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Blindness and Touching

In the previous chapter, it was suggested that theory and practice should not be thought of as separate activities, the one preceding the other, or realizing the intent of the other. Rather, following our reading of Kleist's essay on the *Marionettentheatre* it should be increasingly difficult to determine where theory begins and where practice ends and vice versa. Instead, theory and practice should be thought of as not just mutually enforcing but as the condition of possibility of each other. There will be creative practitioners who embrace this aporia and whose work pushes the contradictions and paradoxes to the limit as the condition of further progress in their art. Examples of such writers, artists, and filmmakers will be examined in greater depth in the second part of this book. Equally, there will be practitioners who claim that their art bears no relation to theory and that their work is a result of, say, the inspiration of the muses or of the realization of personal suffering in the medium of their choosing. Such attitudes are commonplace and are by no means a deterrent to producing great art.¹ However, it should be pointed out that such rationalizations of creative practice are also theoretical through and through. They rely on culturally and historically specific understandings of practice that are ideologically determined. A refusal to acknowledge one's own theoretical position does not make that position any less theoretical. Humanism and Idealism are their own theoretical positions, just ones that make a claim to universalism through a necessary blindness to their own relativity. There will also be philosophers who wish to maintain a rigorous purity between the work of conceptualization and the task of making and who for good reason wish to defend the properly philosophical space of disciplinary philosophy from other idioms within the arts and humanities. However, such disciplinary segregation is the result of institutional (and so cultural and political) imperatives. The history of philosophy itself is much more relaxed about idiomatic borders, as the dialogues of Plato, the *Confessions* of Augustine, or, the novels of Voltaire and Rousseau demonstrate.

However, it would be a mistake to insist that theory and practice, or philosophy and art, were the same thing. They are not and we need to rigorously distinguish between the two if this investigation is to proceed with clarity. Heidegger suggests that philosophy and art, *philos* and *poesis*, reside on opposite sides of an abyss.² All the questions of the philosophical understanding of art come from an attempt to understand the depths of that abyss. The metaphor Heidegger deploys in this context is telling, the gulf between philosophy and art is profound and difficult to see our way through. Heidegger offers us a third term, borrowing from the Greek, *techne*, as a way to bridge that abyss, suggesting that both philosophy and art are technical processes that arise from a form of making and both being a type of tool that humans use to orient themselves in the world.³

In contrast there is a strongly held belief in contemporary film theory that the art object itself is productive of knowledge in a manner that is equivalent to philosophical thinking.⁴ This is a less convincing argument that imagines that meaning originates in art objects independent of either authorial making or critical reading. Insofar as, meaning is in fact the construction of sense by a reader (either the author as first reader, no more privileged than any other, or a critical audience) what this argument fails to account for is the philosophical or theoretical positions, acknowledged or otherwise, that those readers bring to the object. If the art object 'thinks' it is only because it is thought through by its readers, and there will be as many trajectories of thought through the art object as there are readers: the critical exercise is never exhaustive. However, an art object can no more think on its own than a stone can. If critical practice is tied to thinking (and non-understanding) then the important part of it (the one of immediate interest to us here) is the process rather than the outcome.

This book is not straightforwardly concerned with the question of critical appreciation of the art object. That is the business of an entirely different field of philosophy, namely aesthetics, and as any sensitive artist who has ever received a bad review knows there is a world of difference between criticism and practice. Rather, this book is concerned with the problem of the relation between theory (or what has historically been identified under the name of philosophy) and creative practices as a process of thinking and making. Criticism, appreciation, or affect are things that come after or anterior to that process. The question that concerns us here is the relation of theory (the reading of theory and its production) to creative practice. Accordingly, in this book we will consider a range of philosophers and theorists who are also creative artists, and practitioners who explicitly acknowledge their relation to theoretical work. The task here

is not to demonstrate that reading theory will make you a better artist, or to suggest that the proper way to make art is by reading volumes of theoretical writing. Rather, it is to wonder about what sort of art such a relationship gives rise to, and to think through the creative process from the point of view of a theory-practitioner.

One obvious question that emerges from such an investigative trajectory is: if theory and practice are simultaneously impossible to separate and distinct activities, separated by an abyss in Heidegger's terms, then what is the exact nature of the relation between the two? It is a good question to ask, perhaps the only question worth asking in this context. However, if we were truly able to answer this question and to know the mysteries of that abyss then we might risk turning the page on the last chapter in the history of the world. To understand the mechanics of that relation, or even to think of that relation as a mechanical interchange, would mean that in principle it ought to be possible to follow an algorithm that programmed the outcomes of the exchange between theory and practice. The work of art schools could be reduced to an equation; the task of writing and making could be handed over to a computer. As the complications of Kleist and his readers demonstrate the play between theory and practice does not work in this way, art is not a calculus. Rather, if there remains something irreducible and perhaps immeasurable in the relation between theory and practice, the theoretical task must be to know this non-knowing, to understand it better as the aporetic space of creation, lest we are tempted to consign the problem of creative practice to mystery and eternal obfuscation.

Innocent smoothie

Hélène Cixous, both a great theorist and a great writer, also reads Kleist on the *Marionettentheatre*.⁵ In her seminar text 'Grace and Innocence, Heinrich von Kleist' she reads the essay on the puppet theatre alongside the writing of Clarice Lispector. Quoting the Brazilian novelist, she says: 'the passage to the infinite is a disappearance, an infinite distancing from the finite. I am speaking of the movement of Kleist's puppets and of Clarice's thought gathered in her statement: 'In order to understand my non-intelligence, I had to become intelligent'. At the limit of comprehension, one begins to understand noncomprehension' (p. 30). Cixous is referring to the swing of the marionettes' limbs that Kleist characterizes as an asymptote, a line that approaches a given curve and recedes to zero as they tend to infinity. That is to say the line and the curve only ever touch at the point of infinity. This then is a touching that is always on the cards but that is infinitely

deferred, an impossible touching without touching. Cixous is also describing the relation between theory and practice, the infinite approach of knowing at the limits of comprehension. It is in this infinitely receding and shrinking space that we will begin to understand the abyss that separates theory and practice. The abyss is both unbridgeable and squeezed to nothing as the asymptote extends to infinity. Only at the point of infinity do the line and curve share the same space and become one and the same thing. The flight of the asymptote is the process towards the impossible that gives the line and the curve their purpose and meaning. The word asymptote is derived from the Greek ἀσύμπτωτος (*asumptōtos*) which means 'not falling together', from ἀ priv. + σύν 'together' + πτωτ-ός 'fallen'.⁶ This perhaps implies that both line and curve fall separately without ever coming together, synchronized falling to infinity rather than falling as a couple. The fall is then infinite and lonely, as the promise of an impossible touching to come.⁷ What would it mean to speak of the relation between theory and practice in these terms?

Cixous' reading of Kleist in this essay attends to the episode of the youth, who having become self-conscious of his gracefulness is no longer able to reproduce his innocent balance. This part of the Kleist text is of the greatest relevance to us here, given that after theory one cannot remain innocent about matters of practice. This is not the same thing as saying theory has saturated our understanding of practice, rather that naïvete or ignorance is no longer an option after theory. Instead Cixous speaks of an 'economy of innocence' (p. 31) in which we constantly attempt to recover a virginal or paradisaical innocence, only to have it threatened and lost over and over again. This innocence exists only in relation to its opposite, namely, to adopt Blake's terms, experience. We might think of this in terms of the aporias of creativity as an economy between knowing and incomprehension, or between theory and practice. Knowledge and innocence then coexist in an economy of exchange, one for the other, one recuperated and then lost to the other, falling separately towards infinity. This is not to repeat a tired notion of creative practice as pure idealism and theory as a form of corruption. Rather, as Cixous demonstrates there is nothing innocent about innocence. It is in understanding this economic relapse that we will be able to achieve some perspective on the limits of comprehension.

Cixous begins by puzzling the situation of Eve in Paradise, asking 'how can someone who does not know what sin is become a sinner?' (p. 30). This pushes the paradoxes of the fall from Paradise we found in the last chapter in a new direction. Surely, eating of the fruit of knowledge would only make Eve aware of the difference between good and evil, eating itself cannot be a sin for Eve because at that point she does not know what sin is. She eats the apple in a completely

naïve way, her eating only being rationalized *post hoc* as a sin in the light of her new knowledge. For the God who subsequently expels her and her mate from Paradise, her guilt lies in her innocence. God's lawyers will argue *ignorantia juris non excusat*, that ignorance of the law is no defence in law. Eve might respond that the decks have been stacked against her from the start, that the possibility of sinning pre-exists her sin, and that the law claims its universality through its own singular exceptionalism. Having lost her innocence, which is really an innocence concerning the difference between innocence and knowledge, Eve can never be the same again. However, what God has yet to account for is the conditions of the fall from innocence and at what moment that transgression occurs. We might argue that in the moments before biting the apple, when Eve has resolved to do so, she is both still in a state of innocence and already committed to corruption. Unlike the curve of an asymptote, Eve's mouth decidedly comes into contact with the apple, but is she guilty at the point of taste, consumption, or digestion? Such questions may have kept thinkers in the medieval church busy for centuries, the point to note here that eating has taken place and that there is no going back from there.

