

## Architecture or art?

Esther Leslie's sour dismissal of the wrapping of the Reichstag by Christo and Jeanne-Claude (*RP 77*) contains a number of doubtful and contradictory arguments. Permission to wrap the building required a parliamentary vote; approval was by 295 votes to 226. This democratic act by an institution of the state is interpreted, in the article's concluding flourish, as 'a spectacular act of state power-mongering', the wrapped building 'in effect, a gift to the German state'. Whatever the limitations of postwar European bourgeois democracy, to interpret a discussion and a vote as if it were the impersonal act of an unaccountable arm of the state is to falsify actual political process. Nor is it clear how 'the state' can at once arbitrate power ('power-mongering') and make a gift to itself.

Leslie's critique of the architectural briefs for a new Reichstag advocating physical transparency (use of glass), in order to 'reflect' the supposed openness of German democracy runs into difficulties when set beside the wrapping of the existing building. If transparency is ideological, wrapping must in some way differ or even be its opposite. The difficulty is evaded by arguing that wrapping generates 'an illusion of glassy translucency'. This halfway house between concealment and transparency is unsatisfactory. It also contradicts Leslie's view that the wrapped building's night-time look of 'immateriality and translucency' is 'a fraud'. If apparent translucency is a fraud, then the fact that spectators could not, in practice, see through the 'high-strength [and] fire-retarding' material means that the wrapped building was truly opaque. The use of transparent glass for the projected building and the wrapping of the present one are different acts – the difference between architecture and art, in fact. The political meaning of the glass Reichstag will be different from that of the wrapped one. Leslie's attempt to show that the wrapped Reichstag 'prefigures' a glass one, as if they were roughly the same thing, is a clear failure.

The argument that the wrapped Reichstag was 'commodified' by the appearance of an advertisement for beer showing a wrapped bottle and glass, etc., fails; that is properly called appropriation. Wrapping suggests a parcel, but this parcel could not be sold, and could not be taken away. Esther Leslie draws attention to Christo's neo-Dadaist origins, then underestimates the critical humour of the movement.

The wrapping, she says, was 'a simulated disappearance', and 'an erasing and bandaging', a 'swallowing up of the exterior'. In each case she finds a political meaning unintended by Christo and Jeanne-Claude: disappearance means the 'erosion of historical memory', bandaging 'suggests the restorative act of unification', whilst swallowing up leaves 'an empty canvas' on which the state can project a revisionist history. We would argue that the act of wrapping is a witty and transgressive act that satirizes the pretensions of the building. To see its essential structure is not to eliminate its history. As to the un- or anti-democratic legislative acts that took place at the Reichstag, the wrapping can be seen as an act of restraining; a refusal and a negation of the authoritative meanings spoken by the building's usual appearance. Now that it is unwrapped, it will never speak those meanings in the same way again.

Whatever the politics, machinations and hypocrisies of the wrapping, this was a joyful event for millions, participating or not. The building was walked, cycled and promenaded around. The wrapping material was touched with curiosity. Thousands of photographs were taken. This was a family affair, a two-week picnic during which the sun shone on the fabric and balloons flew. Berlin Turks could be seen sitting on blankets in front of their barbecues. Leslie's article does not convey the spirit, the fun and the wonderment of this art object. The wrapping of the Reichstag made a suitable farewell to two old Germanies, the BRD and the DDR.

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# War between philosophy and art

As a regular reader of *Radical Philosophy* since the time of its inception and 'an artist who also writes', I feel impelled to make some response to your first article to engage seriously with the relationship between philosophy and contemporary art. The publication of Jay Bernstein's Slade School lecture, 'The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism' (*RP* 76), is a matter for celebration and congratulation. There are no themes more important than those this article invokes, and it is a delight to read because of the way these thematic elements are set out, one against the other, so as to establish areas of common ground between conventionally opposed positions, such as those of T.J. Clark and Clement Greenberg. However, aside from the great complexity and delicacy of the philosophical issues involved, the article's tonality or mode of address presents a methodological obstacle to the establishment of a framework within which an adequate dialogue between philosophers and artists can take place.

This tonality is typical of a very considerable category of theoretical writing about art, and it indexes an anxious and half-hidden contempt for the physical practice of art as well as for the intellectual competence of persons engaged in it. It detracts importantly from the value of the analyses of cultural critics of the highest distinction, such as Adorno or T.J. Clark. Though accessible in the first degree as a more stylistic inflection, its effects penetrate to the core of their treatment of the larger philosophical issues involved. It is, on the other hand, absent from the work of an art theorist such as Arthur Danto, who takes seriously the existence of an operational state of *warfare* between philosophy and art which dates back to their earliest recorded encounters.

There is a general exclusion of knowledge about contemporary art from university curricula today, and an exclusion of artists from the spheres of intellectual influence. Yet there is a massive contradiction at work here. For Rorty has well characterized ours as 'an historical epoch dominated by Greek ocular metaphors', and it is difficult to name any philosopher who does not somewhere rely upon presuppositions about the perception of shape and colour which the practice and history of painting call into question.

