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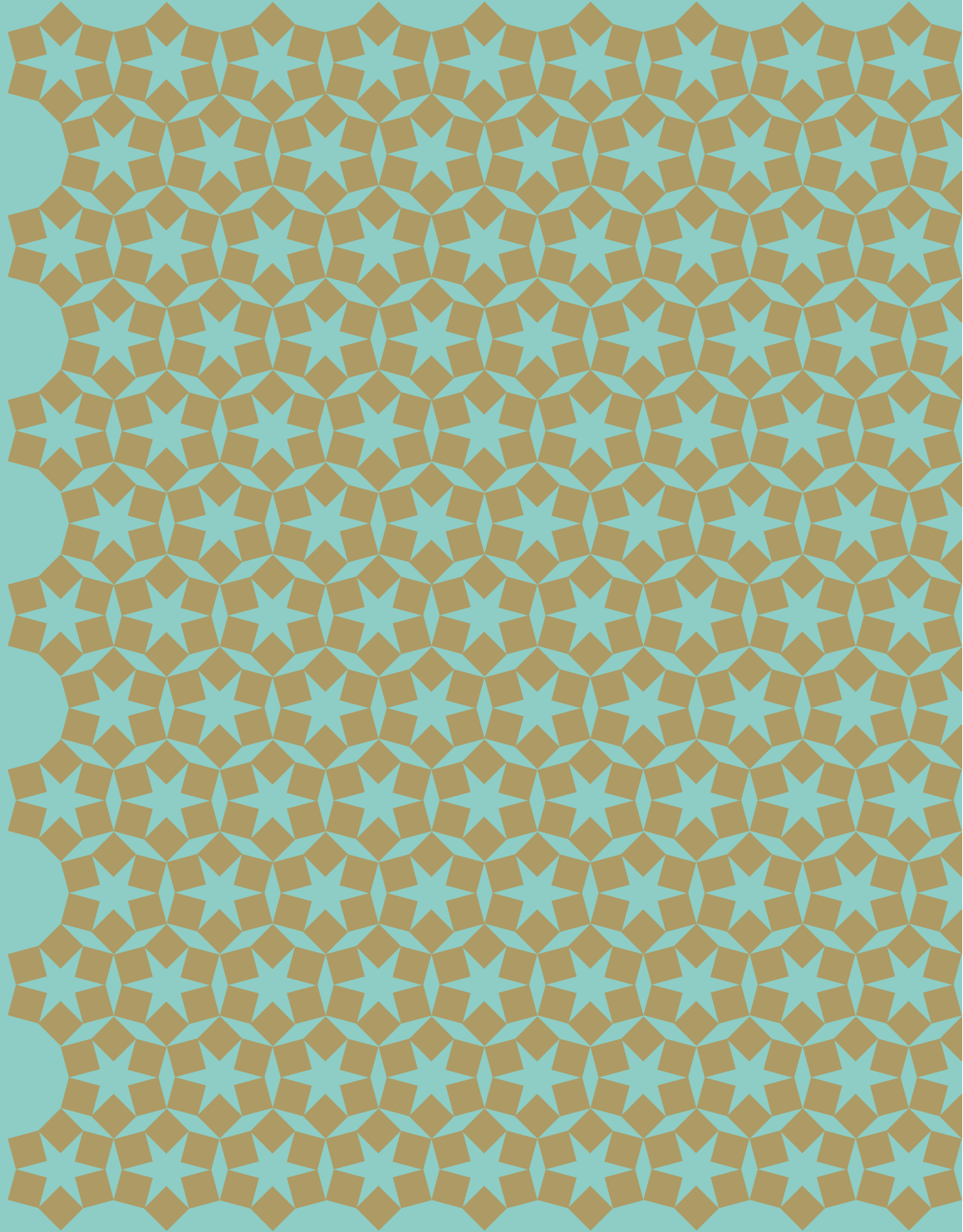


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In Response to Bernard Stiegler: A Pharmacological Avant-Garde

Authors

Aesthetics Seminar Group, Colm Desmond, Jeanette Doyle, Cathy O'Carroll, Elizabeth Matthews, Néill O'Dwyer, Mick O'Hara, and Connell Vaughan