The gates of Paradise are locked and there is no going back, as Cixous notes following Kleist, and we have to advance. However, even though we cannot go back in time, it is possible to advance along a trajectory of loss. In the case of Eve or Kleist's young man, 'there is neither fault nor absence of fault' (p. 39). The young man can no longer recover his balance but it was not his fault that he is now conscious of a lost grace that defines his ongoing narcissism as he stands in front of the mirror day after day in an attempt to re-find his innocence. Cixous identifies the possibility of 'a nonvirgin innocence' or 'an innocence regained' (p. 41), which refuses to equate innocence with an infantile state synonymous with irresponsibility. She states, 'innocence is always linked to risk, since by definition it is outside of a certain type of knowledge. It risks being misunderstood and leads to catastrophes. There is a dangerous innocence and a misleading innocence' (p. 42). There is nothing more regressive and politically suspect that the state of bliss or a return to nature away from the corruption of degenerate culture. This is the basis of a particularly virulent strain of politics that can overtake us without noticing it, the more we insist on divesting ourselves of certain types of knowledge. Practice without theory risks catastrophe, creating a Hell when it thinks it is looking at Paradise. Equally, there is no guarantee that falling from innocence into knowledge constitutes progress as human history since Eden demonstrates. One can be infinitely guilty and innocent at the same time, and with infinite guilt can come innocence.

But how can we *understand* innocence? How can we speak of innocence once innocence is no longer possible? How would we know that we are experiencing innocence when innocence requires an absence of both knowing and experience? Cixous suggests:

One has to go *out* of the circle, in order to speak of the circle. But when one leaves the circle, there is no more circle. There remains only one thing to do: that is to leap back into the circle. This is the metaphor Kafka uses to speak of the relation between self and work. For him, the world goes by like a luminous arch stretched out in front of us. The only way of becoming aware of it is by leaping into it. (p. 46)

Eve bites down on the apple, Satan takes a leap of faith, the artist begins without ever being sure of where that beginning starts. This leap into uncertainty is not necessarily a naïve thing to do; equally knowing that we are leaping into the unknown will not necessarily help us make the jump. Nevertheless, if we are to advance, the jump must be made. Cixous suggests that there are ‘acrobats of the soul’, creative practitioners like Kleist and Lispector, who are skilled in judging the jump-off point, developing ‘an extraordinary dexterity at the participation of the singular in the absolute. At the moment of intersection, in the briefest of moments – to recall the metaphor of the asymptote and its coordinates – something touches, brushes, and that is where one takes the leap’ (p. 46). Kleist is notorious for the creative use of the figures of analytic geometry, it would seem that Cixous follows him in this regard. The terms she uses in French is not quite ‘brushes’ as the English translation renders it, but ‘*frôlement*’, which might be better translated as ‘caresses.’⁸ However, we should remember that this touch only occurs at infinity, it is an impossible caress, infinitely deferred and infinitely gentle. If the leap from self to text, or writing to world, or theory to practice happens at the point of touching then that jump must remain forever as an infinitely deferred journey that never arrives. The participation of the singular in the absolute is forever trapped in that space tending to infinity towards a tangent point.

Such a fall and such a caress are not easy things to think about let alone achieve in art, they give rise to a different register of value in our understanding of creativity. For Cixous ‘brushing is necessary, but has no weight’ (p. 48). The issue of economy requires this lightness of touch, systems of exchange (looking, touching, seeing, speaking) all go through the body and all deal with brushing [*frôlement*]. Equally, the economy of innocence and knowledge requires one to brush up against the other. The caress is infinite and complex and cannot be explained by a computational model. This impossible touching is the conclusion

of an infinite progress down the trajectory of loss, a journey and a moment of connection and exchange that thinks of loss as something other than negative. Loss, for Cixous, should not be imagined as a punishment; rather the movement along the curve towards infinity represents a path towards the extinction of loss, a desire for the loss of loss that would be the most human of instincts imaginable. It always risks a fall but remains the jump-off point for re-entry to the circle of experienced innocence. This might serve us a definition of the process between theory and practice, one that jumps from one side of the abyss to the other and back again, never being content with or dominated by one side or the other, heading towards a moment of impossible caress in the last chapter of the history of the world.

To only have the knowledge of knowledge, says Cixous, is to be without 'the value of life, or love' (p. 67). There are things that go beyond theory, that require us just to do. The prejudice for knowledge is an institutional requirement of philosophy, but it is, says Cixous, 'only a *moment* in a process of reasoning'. The task when living and thinking is to find another idiom of innocence that is necessarily and constantly threatened by knowledge. Innocence must test itself by putting itself at risk at every moment and always running the risk of losing itself. Innocence and knowledge brush against one another in the dance of thinking and making, imperceptibly, risking moments of interruption and relapse.

Innocence regained has to be earned, says Cixous, but it should be our goal and ambition. Unlike the innocence of Paradise, this other innocence is not unknown to itself, nor is it guilty. It remains strange to itself. That is to say, it must be other to itself and involve the relation between the self and other. The first virginal innocence is lost in the encounter with the other; the second earned innocence is earned and regained through that same ongoing encounter. This innocence is other to itself, it is its own other. That is to say, it is experience. When we brush up against the other, as in a dance, this moment of possible interruption and arrest is what Cixous calls 'the transparency of an *in-betweenness* of two beings, moving back and forth from one to the other' (p. 71). It is in-between an irretrievably lost innocence and the complete lack of innocence that comes with absolute knowledge. Both extremes are impossible for the human being, the first and last chapters in the history of the world. We as humans can only ever be *in media res*, searching like Milton for this earthly Paradise only to risk it at every moment in the encounter with our fellow earth-bound inhabitants, and 'to fray a passage toward the other is a humanly difficult art' (p. 71).

It is a contention of this study that in a positive sense the artist does not know what they are doing. There is something irreducibly unknowable to the

artist that occurs in the moment of art that defines the process of art. Creative practice is a mode of performative innocence, that must be strange to itself and risk itself against the other. Practice risks itself against theory, against the risk of knowing itself, an outcome that leads to paralysis. Equally, theory is other to itself, compelling itself into a state other than itself, namely, practice. However, this secondary innocence that is not innocent, is not the monopoly of the creative practitioner. It happens everywhere as the stuff of life. Only the most completely naïve innocent would take on the role of head of department in a university, or start a business, or have a baby. No amount of reading about it in books will prepare you for such an encounter with the other. It is only innocence and ignorance of what will come that carries us forward in these moments. No theory can be adequate to the magnitude of what is set to engulf us, even if those theory books are derived from the experience of others. It is our risked innocence that leads to experience, which in turn earns us the credit of our regained innocence. This experience is no bar from future innocence nor can it negate naïvete. For only the truly innocent would proceed to take the role of Dean of Faculty, or open a second business, or have a second child. Experience, that vaguest of philosophical concepts, is also strange to itself. It contains within itself, as a condition of moving forward, a form of innocence that makes experience possible. There could be no experience without innocence, no innocence that did not inoculate itself against the trap of knowledge by being experienced about the risk of knowing what comes next. Performative innocence is not innocent about the value of innocence. This is also why theory and practice can only tend towards each other at a point of infinity. Both theory and practice must be naïve about the relation of one to the other, performing their innocence as a translation of experience, and while the individual can jump in principle from one side to the other, there remains an infinite abyss between the two of which the individual can never be master. Artistic technique, or the process of practice, can be the slats and joints of a bridge that the individual pieces together to set out precariously, even innocently, across the gulf but experience has its limits in the face of the other.⁹ Technique is not flying; it is falling with style.