*RP* 76 also contains (coincidentally) John Armitage's review of Martin Jay's book *Downcast Eyes*. This suggests the very real danger that philosophers are moving sideways into a serious debate about ocularcentrism and its critiques, without taking adequate account of artists' writings and the history of the documentation of artists' opinions in this field. An operational hierarchy reduces the status of the artist to that of a mere specimen or, at best, a provider of data for competent epistemologists. Its operation is baneful because it draws a theoretically unwarrantable distinction between the activities of philosophizing *about* art and philosophizing *in* art.

The ideology of an irremediable split between a *veritas logica* and a *veritas aesthetica* seems to be demonstrable, in the first instance, by reference to an immense body of theory about art which is not intended and does not deserve to be taken seriously by scholars in other fields. However, I would maintain that this split is the result of a classical process of reification. When, for example, Bernstein (following T.J. Clark) transfers his critique of the 'petty-bourgeois vulgarity' of the *commodification* of abstract expressionism to an alleged 'tackiness and kitsch' in the canvases themselves, he vulgarizes his own argument inexcusably.

The acknowledged poor quality of much 'in house' art theorizing cannot be used to justify the even poorer quality of the lemmatic substructure which is habitually brought to bear on these same issues in 'respectable' academic milieux. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have at their disposal dependable expertise in every field of human endeavour *except* that of the visual arts, where their ignorance is not merely abysmal but also totally unaware of itself *as* a field of constructive ignorance.

Clerisy combines subjective contempt for the individual artist with a grotesquely exaggerated awe for 'art' in its hypostatized form, with the result that artists are systematically trained to regard

themselves with more or less irony both as a curious type of trickster/artisan and as candidates for transcendental glory. It is a mistake to treat this as a mere problem of petty-bourgeois consciousness. It is more a matter of the *big-bourgeoisie's* use of art to legitimate its own claim to divine or spiritual sanction. It is in the interests of both artists and philosophers to trade-in this ridiculous divinity-claim against the advantage of being heard in those sectors of the polis where their experience might usefully apply. Within such a regime, practice in the arts would emerge as naturally contiguous to philosophy and sociology. I have long had the sense that a latent acknowledgement of this relationship informs the policy of your journal.

Bernstein's text has no interest in establishing this common ground. Its air of patronizing contempt for *praxis* comes out in its final dismissal of its question, 'Where might art go from here[?]: *who cares?*' (my emphasis). Yet this outcropping of a warlike intentionality is revealed as incoherent when placed alongside the more habitual 'art should...' injunctive tonality which is common to Bernstein, Adorno, Clark and many others. They *do* care where art goes and they care very much. Despite its other excellent qualities, Bernstein's intervention represents a veritable *trahison des clercs*.

**Jeffrey Steele**

## Frank significance

Theresa Orozco, and her translator, Jason Gaiger, conspire on p. 25 of her piece on Gadamer's 'philosophical interventions under National Socialism' (RP 78) to convey a wholly misleading impression of Manfred Frank's view of hermeneutics, let alone of his politics. Given Frank's exemplary record of intervention in German politics in the name of preventing any return to the horrors of the past, I think one should set the record straight, especially on a topic as sensitive as this.

Orozco cites Heidegger on the highly questionable idea of interpreting the 'secret doctrine' of Plato, and uses remarks by Frank from his *Stil in der Philosophie* as though they back up what Heidegger is saying. She sees Frank's position as implying an interpretative elite who 'imagine themselves to be among the select few who stand in the presence of a truth which can never be grasped discursively'. Although Heidegger does play a – very selective – role in Frank's broader discussion, the passage cited from Frank actually refers to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, Kierkegaard and Kafka, and not to Heidegger at all. The distortion is made even worse by Gaiger's wrong translation of the passage. What Frank in fact says about the *Tractatus* is that 'What "shows" itself in the propositions of philosophy, but cannot be "said", and therefore really stays silent – can yet stay silent in a *significant [bedeutsam]* manner' (my emphasis). Gaiger, for whatever reasons, translates this last phrase as 'can always remain silent *profoundly*' (my emphasis), thereby suggesting a wholly erroneous link to elitist notions of 'depth', etc.

Frank's concern is actually with those literary aspects of texts which are clearly significant (rather as music is significant), but which cannot be grasped merely in terms of an analysis of the meaning of the propositions of the text. Exactly analogous positions are to be found in Schleiermacher, Adorno and other thoroughly non-irrationalist thinkers. The attempt to turn this position into something analogous to the worst aspects of Heidegger's and Gadamer's hermeneutics in relation to Nazism is not just absurd, but betrays precisely the hermeneutic characteristics which the author is concerned to unmask in Gadamer's interpretations of Plato in the Nazi period.

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### The British Society for Ethical Theory

A new British Society for Ethical Theory was inaugurated at a conference at Keele on 28 March this year. Originally called the British Society for Metaethics, the Society arose as an electronic mailing list with around fifty members. The society seeks to promote ethical theory in Britain and to foster contact among members of the ethics research community, in the first instance by organizing conferences, at least annually.

Further information and membership application forms may be obtained from the secretary,  
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