



Marcus Steinweg

## Inconsistency Clouds

For Jiří Georg Dokoupil

### L'Immensité

The French language has a noun that in German hardly works as a noun, but rather as an adjective: L'immensité. Immensity (das Immense) is not widely used, but one speaks of immense presence or immense effort without resistance. Gustave Courbet has titled a famous painting from 1869 L'immensité. It shows what can only be shown but not depicted: infinity. Immensité, the immensity, marks what is beyond all measure. It is related to the incommensurable, which names the immeasurable, the lack of a common scale of two or more variables. Immense and incommensurable are words that point to gigantic proportions, which can just as well be monstrously small and minimal. Within this vocabulary, we naturally move on the trail of the sublime. Now it suggests itself to move it into a horizon of immanence without alternatives, thus situating it where, by definition, it no longer has the right to stay or to exist. Courbet's painterly materialism (which anticipated much of what Michel Foucault pointed out in Manet's work: the playing out of the signifier, the canvas, the oil paint in terms of their material substance, etc.) rises to this precise challenge, marking one of the most pressing problems of contemporary philosophy: How to save infinity under the conditions of increased finiteness? How to think of immensity and infinity in the context of their de-sublimation and de-theologization? And finally, how to prevent the horizon of a radical materialism from having a relapse into idealism by not evading the question of its consistency or inconsistency?

### Critical Affirmation

Friedrich Hebbel claimed that "the work of art [...] loses all value," when the artist "tries to infuse it with a reconciliation with the human condition and with states of the world in general."<sup>1</sup> The fact that irreconcilability is part of an artwork does not mean that it is exhausted by negativity, by the pathos of the critical or by scathing defensiveness. Refraining from resentment and victimization is immanent to art. Art's attacking character expresses itself in a readiness for offensive combat and with the courage to affirm the incommensurable. Fully immersed into world affairs and in full confrontation with the aporetics of human existence, the artwork is an arena for controversial humor. In all great works of art, laughing at the futility of our constructions of meaning triumphs over the critical remorse of those who fancy themselves as victims of their reality. Therefore, Theodor W. Adorno could imagine the compossibility of reconciliation and irreconcilability. This is where dialectic begins in the first place: With the critical interconnection of both terms. Just like Hebbel, Adorno has no intention to join a dialectic of reconciliation that is connotated (rightly or not) by Hegel's absolute idealism and whose function lies in a reactionary arrangement with world history: "The reconciled condition would not

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Hebbel, *Tagebücher (Diaries) 1843-1847*, Band 2 (Volume 2), (Munich 1984), p. 326. (translated by SE)

Untitled - 2013-2015

Soap-lye and pigments on canvas

145 x 115 cm - 57 1/8" x 45 1/4"

annex the alien, with philosophical imperialism. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the nearness it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own."<sup>2</sup> The irreconcilable reconciliation suggested by Adorno—and in his own way also by Hebbel—is an affirmation of the distant and the different as an incommensurable scale, which, by not being identifiable, marks the non-identical as the truth of our condition and our world.

### Restless Relation

In the section titled Aesthetics of Ignorance (Ästhetik des Nichtwissens) in Martin Seel's *Active Passivity* (2014), the author follows Adorno's concept of "the determination of the indeterminate" in order to proclaim the "celebration of uncertainty" as the "telos of all aesthetic perception."<sup>3</sup> Without a doubt, he has the right to include uncertainty and ignorance in the experiential content of an artwork as well as in aesthetic reflection. Adorno's formula interlaces the dimensions of belief and uncertainty, of the known and the unknown, of the determinate and the indeterminate. Everything is about capturing the character of this interconnection. One can speak of dialectic, if it remains a negative dialectic that fails a final synthesis. It is a dialectic of tension and restlessness, which makes the interrelated poles wear each other out. The indeterminate is threatened by the determinate, and vice versa. It is this mutual threat that vitalizes the two dimensions. They are what they are, but in contentious exchange with their opposite. The progressive streak of this restless relation is measured by precisely this restlessness, which also means that artistic thinking, as well as aesthetic reflection, must escape at least these two quietisms: the obscurantism of ignorance and the obscurantism of knowledge. There is no full knowledge, as there isn't total ignorance. What we call art is nothing but the resistance to this dual obscurantism. Therefore, the expression of the "celebration of ignorance" is misleading. Neither ignorance nor knowledge are being celebrated, if it can be referred to as celebration at all. In works of art, the impossibility of choosing one over the other is expressed by hierarchizing their relationship. The work of art is the arena for elemental restlessness and resistance. If there is something to celebrate, it is this impossibility. Art is art by self-refusal. Art refuses itself to obscurantism, quietism and dialectical synthesis. And with that, art refrains from celebration and self-celebration. Art is rather what takes a sober look at realities that are concealed from art's sight. One can speak of a certain coldness of the gaze, or of precise excess, or "controlled insanity."<sup>4</sup> The artwork constitutes the scene of the subject's self-transgression. The artwork intersects reflection and profection, analysis and passion, intellect and emotion, criticism and affirmation. The poles keep activating each other. Only in their polemical interconnection and reciprocal provocation is there a chance of art.