I feel like writing

Reading Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, Hélène Cixous alights on the passage concerning the fencing bear: 'his right paw raised ready for Battle. He looked me straight in the eye. That was his fighting posture.' She notes that

the gaze of the computational and flawless bear is important, 'he is not a blind animal. We write with our eyes closed and the more we close our eyes, the more we see. But the bear does not need to close his eyes. Only humans do, in order to see otherwise' (p. 54). The clear-sighted bear fixes us with a steely gaze, he can see us coming, and always has a response. The human in contrast, in order to see past the bear's impeccable defences, would be better off closing their eyes and taking a stab in the dark. As a long-term myope herself, the question of blindness is importantly close to Cixous' own creative practice and is a key trope in her writing on writing.¹⁰ In the essay 'Writing Blind: Conversations with the donkey' [*Ecrire aveugle*] she offers an extraordinary account of what it means to write and to think.¹¹ It is impossible to delimit this text as either theory or creative writing. It is both and neither at the same time, and an excellent example of the new idiom of writing as critical practice that takes place in the asymptote of theory and art. As with Cixous' account of innocence and loss, blindness is not to be thought of as something negative or as the result of some impairment but as the condition of all seeing, all insight, and all writing.¹² We will find here a clear-sighted understanding of the passage into darkness and uncertainty that characterizes moments of creativity. In Cixous there is nothing shortsighted about blindness. Equally, we should be careful when reading this essay not to assume that the lyrical 'I' of the narrating voice is reducible to the figure that answers to the name of Hélène Cixous. This is a work that writes itself; the 'I' could be the voice of writing itself, a text describing its own production.

The text is a poetic encounter with the strangeness of the author's self in creative practice as she doubles her alterity by writing about herself writing, looking at blindness, or, seeing the dark. She says that in order to write she must escape broad daylight, which fills her eyes with visions.¹³ She wants, 'to see what is secret. What is hidden amongst the visible' (p. 139). She separates herself off from the world to write by closing her eyes, and behind her eyelids she finds herself elsewhere: 'there reigns the other light. I write by the other light' (p. 139). In this other light of blindness, she descends into 'the dark gorge' of writing. She asks, 'who believes they know how to see?' (p. 140). What presumption is involved in the belief that one can believe one's eyes? Seeing is not a matter of knowing, everything one sees has to be questioned and doubted. Who can say that they have the resources of flawless sight? Who could be so secure in their faith in vision that they could claim to know what they are doing when they see the world in front of them? It was precisely this doubt in the letter on the green glasses that led Kleist to his moment of crisis that threw him into writing. Sight and the metaphysics of vision would, on Cixous' terms, only be a moment in

the process of rationality. One that is not secured or exhausted by knowledge but one that awaits to be complicated and risked against its own potential for blindness. Cixous, here, complicates the proverbial wisdom that there are none so blind as those who will not see, which retains within it the sense that sight can be opposed to blindness as an absence of sight and in principle can be corrected to produce true or clear vision.¹⁴

This is close to the commentary on the multitude by the lake in Matt. 13:13 who 'seeing see not ... neither do they understand' or the foolish people of Jer. 5:12 'without understanding/Who have eyes and see not.'¹⁵ But as Ira Gershwin would say 'the things that you're liable to read in the bible ain't necessarily so'.¹⁶ Rather, for Cixous, there are none so blind as those who do see, and who in seeing think that they have seen all that there is to see. There is in the metaphysical tradition an assumed connection and order between sight and knowledge, and the sensible and the intelligible. Cixous' challenge to this is to suggest that knowledge itself is blind, and that with blindness comes another way of seeing. Blindness sees around seeing and knows something that knowledge is blind to.

The important figure for Cixous in this respect would be not the all-knowing son of a Christain God but the blind, trans-sexual Tiresius,¹⁷ 'not seeing the world is the precondition for clairvoyance' (p. 140). This form of seeing sees what the blind person sees, which is neither day nor night but a different long and precarious region in which the shadow of thought flashes ahead in secret. She says, 'my book writes itself. Creates itself. (In French: *se crée*) Secret' (p. 141). A secret is not necessarily something that waits to be dug up or uncovered, something that in principle is knowable or recoverable. Rather, a true secret is one that remains secret while in full view, or, hidden in plain sight as we say in English.¹⁸ Here and elsewhere in Cixous, writing runs ahead of its author, laughing 'it turns back to see if I am (following) it' (p. 141). The secrets of creation are in front of us, running ahead, out of control, teasing us, in play and laughter. We pursue them blind along secret passageways, while the passage itself 'runs faster than my consciousness and my hand' (p. 144). Fortunately, the passage leaves traces but when in pursuit 'one must act fast. And no time to learn' (p. 144). As with Kleist's wrestler in the essay on reflection, practice calls for an improvisation that happens without the time to assimilate it as experience. This is not a pure and originary improvisation, rather it is the breathless pursuit of what lies beyond us, a groping along by memory of a technique that is inadequate to the chase: 'A book writes itself quickly. How long did it take you to write this book? There is a long time and a short time. Add my whole life ... The book is written at full speed when it is ready' (p. 144). The secret gestation of writing happens according to

multiple temporalities that share an irrecoverable past and an unknowable future. Writing seems to exist in another time zone that exceeds us, carrying us forward through the reserves of our own jet lag.

Writing takes the whole of life, requiring all its resources, which as we have seen in Cixous run beyond the moment of knowledge, and involve the looseable pursuit of the loss of loss. The writing life is the pursuit of writing, of the time to write and the laughter that comes from writing. One of the most astute pieces of feedback I ever received from one of many unsuccessful job interviews for a post in university management was that they did not want someone who wrote so much and would be too easily distracted. This raises a question about what sort of person they were looking for to run a university, but that, I suppose, is their business. A writer wants to write and cannot live without writing. The writer who cannot write will be out of sorts; they will not be right again until they have the chance to write: without writing they are no use to themselves or anyone else. When the book is ready I feel like writing. Readiness is all even if I do not know what I am letting myself in for.

What would it mean to say, 'I feel like writing'? Cixous writes, 'an employee of Air France tells me on the telephone: I like your books because they touch me. We all like to touch – to be touched' (p. 142). Something touching happens in writing. It happens at the infinite caress of the asymptote of theory and practice. It occurs as we grope our way along the dark passageway in pursuit of the text that escapes us. Here, I can close my eyes and imagine Hélène's politeness and embarrassment as she is recognized on the telephone to the Air France ticket office, her writing having touched the life of another. She would be touched by that. However, even if she risks her writing against the review of the other's gaze, she does not write for the other without but for the other within: 'I write to feel. I write to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words.' Words are her digits, writing is her haptology, her's is a phenomenology of strokes and marks, 'I must write, or else the world will not exist' (p. 148). As a writer, everything for her, her whole world of waking, working, and living depends upon this gesture. One is not 'a writer' by designation of the academy, media, or literary apparatus. Rather, one is a writer because one writes and there is nothing to be done but writing. Cixous says writing keeps 'death at a respectful distance' (p. 148). This is not an attempt to master death or achieve immortality by the management of the perpetually deferred end. Writing cannot put an end to the end, but it can be in dialogue with the end. In writing, the end should not come too soon. Writing is not a triumph over death, 'it is the fabrication of the

raft of nothingness' (p. 122). We will recall the relation between fabrication and storytelling as this raft sets sail in the dark without map or guiding star – we are making it up as we go along. This fabrication is also a making, a handy craft that requires us to get in touch with the manual and needs finishing touches. Writing is full of feeling.

Death is not the end of the story.¹⁹ It can be the terminus of writing, but an automatic writing would be writing with a manual, the death of the author does not imply the death of writing or the end of feeling. Rather, the death of practice comes with knowledge. The secrets of practice exposed to the full glare of the high noon of knowledge would wither away. Writing cannot exist in the head prior to putting pen to paper. It cannot be known in advance, rather it happens in the touch of the hand on the pen and the caress of the pen on paper, or the touch of fingers on a keyboard, writing is in the process. Nor can writing be captured by knowledge after the fact, having a light shone in its face until it gives up its secrets. Knowledge cannot exhaust the secrets of writing; they remain on the page for anyone who has eyes to see. Cixous says, 'I am not an intellectual. I am a painter ... I paint, I draw the sentences from the secret well. I paint the passage: one cannot speak it' (p. 149).²⁰ Painting involves brushing, touching the canvas with brush strokes, as the work emerges from the relation between brushing and surface. To feel like writing is also to say that writing is like feeling, a sensory apprehension that can happen in the darkest night, a knowing that happens without the security of knowing. As when we make love with our eyes closed which does not distract from perfect dexterity and intimacy. Knowing does not feel, 'knowing is without fever and without life,' says Cixous (p. 151). Knowing legitimizes research or puts in train the search for what is not yet found, but it cannot grasp that which remains beyond its reach. Knowing is out of touch with feeling. Writing feels its way, while knowledge is blind to what it holds in its hands.

