporary art in general as well as at certain theoretical preoccupations of art history.

The first half of the chapter then makes a case for attention to be paid to the *affective* side of the art experience. Affect here is understood, via Deleuze–Spinoza, as the effect a given object or practice has on its beholder, and on its beholder’s ‘becomings’. Important here is also what we might call that ‘affective-gap’, or ‘hesitancy’ as Henri Bergson understood it, between stimulus and response, which in itself allows creativity to arise. A third moment is provided by both Georges Bataille and
Jean-François Lyotard each of whom in their own way see art as a form of affective, or ritual, practice that accesses a realm beyond the known. In each case affect is to do with the body and with thought, and with what a body–thought is capable of. As with the previous chapter I make this argument against the backdrop of deconstruction (or ‘signifier enthusiasm’) and against what we might call the melancholy science of a more Adornian attitude towards art.

The chapter then turns to Deleuze and Guattari’s own chapter on art in *What is Philosophy?* and looks at how a notion of affect (along with a notion of percept) might be deployed in thinking about the actual work of art, itself understood as a specific form of thought. In particular I am interested in how this ‘Deleuzian’ attitude differs from the more usual (in terms of art history) representational models or languages (and especially the ‘Social History of Art’). Affect here is used slightly differently in that it names not only intensities in or on the body but also self-sufficient elements in the world (that which ‘makes up’ art). I also make a detour at this point to Deleuze’s book on Francis Bacon, and specifically to concepts of the *figural*, the *diagram*, and *probe-heads*, each of which deform figuration and disrupt representation. This leads on to the last section, a brief consideration, as a corrective, of what we might call contemporary art’s allegorical qualities.

The ethicoaesthetics of affect

Aparthness against deconstruction

Art is thus confused with a cultural object and may give rise to any of the discourses to which anthropological data in general lend themselves. One could do a history, sociology, or political economy of it, to mention just those few. One can easily show that its destination, anthropologically speaking, undergoes considerable modification depending on whether the artwork ‘belongs’ to a culture that is tribal, imperial, republican, monarchical, theocratic, mercantile, autarkic, capitalist, and so on, and that it is a determining feature of the contemporary work that it is obviously destined for the museum (collection, conservation, exhibition) and for the museum audience. This approach is implied in any ‘theory’ of art, for the theory is made only of objects, in order to determine them. But the work is not merely a cultural object, although it is that too and always has been, and if it holds out or is able to hold out a promise of an infinity of forms and commentaries, and through this infinity, a promise of community of feeling, it is because it harbours within it an excess, a rapture,