In Response to Bernard Stiegler: A Pharmacological Avant-Garde Aesthetics Seminar Group—*Colm Desmond, Jeanette Doyle, Cathy O’Carroll, Elizabeth Matthews, Néill O’Dwyer, Mick O’Hara, Connell Vaughan* In this paper, motivated by Bernard Stiegler’s recent interaction with the Aesthetics Seminar Group, we seek to explore the potential of the avant-garde as pharmakon. From Stiegler’s response to the question, “what is the legacy of deconstruction?” it is evident that the trajectories that contemporary art has taken are at stake in new articulations of the avant-garde. As he claims, “in aesthetics is the question of conceptual art and materiality or immateriality and performance precisely... for aesthetics these questions are extremely important particularly for what is called contemporary art.”¹ In the interview conducted with Stiegler, he calls for “a new

1. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

concept of critique". Central to this, Stiegler seeks to "re-invent" Derridean deconstruction in terms of what he calls "grammatization".

We need a new concept of critique which is not at all grammatological critique but a grammatized critique and a critique of grammatization, a historical critique.²

2. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

Derrida used "grammatology" as a means of critical investigation into the origins of language with a view to destabilise the primacy of speech over writing. Grammatology, as a precursor to deconstruction, initiates a mode of critical analysis that marks the interplay between speech and writing, presence and absence, interiority and exteriority, etc.³ For Derrida, the difference between deconstruction and other concepts of critique is the recognition of an essential contamination that excludes the possibility of a pure distinction or any pure critique.

3. Derrida's term *differance* conditions that which is deferred, that which is different, acting as a hinge between speech and writing, between the interior and exterior.

A central aspect of this deconstructive approach to critique is Derrida's use of the *pharmakon*. Derrida uses the *pharmakon* to demonstrate the "beneficent" and "maleficent" double-nature of writing in relation to memory (this marks a shift from grammatology to deconstruction). Stiegler's appropriation of the *pharmakon* builds upon Derrida's use of it in "Plato's Pharmacy":

Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence.⁴

4. See Derrida, J. 'Plato's Pharmacy,' *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 61-172.

Stiegler's mobilisation of the *pharmakon* is marked by his appeal to its "beneficent" or curative aspect, which contrasts with Derrida's apparent focus on its poisonous or "maleficent" facet. In particular, Stiegler mobilises critique as *pharmakon* in his approach to art and aesthetic experience. A maleficent aspect of the *pharmakon*, unexplored by Derrida, in Stiegler's words, is a "bad articulation to economy"⁵ manifest in the appropriation of experience by the culture industry.

5. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

More widely for Stiegler, human consciousness is constituted pharmacologically through technical prostheses and the industrialization of both technics and time marks a fundamental modification of human relations to the world. This position is historically visible in a first

"mechanical turn of sensibility"⁶ that leads to the proletarianisation of sensibility; a loss of individuation, of "savoir-faire" and "savoir-vivre". However, this first turn constitutes a shift in aesthetic experience as a result of the relationship between production and reproducibility that initiates the possibility of the empowered amateur and de-proletarianisation.

Crucially, for Stiegler, grammatology is a structure, whereas grammatisation is a process. By such a conception of critique, Stiegler argues for a process fundamentally more critical than what he calls a "logocentric"⁷ grammatology. Grammatization is productive of critique and a central component of this is the process of "discretisation". Stiegler uses this term to describe the process whereby a given object is broken down into discontinuous component parts, for example the digital image. Stiegler then mobilises the digital more broadly as a *pharmakon* of the twenty-first century, in so far as it has the potential to enable creative forms of individuation or obversely, proletarianisation.

6. Stiegler, B. 'The Proletarianization of Sensibility,' *Lana Turner Journal* 4 (2011), <http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/archives/prolsensiestiegler>.

Elsewhere, and in a related manner, Stiegler deploys this approach to critique in the field of aesthetic practice through his mobilization of the term *avant-garde*:

I understand the potential of creative territories: as the possibility of an *avant-garde* territory, that is, an area capable of inventing a new cultural, social, economic and political model, of offering prefigurations of alternative "lines of flight" to those of a consumerist society that has now reached exhaustion.⁸

In response to the question of the relationship and practice of aesthetics and deconstruction, Stiegler expands upon these possible 'lines of flight'/'circuits of thought' as follows:

I believe that today we must articulate aesthetics and deconstruction into a critique of aesthetics and deconstruction in the political point of view and in an economical point of view. I believe that we have the same problem with deconstruction and arts which is the articulation to politics, a bad articulation to economy. I say a bad one, because we don't have a good critique of speculation.⁹

7. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

8. 'Stiegler, B. 'The Age of De-proletarianisation,' *ArtFutures: Current Issues in Higher Arts Education*, (Amsterdam: ELIA, 2010), 13-14.