This is the aporia of theory and practice. One should not move so fast as to equate theory with knowing and take writing as a metonym for all practice. The dance between the two is more complicated; they are entangled one with the other. Theory is equally a writing that risks its innocence against its own impulse to register experience. Any creative practice always risks its own arrest by seeking to understand itself. The creative process constantly shuttles between theory and practice, without being mastered by either, coming up for light and then plunging again back into the darkness. It makes progress by feeling its way along the secret passageways of uncertainty.

Once more with feeling

In the case of Kleist, we saw that dancing leads to blindness, in the case of Diderot's 'Letter' blindness leads to touching. The question of creative practice touches on the problem of haptology. This is more than a literal appreciation of creative practice as a material activity or handcraft. It is far from certain that all creative practice involves a form of physical making. The production of the art object is often the result of a devolved relationship between an artist and a fabricator, or, the result of collective co-creation as in technical demands of filmmaking. Creative practice is not reducible to the final object of study, it is the entire process of thinking, making, and living. In this sense, it is as much a conceptual event as it is a material one. In contemporary art it is increasingly difficult to demarcate the borders between theory, philosophy, history, making, and presentation of an object. One should not so easily assume that creative practice is something you do with your hands, while theory is something you do with your mind. There is a profound materiality at work in writing, from the touch of quill on vellum or pen on paper to the weight of fingers across the digital keyboard or screen. Writing has traditionally been a haptology. However, the question of touch is not merely a material or phenomenological issue.²¹ Rather, touch is a conceptual problem that defines relation. This can be the position of bodies, the topography of material objects, or the arrangement of a conceptual order. Touch in this sense is a Cartesian problem, and so a question that arises from the metaphysical and phenomenological traditions. Touch is above all else a philosophical problem.²² One thought touches on another; one can be touched without physical proximity. Touch involves questions of sensation, comprehension, the sensible, the intelligible, and the intangible. To understand, or to grasp, haptology is to begin to appreciate the impossible relations that define the ways in which theory and practice touch one another, cross over, and coexist.²³ To speak of touching is to problematize profoundly the assumed order of the material and the conceptual and so begin to think through the aporias at the asymptote of theory and practice. Haptology is the word that Derrida gives us to name the discourses of touching; it is what we talk about when we talk about touching. It will be of help to us here as the purpose of our argument is not to offer a typology of ways of making but to think about what we think about when we think about the how theory and practice touch one another. The point of such an inquiry would be to suggest that the visual, plastic and sonic arts are heavily implicated in thought and it is this imbrication that defines the problem of theory-practice.²⁴

A classic study on the problem of art and touching is Herder's *Plastik*.²⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, like Diderot or Rousseau, would be another figure of critical practice, who in writing across a range of idioms combines philosophical reflection with poetic and aesthetic production, once again demonstrating the historical specificity of our own contemporary concern with the disaggregation of theoretical thought and creative practice. Herder's book on sculpture takes Diderot's letter on the blind as its explicit jump-off point, opening with a reference to the observations made in that text. It is an extraordinary meditation on theory and practice that would merit an entire monograph-length commentary on its own. We will have occasion to return to it over the course of this study but for the moment we will reserve our comments for the opening movement of Herder's text, in order to formulate an understanding of critical practice as a haptology without sight, or, a blind discourse of touching.

Herder suggests, following Diderot's anecdote of blind Sauderson, that while sight can understand shapes, touch alone understands bodies. That is to say that sight understands visible surfaces but the sense of touch is required to appreciate form. Sight requires light and is a sense of the daytime, while apprehension through touch is a skill of the blind and is available 24 hours a day. Sight then is a trick of the light, while there is a more profound knowledge at play in the sense of touch. Citing Diderot's account of the blind who have their sight restored only to be confused by an environment of coloured surfaces, Herder suggests that sight in fact should be no more privileged a sense for the interpretation of the physical world than any other. Sight is merely habitual rather than fundamental and relies upon other senses in order to appreciate spatial relations. Touch, for Herder, takes us beyond mere appearance and simulacra, 'an ophthalmite with a thousand eyes but without a hand to touch would remain his entire life in Plato's cave and would never have any *concept* [*eigentlichen Begriff*] of the properties of a physical body' (p. 9). The emphasis on concept here is Herder's, demonstrating the importance of touch to understanding, which is more obvious to speakers of German who move between *griffen* [touching] and *begreifen* [understanding]. The equivalent in English would be the move from prehension to comprehension. Herder asks, 'for what are properties of bodies if not relations to our own body, to our sense of touch?' (p. 36). What emerges very quickly in Herder is an understanding that touch is intimately connected to thought.

In a gesture that can frequently be seen in the modern European tradition of philosophy, he goes on to suggest that animals do not have access to concepts of texture, form, or volume because these are proper to man, 'only human beings have them, because alongside reason we possess a hand that can feel and grasp'

(p. 36).²⁶ For Herder, we could not confirm our own existence without touch and would be lost forever, in dreams and guess-work, 'we would know nothing for certain' (p. 39). There is then in Herder's haptology an understanding that we jump straight from one privileged sense (sight) to another (touch) and touch is merely a substitute for the metaphysics of sight insofar as it re-inscribes all the privileges proper to man and the affirmation of certainty that we find elsewhere in optic-centric discourse. However, while touch may be a privileged sense of phenomenology, there are resources within Herder's text that will allow us to read this tradition against itself. First of all, in recognizing the importance of touch we have acknowledged the incompleteness of sight and already introduce an element of doubt into the normative understanding of seeing as believing. When we take touch seriously we can no longer believe the evidence of our senses, or at least we must begin to relate to those senses differently. Secondly, if the historically privileged sense of sight is no longer to be taken as a metonym for the whole of understanding, then similarly none of the other senses can be adequate to such an ambition. This will complicate Herder's anthropocentric rationalism as we progress through his text. As the French would have it, there is something stupid/beastly [*bête*] about the philosophical categorization of the animal and the human, but that is a whole other book.²⁷ Rather than disappear down that particular rabbit hole, for now we can say that in fact Herder's thesis on touching introduces considerable uncertainty into how we traditionally think of certainty.

For example, Herder notes that while touching leads to conceptualization such knowledge cannot be taught but only acquired through experience. The trial and error of the child in the nursery combines sight and touch to enhance one another and importantly leads to judgement. We might add to that the taking of risk and the assessment of risk on the part of the infant, whereby newly obtained knowledge of the world is risked against fresh encounters with the unknown. For Herder the scene of the nursery is the incubator of the mathematical and physical sciences. What is striking here is that process leads to knowledge through practice but that practice takes place in a realm of uncertainty and that knowledge has to be extended and risked in a process without end. A blind person who uses touch to make sense of the world 'is able to develop concepts of the properties of bodies that are far more complete than those acquired by the sighted ... his method of slowly but surely making out concepts ... is able to judge the form and living presence of things far more subtly than the sighted, from whom everything flees like a shadow' (p. 37). One way of reading Herder's commentary here is as an allegory of critical practice. Once more there are none so blind as those who see. Knowledge is not immediately given by the

instant arrival of what presents itself but is acquired through the slow process of making our way in the dark, reaching out and testing the world around us within an envelope of subtle uncertainty. This knowledge is not the access to an unmediated truth of the universe that the pre-Kantian Kleist yearned for, rather it is criteria for making judgements about the world. The leap from judgement into life is not given by knowledge but occurs as a wager of that knowledge against experience.

Herder goes on to make a distinction between the concepts understood through touch and the ideas that come from the habit of sight, 'the difficult *concepts*, which at first we make out only gradually and with great effort, begin to be accompanied by *ideas* derived from sight. These ideas then illuminate what previously we had understood only obscurely' (p. 37). The knowledge that comes from touch as a process of testing and judgement is not complete and is supplemented by sight. However, sight as habituation requires touch as its 'foundation and guarantor' (p. 38). That is to say, the immediacy of sight as a way of operating in the world is complicated and opened up by touch, in which 'the swift idea proper to seeing runs ahead of the slow concept proper to touching' (p. 38). Travelling at different speeds, sight is out in advance separated from its guarantee, while touch lags behind its confirmation. Sight and touch then assure one another but remain relative to one another and in this gap between the two we are able to take a second look at sight. Sight as habituation is 'but an abbreviated form of touch' (p. 38). That is to say, despite appearances, sight and so living in the world as a sited person, is equally prone to the insecurity of touch as a form of judgement. The illusion of the speed of sight is that 'we believe we see something when in fact we touch it and where only touch is appropriate' (p. 38). For Herder, 'sight gives us *dreams*, touch gives us *truth*'. But this truth is the truth of the blind, the slow process of assessment and judgement, moving gradually and with care through the world, in the absence of an absolute, all-seeing knowledge.