### Acceleration

Nietzsche has recognized the indestructible variant of idealism in the belief in the "petits faits": "Seeing what is—that belongs to another species of spirit, an anti-artistic, factual one."<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche does not say that artists are in contact with a deeper truth. Daring to claim this would be nothing but a questionable

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Seel, *Aktive Passivität. Über den Spielraum des Denkens, Handelns und anderer Künste*, (*Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom*), (Frankfurt on the Main 2014), p. 102ff. (translated by SE)

<sup>4</sup> See Heiner Müller, *Theater ist kontrollierter Wahnsinn. Ein Reader*, (*Theatre is Controlled Insanity. A Reader*), (Berlin 2015). (translated by SE)

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols: And Other Writings*, (Cambridge University Press), 2005, p. 195.

romantic view of artists. Nietzsche says that artistic production includes the questioning of all factual imperatives. Their function is to stabilize an idealism that we call realism. If art is good for anything, then it's for destabilizing any phantasms that make the texture of our reality appear consistent. Art is the affirmation of its instability and contingency. Artistic production includes the risk of unsecured moves, the courage to refrain from one's own possibilities and the risk of doing what you can not do. Therefore, to this day, in a time when everyone makes the best effort to deprive art of being art and to free themselves from the ideology of the aesthetic—different kinds of art are reproached from different sides for a lack of seriousness. Strictly speaking, artists are accused of accelerating beyond the usual requirements. They are accused of speeding, which makes everyone who abides by the speed limit look foolish. There is a word for feeling embarrassed for being left behind: resentment.

### Bonds

The relationship between art and criticism is an expression of tension and difference. It is also a sibling-like relationship, because art that eludes acute evidences by converting them to their arbitrariness implies a critical consciousness as well as an awareness of the critical and its limits. At the same time, criticism takes out a problematic loan in the arts for being credibly critical, rather than just staging the critical. But criticism itself has to be art if this means taking speculative bonds in an uncertain future. "As long as criticism has not turned itself into an art to match other arts, it will not cease to be mean, biased, unjust and undignified,"<sup>6</sup> Rilke once wrote. Criticism is only critical if it is self-critical, which implies a kind of active self-destabilization. Its judgment is hanging over a myriad of blind hypotheses. Criticism only exists as a blind practice based on a fluctuating mortgage.

### Flying

Thinking includes flying. Kant already knew that, but for him this was nothing but an issue of concern. The Critique of Pure Reason (1781/87) bans human reason from flying by teaching to fly in a different way. To fly or to think differently: It amounts to the same thing. It's about flying or thinking under new conditions, under the conditions of a subject affirming its sensuality. The subject must not fall into the dogmatism of pre-critical thinking. It experiences itself as dependent on forms of intuition of space and time. Dependence on one's own receptivity is one thing, but independency within the meaning of a hyperbolic or speculative opening up to the indeterminate is something else.

### Bursting

With the bursting of the soap bubbles, our dreams, hopes, and illusions burst—but that's what is called our reality. It would be naive to believe that our realities were not soap bubbles. These realities have the beauty and fragility and seductiveness of soap bubbles. This does not mean that they have no consistency and are nothing but chimeras. They are flying spheres, floating clouds, dwindling worlds, gliding balls. Neither are they docked on solid reasons, nor are they making metaphor of a kind of heavenly or divine consistency. They are inconsistency clouds that only know time and space, no earth, no sky. Dreamscapes arising from our reason. But this is a kind of reason that can fly.

<sup>6</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Florentine Diary*. (translated by SE)