In this schema, sight only has access to surfaces, images, and figures, whereas touch leads us to bodies and forms. Touch and sight, like all concepts used in the arts and sciences, says Herder, are 'fused together' in 'that great confusion we term life' (p. 39) and need to be separated in order to be traced. He suggests, for example, that beauty [*Schönheit*], appearance [*Schein*], and beholding [*Schauen*] are all unquestioned terms in psychology that confuse knowledge with seeing. The metaphysics of immediate presence, the self-identical and so on is derived from this unquestioned privilege given to the rapidity of sight, 'sight is the most artificial, the most philosophical of the senses' but it will never give rise to a 'true phenomenology' (p. 39). Touch may seem ancillary or supplementary to sight

but is in fact its foundation; touch and sight open one another and ruin one another's claims to completeness. This then is not quite the substitution of one privileged sense for another; touch and sight both live in a world of blindness.

Now, all this concerns Herder because his aim is to develop an aesthetic of the plastic arts, and sculpture in particular. He stresses that sight is insufficient on its own because three-dimensional art is categorically different from the surface of a painting, 'a creature that is nothing but an eye, indeed, an Argus with a hundred eyes, may look upon a statue for a hundred years and examine it from every side; but if it is without a hand with which to touch, or at least able to sense its own touching, if it possesses only the eye of a bird and is all beak, gaze, pinion, and claw, it will never have anything more than a bird's-eye view' (p. 40). Herder's metaphors of sight are compelling, from the ophthalmite to an Argus, from the mollusc to the mythic, 360-degree surveillance remains inadequate to experience. Argus was lulled to sleep with spoken charms and then killed by Hermes as he guarded the nymph Io, the first murder of the new generation of gods.²⁸ Sight is the first thing to die when tested against the world, and like Abel watching his flock, death soon follows as knowledge enters into the sacred grove. However, the important moment here in Herder is the qualification of touch itself with the ability to sense one's own touching. Herder may not have visited the Victoria and Albert or the Musée D'Orsay recently but he is fully aware that gallery guards watch the statues like an Argus and tend to take a dim view of visitors touching the artwork. Sculpture is of course viewed from a distance, the difference between a painting and a statue, in the classical sense, is not that we can touch one and not the other, but that one depends upon the sense that it could be touched and understood while the other could not. A blind person might get little out of laying their hands on a Rembrandt. Sculpture need not be touched as such but gives rise to a virtual sense of touch, to a phantom limb that touches. Seeing sculpture doubles the senses by an 'as if' of touching, just as a work of critical practice calls out to read, to be touched by theory. Sense reaches out, virtually, to sculpture and the knowledge and experience of sculpture is in this sense prosthetic, like Kleist's marionettes.²⁹ Touch is doubly estranged and made strange to itself. An experience of the plastic is first an experience of self-touching, of experiencing the ability to touch without touching, knowing touch through not touching.³⁰ It is a touching without origin or telos, a touching that is other to itself.

The reality of self-touching is a virtual corpo-reality, 'consider the lover of art sunk deep in contemplation who circles restlessly around a sculpture. What would he not do to transform his sight into touch, to make his *seeing* into a form

of *touching* that feels in the dark?’ (p. 41). We have moved here from a touching that is blind to a touching that is blind and virtual, ‘his soul speaks to it, not as if his soul sees, but as if it touches, as if it feels’ (p. 41). The ‘as if’ of experience is crucial; sensation is fabricated and simulated. And it is an experience not of the ‘as if’ of sight, that is to say immediacy, but the ‘as if’ of process. The ‘as if’ is what connects phenomenality with fiction and so creation. It is the human capacity to hold simultaneously contradictory positions, which accept both the reality and unreality of a given event. When reading fiction, we accept that it is simultaneously not true and also revealing of a truth, one that as we say is more true than truth itself. Perhaps, a fiction that is stranger than truth, or, one that renders truth strange. The structure of this experience also holds for looking at art, sitting in the theatre or watching a film. However, according to the schema we are deriving here from Herder, art is not an aberrant experience, at a remove from or marginal to the ‘reality’ of the world. Rather, in art we will find a decisive example that pertains for all phenomenality, namely the structure of the ‘as if’, in which we accept the experience we are having as real while we know that it is equally unreal. That is to say, experience of the world is not to touch the world as it is but to experience the world mediated through the fabrication of sense. We might say that sense itself is prosthetic, like Kleist’s green spectacles. It is perhaps not surprising that we can find in Herder a schema that looks more than a little Kantian in orientation. Herder studied with Kant in *Königsberg* and although it was a pre-critical Kant, it would not be difficult to propose a demonstration that showed how the DNA of the *Ding an sich* runs through the whole of Kant and Herder. The ‘*an sich*’ and the ‘as if’ are two idioms of the conditions of possibility that we will find emerging in the shared understanding of the separation of the material and its perception via the senses, which is the very definition of the phenomenological tradition as it emerges from the Kantian *noumenon*.³¹

Let us break from this reading of Herder, really before Herder has even got going in this text. As he opens out his argument he will want to insist on the specificity of sculpture as the presentation of truth in contrast to painting as storytelling and dream. However, in doing so he must always return to sight and to painting as that which both differentiates and completes the plastic. Plasticity is unstable and the terms Herder wants to attribute to it will not hold when constantly opened up and complicated by the visual. Fascinating as this disarticulation of plasticity is by Herder, the point for us here is to identify in the argument a gesture that takes us beyond the assertion that critical practice is a creative blindness. In making this claim, it was important to emphasize that critical practice is not the mere application of knowledge or theory to making

art, which will result in a set of programmed outcomes or privileges 'theory' and 'philosophy' as a meta-discourse of the intelligible over the sensible of artistic affect. Rather, the blindness of critical practice demonstrates the uncertainty that we find before, during and after the creative act as a process of questioning and risking knowledge against an unknown future. In this sense, we might say that critical practice is no different from any other creative process. However, it is important to note the access that critical practice gives us to this structure of epistemological and poetic insecurity. To extend this claim to suggest a relation between the blind writing of theory and practice and the conceptual order of touch, is to identify critical practice as a slow process of judgement and risk that is incomplete within itself but equally guarantees the conditions of an overly hasty, habitualized metaphysics of immediacy in creative acts. In the gap between an artistic technique that races ahead and a critical practice that takes its time, neither of which can operate fully without the other, we will find an exemplary case of the curious conditions of making and creative production.

Blindness is an insufficient condition on its own to lead us forward, touch is required to feel our way through the world, assessing, judging, and risking our inadequate knowledge against what arrives in an obscure and unknown way. In this interminable process, theory is not a map or a privileged model for understanding. Rather, it is one moment in the process of the long dark night of reason and creation, which by turns works its way through what presents itself as what is to be experienced. In this set-up, theory and practice are strange one to another, but cannot hope to progress without combining to complement one another, even if that fusion is also a confusion that complicates both. Equally, in this scenario theory is as strange to itself as practice. Theory is not the wheel and rudder of practice but a blind writing practice that is every bit as haptic as the practical act of making or fabrication. Practice is neither the result of theory applied nor the full actualization of creative force in comparison to the anaemic support of theory. Rather, practice is theory at risk, the ruin of theory as well as its guarantor. Practice requires theory to proceed; as it touches what confronts it, theory is in the very fingertips of practice. However, critical practice is prosthetic, it is a touching that recognizes its ability to touch even if touching as such remains postponed or distant. Critical practice can no more grasp the nettle to assume mastery of the event than any other idiom of knowing. Rather, critical practice works in and with the aporias that open around the problems of knowing and creating, holding them in the productive tension of the 'as if'. Critical practice acts as if it were possible to create and as if it were possible to know, while simultaneously retaining a hold on the creative knowledge that both are equally impossible. Critical practice is a phantom limb that sculpts or writes,

its touch is as irresistible as it is unattainable, and in that asymptote there lies the infinite possibility of a caress that completes but never arrives.

Plastic arts

There can be no future without creativity, and no creativity without a future. Following these accounts of Cixous and Herder, blindness and touching, this hypothesis will require a little unpacking. In order to do so I would like to turn from Herder's understanding of *plastik* to Catherine Malabou's extraordinary reading of Hegel in her *L'Avenir de Hegel*, translated into English as *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*.³² 'L'Avenir', however, is not straightforwardly mapped on to 'Future', there is a conceptual shortfall in that translation, something fails to come from the French.³³ Nevertheless, we have in Malabou's account of Hegel a rich resource for the consideration of creativity in relation to her privileged Hegelian term, plasticity. *Plastik* is the German word for sculpture but it also flexible in its meaning as it stretches across idioms and languages:

Plasticity characterizes the art of 'modelling' and, in the first instance, the art of sculpture. The plastic arts are those whose central aim is the articulation and development of forms; among these are counted architecture, drawing and painting. Hence, by extension, plasticity signifies the general aptitude for development, the power to be moulded by one's culture, by education. (p. 8)

It is then an elastic term that denotes suppleness and flexibility, meaning the ability to evolve and adapt; accordingly, we sometimes speak of the 'plastic virtue' of living things, notably plants and animals. In this sense the art of modelling does not just concern the imposition of a set standard or prototype to be copied or followed as a method. Rather, this modelling may include the exact opposite of such a systematic approach, suggesting instead the ways in which the model is changed and evolves as it comes into contact with an exterior environment.³⁴ Model in English refers to both that which is copied and the copy itself, further complicating the routes by which adaptation and evolution can be furthered. However, while plastic is malleable, in its classical sense, says Malabou, 'things that are plastic preserve their shape, as does the marble in a statue: once given a configuration, it is unable to recover its initial form. 'Plastic', thus, designates those things that lend themselves to being formed while resisting *deformation*' (p. 9).

Malabou's work on plasticity is highly suggestive and will provoke us into further thinking here. However, it is a line of thought that I can only follow so far for reasons that will emerge as we shadow the contours of Malabou's text.

While a statue cannot return to its original state as a marble block, it can easily be disfigured, and modern plastics subjected to sufficient heat can be deformed out of all recognition. That the principle of formation is subject to the pull and resistance to deformation is not in doubt. What is at stake is the elasticity of plastic as a concept, how far can it be stretched before it can no longer snap back into its original shape? With formation comes deformation that in turn launches new figures and disfigurements.³⁵ My issue with this use of plasticity is that ultimately the term may be inadequate to the work that Malabou needs it to do as she tries to fit a quart into a pint pot. A pint pot, even a plastic one, might be a grand thing on its own but it is not the only utensil in the kitchen and understanding creativity might finally require us to stretch beyond plasticity. However, Malabou is of course a sensitive reader of the terms of plasticity, also recognizing that in the modern sense plastic also names a type of explosive made from nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose. In other words, plastic is a term that implies its own opposites, both the concrete making of shapes and the annihilation of all form. As she will say in a memorable phrase, plasticity ‘explodes its own reserves’ (p. 187).

For Malabou, in her account of Hegel, the idea of plasticity is closely associated with the accidental. She suggests that the dialectical process is ‘plastic’ because it unfolds and makes links, while plasticity is dialectical because it involves the merger of antinomies, emergence, and explosion, seizure of form and the annihilation of form. At this point we would do well to flag a warning with respect to the dialectic as a plastic process. There might be nothing less flexible than the dialectic in its scientific form, nothing more set in its ways and resistant to change.³⁶ Equally, if the dialectic is malleable then it is because the dialectical process contains within itself something fundamentally undialectizable, which escapes and opens up the dialectic. I would want to retain this as an irreducible principle of the experience of art and of the making of art, which cannot be easily mapped onto any dialectical pattern or model. Plasticity as a concept will have to bear this in mind if it is to succeed, just as the dialectic will need to take on new forms if it is to operate in the sense that Malabou requires it to. Nevertheless, she turns in these pages to the *Science of Logic* and to the *Phenomenology* as touch points in her consideration of Hegel in order to connect plasticity with temporality and the dialectic ‘as nothing less than the *formation* of the future itself’ (p. 12). She writes:

Plasticity characterizes the relation between substance and accidents. Now the Greek word συμβεβηχός, ‘accident’, derives from the verb συμβαίνειν which

means at the same time to follow from, to ensure and to arrive, to happen. Thereby it can designate continuation in both senses of the word, as consequence, that is, 'what follows' in the logical sense, and as event, that is, 'what follows' in a chronological sense. Self-determination is thus the relation of substance to that which happens'. (p. 12)

Accordingly, Malabou maintains that the future, as it appears in Hegelian thought, is the relation which subjectivity maintains with the accidental. Malabou has previously run the trope of plasticity through Hegel's use of the term in relation to his consideration of 'exemplary identities' in Greek philosophy, in which particularity and universality meet in the form of exemplary thinkers. Let us work with Malabou's definition of terms here for the moment to see how this question of plasticity might play out and be of interest to us in this current investigation. However, it is also necessary to note that the exemplary is no more exemplary than any other example and to pick up Hegel's terminology here could be leading us to a foreclosure that we might not be willing to make with respect to creative practices. Despite this, it will be important to welcome a consideration of contingency in relation to creativity.

The core of Malabou's argument plays out in the paragraphs that follow, 'the dialectical composition of such concepts as 'the future' [*l'avenir*], 'plasticity', and 'temporality' forms the *anticipatory structure* operating within subjectivity itself as Hegel conceived it' (p. 13). In order to distinguish this structure from the future [*futur*] as it is normally understood, Malabou gives it the name '*le voir venir*', which her translator Lisabeth During economically renders as 'to see (what is) coming'. In French '*voir venir*' means to wait to see what is going to happen, observing with care what is about to unfold, with the suggestion of guessing or probing the intentions of others. It can be used, according to context, to express both knowing what is to come and not knowing what is about to happen. Accordingly, Malabou has Frenchified Hegel so that 'to see (what is) coming' can suggest the relation between 'teleological necessity and surprise' (p. 13). At this point in Malabou's own thinking she is only considering plasticity in relation to the text of Hegel, she has yet to roll it out towards her later extended consideration of neuroscience, medicine, and trauma.³⁷ For the moment then she convinces with the suggestion that if we follow this term through the Hegelian corpus then we will find it as a decisive concept that is varied and extended to enable the turns of his thinking: 'plasticity is, therefore, the point around which all the transformations of Hegelian thought revolve, the centre of its metamorphoses' (p. 13). What follows is an inventive and inspiring

reading of Hegel. However, this is not a book about Hegel, or at least not straightforwardly a book that might be considered Hegelian. Our concern here is with the question of creativity and in particular its relation to the borders of philosophical inquiry where idiom gives way to genre and in turn is opened by other practices. This would seem to be a distinctly plastic space in which new forms are made and disfigured. The moments of creativity that press themselves upon us here are those in which we make the attempt to see what is coming and to fail to see it as it arrives from another place. Theory-Practice is the double attempt to see ourselves see what is coming. This is a sight that would seek to see around corners or to see ourselves seeing into the future.³⁸ It involves this relation between teleological necessity and accident that Malabou characterizes in Hegel as *le 'voir venir'* but importantly it must also exceed it.

Later in the thesis Malabou returns to this question of 'plastic individuality' as it arises from Hegel's understanding of identity in ancient Greece. Concluding the first section of the book she observes that 'the 'becoming essential of the accident' describes the Greek moment of subjectivity, as interpreted by Hegel' (p. 75). This is worth reflecting on for a moment, in so far as the Greek moment of subjectivity is the hinge that takes us from *mythos* to *philos*, from fable to theory. The gesture in Malabou as it is in Hegel is to identify subjectivity with a lack of substance, the human is not a question of the material animal but of ideas and of spirit. 'Human subjectivity is constituted in self-forgetting; consciousness and will, under the influence of repeated practice, win their force through a kind of self-absenting. When man makes his entrance into the speculative narrative he does so in the guise of a farewell [*adieu*]' (p. 75) says Malabou of Hegel. Accordingly, if creativity is an expression of subjectivity then it is also not a question of substance. We might say, adopting a certain Hegel, that creativity has no substance. Rather, subjectivity is constituted precisely in acts such as creative practice, and 'repeated practice' at that, in which consciousness and will absent themselves. We have never suggested that creative practice is a matter of consciousness or the realization of intention. If the human enters the world of *philos* on the basis of self-effacement, then it is not straightforward to separate this valediction from the acts of self-forgetting that come with the experience of creative practice. Even more so, then, the question of theory-practice presents us with a double entry into a speculative narrative that finds its resources in those creative experiences in which the self is confounded by the self, or, to borrow from Malabou, the self bids farewell to the self. In the next chapter, we will suggest the ways in which this key aspect of creativity plays out as a relation to the other and the other as a mode of creativity itself, including the wholly other

of automation and death. For the moment, I would like to work with Malabou's understanding of plasticity as central to the anticipatory structure of this self-effacement of subjectivity. She offers a definition of the two powers of plasticity:

Plasticity is a name for the originary unity of acting and being acted upon, of spontaneity and receptivity. A medium for the differentiation of opposites, plasticity holds the extremes together in their reciprocal action, enabling the function of a structure of anticipation where the three terms of the temporal process are articulated: the originary synthesis, the hypothesis or embodiment of the spiritual, the relation of the moments of time. The meaning of the notion of plasticity is what it is, plastic. Indeed, the originary operation of receiving and giving form is not a rigid and fixed structure but an instance which can evolve, which means that it can give itself new forms. The temporal differentiation of plasticity makes possible the historical deployment of the substance-subject. (p. 186)

Theory-practice would seem then to be a plastic art on Malabou's terms, in which *poesis* and *philos* are held together according to the force of their reciprocal actions, critical and creative, in which the theory and practice both act and are acted upon by each other. Importantly in Malabou's reading of Hegel this gives rise to a temporal process as the operation of the dialectic. In this sense, theory-practice as a plastic art would be fundamentally anticipatory. That is to say it looked to the future, or as we might translate the French, it looks to what comes, evolving and developing as that arrival takes unknown and unpredictable forms. It is this arrangement of a temporal structure that allows plasticity to realize the valedictory subjectivity of Hegel's humanism. However, if as we suggested that the possibility of this dialectical structuration rested upon a necessarily undialectizable element, that which the system was forced to expel or could not digest, then we might say that something must fall outside this temporal assembly.³⁹ That is to say, that plasticity like the dialectic was unable to close itself in a complete refusal of deformation. There would remain some element of theory-practice or the plastic arts in general that was not so much anti-plastic, for this could easily be recuperated within the dialectic, but spastic in time with respect to the plasticity of the dialectic. It is not so much a question of in-between-ness as being trapped in no-space, insofar as that space cannot be coordinated in relation to temporality. The time is out of joint, as Hamlet would say.⁴⁰ The resistance to plasticity would no doubt be an important part of the formal elasticity of the plastic, and plasticity does not just present itself as the name of the dialectic but as a deformation of the dialectic within Hegel.

However, what remains indigestible to the dialectic must equally remain anterior to plasticity. This is that moment, to give it a temporal designation, of unknowing or blindness we have identified as irreducible in creative practice.

Malabou concludes her study with the provocative formulation of a mode of 'plastic reading':

The Hegelian idea of plastic reading confers on the notion of 'to see (what is) coming' its real meaning. 'To see (what is) coming' denotes at once the visibility and the invisibility of whatever comes. The future is not the absolutely invisible, a subject of pure transcendence objecting to any anticipation at all, to any knowledge, to any speech. Nor is the future the absolutely visible, an object clearly and absolutely foreseen. It frustrates any anticipation by its precipitation, its power to surprise. 'To see (what is) coming' thus means to see without seeing – await without awaiting – a future which is neither present to the gaze nor hidden from it. Now isn't this situation of 'in-between' *par excellence* the situation of reading? (p. 184)

We have established that problems of reading and the challenges of Theory-Practice are one and the same, that is reading in the sense of a creative, inaugural event that discovers a text as of the first time. The question here will be whether Malabou's understanding of reading is sufficient to an account of the demands of Theory-Practice. In truth, Malabou's thought here is little more than a move that allows her to thematize her own study of Hegel. While the difficulty in reading Hegel 'is caused by the seeming impossibility of making any headway since from the outset we would need to carve out a beginning allowing us both to foresee and not to see what follows' (p. 184). Malabou has a happy fall, the accident and contingency, of alighting on the term plastic. This then allows her the foothold to make progress through the text of Hegel by her inventive re-inscription of plasticity within the dialectical schema. However, when in her closing remarks Malabou attempts to mobilize plasticity beyond the text of Hegel she immediately hits a snag.

In the final section, entitled, '*le voir venir*', she comments on the resistance to the dialectic to be found in philosophy and modern life, of which my comments above might be a good example. But she is referring explicitly to a hypothesis on the end of history that is both surprising and unsurprising to find in these closing paragraphs written in 1996.⁴¹ She notes that the arrangement of the two modes of 'to see (what is) to come', the teleological and the alienated, determines 'the future of those creatures who no longer have time ahead of themselves, who live out a teleology which is shattered because already accomplished. Such a future is both beautiful and terrible. Beautiful because everything can still

happen. Terrible, because everything has already happened' (p. 192). It is odd to think that for all its resources the plasticity of Malabou has only managed to place us, if not, close to Kojève then in some sort of time loop in which we live, die and repeat, as a future within closure, like the death drive of a demented computer game. She goes on to describe this contradictory temporal flop as the relation between '*saturation* and *vacancy*', the philosophical tradition reaching completion and the uncontested victory of capitalism, that simultaneously leaves no room for progress and is felt as a vacuum. Malabou is teetering on the brink of at best a historically specific reading at worst an intellectual collapse in these final pages as if the effort of reading Hegel has wrought a terrible price. On the one hand, she suggests that this vacuum and the promise of unemployment it brings, both for the citizen and the philosopher, is also 'a promise of novelty, a promise that there are forms of life which must be invented' (p. 192). On the other hand, she is prepared to go the full Hegel, as a true believer rather than a critical reader, and entertain, 'the possibility of a closed system to welcome new phenomena, all the while transforming itself, is what appears as plasticity ... the process by which a contingent event, or accident, touches at the heart of the system, and, in the same breath, changes itself into one of the system's essential elements' (p. 193). That is to say the future is always folded back within the dialectic, the loop is closed, and accident or contingency cannot escape the order it confronts. This would be the death of creativity, the necrotic sclerosis of plasticity that is always successful in refusing deformation. Malabou can see this but suggests that the coexistence of the plane of saturation and vacancy, in which the formation of forms is in alliance with the *Plastikbombe* [atomic bomb] 'is what the future requires' (p. 193). She concludes that 'the philosophy of Hegel invites us to enter into the serenity and the peril of the Sunday of life'.⁴² This is a challenging thought that following Malabou's stimulating reading of the Hegelian text we ought to take seriously. However, it ultimately fails to satisfy, not because one longs and hopes for an escape that might not be available to us, but because this shocking final section of Malabou's book performs the very hypothesis she seems to reject in these paragraphs. Namely, on her terms this surprising turn in Malabou's argument should be capable of incorporation into her thesis as an essential element of her thought on plasticity. Instead, these lines, open up the entire argument of the preceding chapters, giving us to question not the elasticity of the plastic but its necroid form, and to ask that whether in her reading of Hegel, Malabou has not finally succumbed to a certain Hegelianism that she ought to unpick. In contrast to Malabou's formulation here, I would insist on the unforeseen, that which sight does not see, that must remain outside

of the dialectic. It is the very openness of the dialect, its incapacity to close, which makes its action necessary. On its own terms, the dialectic is a death machine, without the possibility of escape, hybridity, or transformation worthy of the name. It is the failure of the dialectic that makes the dialectic possible. If plasticity is just another form of enclosure and death then it is not what the future requires but what the future must dissolve. The future lies not in a loop of vacuum, fabrication, and incorporation, but in what falls out of the dialectic and is irreconcilable with it. This is the moment of creativity, spastic in time and space, a wedge that prevents the automatic sliding door of the dialectic from sealing us into the Sunday of life. The door will bang continually against this small block but it cannot close us in.

If this is what the future of Hegel ultimately means then surely this plastic is junk. What is the value of plasticity if the moment it is put to use beyond philosophy it becomes toxic? Isn't the point of plastic that it is non-biodegradable and lasts forever? Is the future of Hegel to be trapped in the Sunday of life forever as the plastic debris piles up around us, polluting planetary life and leaving the subject like a Beckett character on a landfill site as dusk settles on the last Sunday? As a preface to *L'Avenir de Hegel*, Jacques Derrida provides an extended reading of Malabou's thesis. It is ostensibly a peon of praise for his pupil, but read carefully it is also a considered critique of the foreclosures in Malabou's thought, which are apparent in this Hegel book and are amplified in her later writing. Derrida is keen to signal in Malabou's work 'a certain non-empiricist idea of contingency or of a certain responsible empiricism with renewed radicality' (pp. xi–xii) around a commitment to the becoming essential of accident and the simultaneous becoming accident of essence. There is also an acceptance, familiar to readers of Derrida, that while there would be no more history without the future, without the possibility of absolute surprise, equally there would be no future and no novelty without a link to history, tradition, retention and synthesis: this synthesis has already claimed the future anterior and the 'to see (what is) coming' of anticipation, it has already called for the teleological structure which must dampen surprise itself or novelty in order to make it possible: as if it were a surprise *without surprise*' (xiii). This doubleness is the two antithetical forms of the plastic and the plasticity of these two contradictory forms that is totally germane to art as a plastic artificiality or the synthesis of that other plastic matter that is living form. We might even add that theory-practice also performs the double powers of plasticity, synthesizing *philos* and *techne*, both plastic idioms of configuration that when mixed together produce an unstable compound capable of blowing up the entire field. At this point Derrida would seem to remain close to Malabou.

However, and to cut to the chase, Derrida's future is not the same as that of Malabou, and in reading Malabou he goes beyond her in thinking this future. He notes, as if he were following Malabou's reading of Hegel, that 'the strategy does not consist here in simply demonstrating that the future has the place that we often deny it *in* Hegel's philosophy'. In this sense, Malabou would seem at least to wish to exceed Kojève. But at this point the pronomial form of Derrida's writing shifts a gear and rather than noting what Malabou has to say around Hegel, he notes 'we will attempt to think *differently* – to think *otherwise* – a certain radicality of the future' (p. xxix). The word to emphasize here is the *nous*, as the argument of Derrida's introduction begins to drift away from the text that furnished its occasion:

Otherwise: that is to say, and such is the radicality of the 'farewell' or the 'adieu,' a different radicality or a radicality otherwise more radical than a simple 'moment of time'. The future, *what is yet to come in the future*, is not simply reducible to what is *imminent* in the future, and this very difference reveals plasticity itself, the condition also for there to be some kind of sense in speaking, as we have been from the beginning, of a 'history of the future.' (p. xxix)

At this point Derrida remains on Malabou's tail, quoting with approval her positing of 'the future as 'plasticity', amounts to *displacing* the established definition of the future as a *moment in time*' (p. 5). For Derrida it is important to 'abandon' this sense of the future as a tense. He notes 'let us underline the word 'abandonment', which immediately follows the above quoted passage in the text, and let us underline this word because it says something of what is done or of what passes in and with the 'farewell', that is, a certain kind of desertion, of abandonment, of aban-donation' (p. xxx). This is a curious sentence because while Derrida will make considerable play of the *adieu* as abandonment, including the desertion of and by God [*à dieu*] the word does not appear 'immediately' after these quoted lines in the text of Malabou. Indeed, immediately after this sentence, Derrida quotes the next and immediate lines from Malabou in which 'abandonment' is nowhere to be found. Instead Malabou speaks of 'renouncing' well known and familiar meanings of the future. And in introducing these lines of Malabou, Derrida persists with the *nous* of 'if we could say'. Derrida's text seems to be taking on a life of its own in which he is inhabiting the text of Malabou, 'owning it' as we say in the modern vernacular, while simultaneously abandoning it. Something has fallen out of Malabou's text, the term 'abandonment' and fallen into Derrida's pages. It emerges without reason and with surprise as Derrida opens up some distance between himself and the text he reads by rewriting that

text, inserting words in it that do not exist. While Derrida abandons, Malabou renounces, the classic logic of the master and student.

At this point, while Derrida continues to co-sign and co-counter-sign the text of Hegel with Malabou through the pronomial *nous*, he also takes his leave of Malabou. He bids her farewell by upping the ante around the '*adieu*'. In a few pages it will allow him to introduce into his admiring account of plasticity his own term that will stretch plasticity to breaking point. This is another mode of farewell, namely 'mourning'. Derrida writes:

Is there not some sort of plasticity of mourning? This plasticity, would it not consist in saying farewell to itself while always giving and receiving for itself yet another form, while always interiorizing, incorporating, *sublating*, idealizing, spiritualizing that which we abandon or which abandons us? The dialectical would be this plastic of mourning – or of melancholy, of the pathologies and of the 'folly' which the Hegelian problematic so carefully and remarkably interrogated from the first chapter of this book. Let us radicalize the theme in following the *motif of mourning* (a word which, as long as I remember, is not present in this book but which haunts it in so far as this book is also, thematically, a book on death and even on the death of God). May we not say that all plasticity is engaged or involved in some sort of mourning, in a mournful experience or a work of mourning, and to begin with the very one which divides and opposes to itself the expression 'to see (what is) coming'? And when it fails to recall, or to bring back, within Sameness, when it falls short of interiorizing, of assimilating (etc.), the other, the 'uncontrollable', remember, the 'inevitable', the 'unsteadiness', the question of the 'Absolute Other', then the failure of this work of mourning would urge to leave, *abandon* (see above), to salute with a certain farewell or *adieu*, and hence *to mourn mourning itself*. (pp. xxxix–xl)

Derrida proposes another temporality to the dialectic, the work of mourning, one that also incorporates and sublates but which is never complete. There is no Sunday, no day of rest, in the life of mourning. It is not accidental that the work of mourning plays such a significant role in Derrida's book on Marx.⁴³ The work of mourning is work, it is labour, it is the ongoing response to the task of interiorization and working through that characterizes bereavement but also intellectual labour. The work of mourning could equally describe the process of manipulation and sorting that identifies creative practice. In this sense, Theory-Practice would be a double mourning, a double labour, which worked through its material in a pincer movement across the abyss that separates these two idioms of mourning. If there is 'some sort of plasticity of mourning' it would

suggest not only the flexibility of mourning as a mode of encountering thought and the world, its endless openness to new ways of working, but also that plasticity would in some way be mournful. The suppleness of plastic requires it to be worked, in order for it to have some play, to give way and to flex under the pressure of manipulation. A mournful plasticity would be one that risked falling into a state of depressive rest, unable to move as it became set in its ways. However, it would also be a plasticity that had to work hard to keep going, to face the future through the labour of dealing with the past. Derrida suggests, 'the dialectical would be this plastic of mourning.' That is to say, a plasticity that had been worked over and through – a melancholy pathology as a perpetual work of mourning, unable to close itself off and unwilling to let itself go. Its task would be to keep the memory alive, not just of a past now lived but of the future. Keeping alive the memory of the future would be truly to reckon with the history of the future.

This is where Derrida exceeds Malabou, by radicalizing plasticity, stretching it beyond itself, through the work of mourning (a word that is not present in Malabou's book). Derrida's response to Malabou is to outflank her by abandoning plasticity to mourning, mourning the failure of plasticity, its limits and its forms, in favour of an alternative dialectical play. Derrida reclaims the 'to see (what is) coming' as an idiom of mourning, the work that abandons while carrying within itself the remains of the other, but which cannot be assimilated. And this is key for Derrida, mourning cannot bring back the other to Sameness, successfully interiorize or fully assimilate it. Something always remains, that is the lesson of Derrida's own reading of Absolute Knowledge in *Glas*.⁴⁴ Consequently, mourning fails and its work is the labour of its inevitable failure, which would then call for an abandonment (again Derrida picks up his own insertion and invention here) of mourning itself in a half-finished state, a ruin of ruins. Such an existence would indeed be a melancholy pathology for some, but in contrast to the Sunday of life, this will get us through to Monday when we can start the working week all over again. We might say that mourning bids its own farewell to plasticity, or to a certain plasticity at least, offering no closure to that impulse within plasticity that resists deformation. Insofar as it insists on the remainder, mourning puts a bomb under plasticity, blowing the doors off of dialectical enclosure. To mourn mourning itself, or, abandoning the work of mourning is impossible, or to welcome death. It is a question of multiple farewells, says Derrida, 'one renounces the future, the other hopes or promises' (p. xi). Renouncing and abandoning are, as we have established, not necessarily the same thing. However, the more this

other promise of the future is guaranteed or underwritten, the more it becomes a calculation of the imminent and so a betrayal and loss of the future. Hope then must be the structuration that keeps alive the memory of the future as that which escapes the dialectical foreclosure of plasticity. While plasticity looks to the future it in fact finds nothing to be hoped for there.

Let me cut short this reading around Derrida and Malabou, before Derrida continues on his way to discuss the *adieu* as a farewell to God and a God that says farewell to the future. The accidental death of God is a fascinating topic but not the subject of our current enterprise. Rather, the importance of Malabou's magisterial study of Hegel to the question of creativity is the resources it gives us to think the problems of Theory-Practice as a double plastic form, one that shapes and detonates. However, it is also a form of work that resists closure, something irreducible always remains that requires us to renounce if not abandon the possibility of completion. The work of critical practice is important because it keeps alive the memory of a future for both theory and practice, or multiple futures in which theory and practice compel themselves into states other than themselves. One can make plastic in the kitchen out of vinegar and milk treated with a little heat. The vinegar curdles the warm milk releasing casein plastic that can then be formed and dried out to set. Whether theory is the vinegar that curdles the warm milk of practice or vice versa it is hard to say. Perhaps, the plasticity of Theory-Practice is more like the celluloid that screens and burns if subject to a hot bulb, dissolving in its projection, leaving a residue that clogs and scolds as it bids farewell to its own illusion of the momentary play of shadows.