This pharmacological approach raises questions about the relationship between Stiegler's conceptions of critique and *avant-garde* theory and

9. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

practice. Why does Stiegler posit the territory of the avant-garde as a redemptive milieu? Can the avant-garde be mobilized as an exemplar of a *pharmacological* critique? These questions will be the central focus of the rest of this paper.

The subject of the avant-garde and its competing definitions has provoked varied and often polemical views by philosophers of art and different artistic movements with regard to its life-cycle, meaning and social significance. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was the first to use the term “avant-garde” in a non-military sense. For him it referred to the role of men of imagination in the context of a Socialist revolution.

It is we artists who will serve as your vanguard; the power of the arts is indeed most immediate and the quickest. We possess arms of all kinds: when we want to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them upon marble or upon a canvas.¹⁰

Surrealism, as an example of an avant-garde movement, was famously defined as “Dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral pre-occupation.”¹¹ From these two definitions we can see the avant-garde framed in terms of both vanguard and resistance to totalizing logic. Beyond these frames, the avant-garde has also been described in terms of collective action through political agitation, inevitable exhaustion through commercial co-option, ‘the shock of the new’, publicity and self-declaration, and criticising art through art practice.

Another example of the avant-garde, the Situationist International, recognised the performative dilemma for avant-garde praxis. Through the concepts of “recuperation” and “decomposition”, the avant-garde offered a useful way to understand why an emphasis on critique can be dangerous. Recuperation is an inevitable process whereby radical images are assimilated into mainstream culture. The effect of this is decomposition, whereby any challenge to the existing status quo is “smothered” by consumerist logic. “Recuperation... implies both recovery and expropriation, doubleness perhaps reminiscent of Derrida’s reading of the platonic pharmakon...”¹² Art, for Stiegler is always linked with technical oeuvres and experimentalism and it is the domain of the avant-garde to produce new ‘circuits of thought’. The value of Stiegler’s approach is that each of these features of the avant-garde

can be subjected to a pharmacological analysis, which entails an emphasis on the curative aspects of a potential poison.

Central to Stiegler’s conception of the *pharmakon* in relation to the avant-garde is the problem presented by the advent of the digital.

Like writing, and according to Plato’s word, the digital is a *pharmakon*, that is, at once a poison, a remedy and a scapegoat. Only the digital itself, insofar as it can be a remedy, enables an effective struggle against the poison which it also is, and this is without doubt a key to the 21st century.¹³

A maleficent aspect of the digital is that it offers an illusion of individual choice but in fact determines the mass adoption of identical objects “whose goal is to subdivide and tribalise [communities] into sub-communities through devices that can observe the behaviour of the programmed consumers.”¹⁴ Furthermore, a hyper-consumerist economy erodes individuation as it dissipates what Stiegler calls the “pre-individual fund”, the resource of accumulated experience of previous generations. Cultural consumerism, recuperation and speculation are symptoms, leading to a liquidation of desire and destruction of aesthetic experience.

Equally, for Stiegler, the deployment of new digital technologies which cultivate aesthetic control and conditioning, mark the possible site of resistance and potentially new beneficent forms of individuation. Symptoms of this positive *pharmakon* coincide with a second “mechanical turn of sensibility” brought into effect through increasingly accessible and iterative digital technologies. The second turn constitutes a shift in aesthetic experience as a result of the creative possibilities of digital technics. This approach to the digital is an exemplar of the *pharmakon*.

In *our* epoch, and contrary to what occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, we are experiencing the *de-professionalisation* of instruments, their migration toward non-professionals, the re-instrumentation of the public, and the re-arming of *amateurs* [...]. The *mechanical re-organisation of perception* taking place with the *digital* leads to the reconstitution of forms of knowledge held by audiences and publics. There thus comes to be formed a new *avant-garde*: one that constitutes *new publics*.¹⁵

10. Saint-Simon, H. de, 'L'Artiste, le savant et l'industriel,' *Œuvres complètes de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin*, volume 10 (Paris : E. Dentu, 1867), 210.

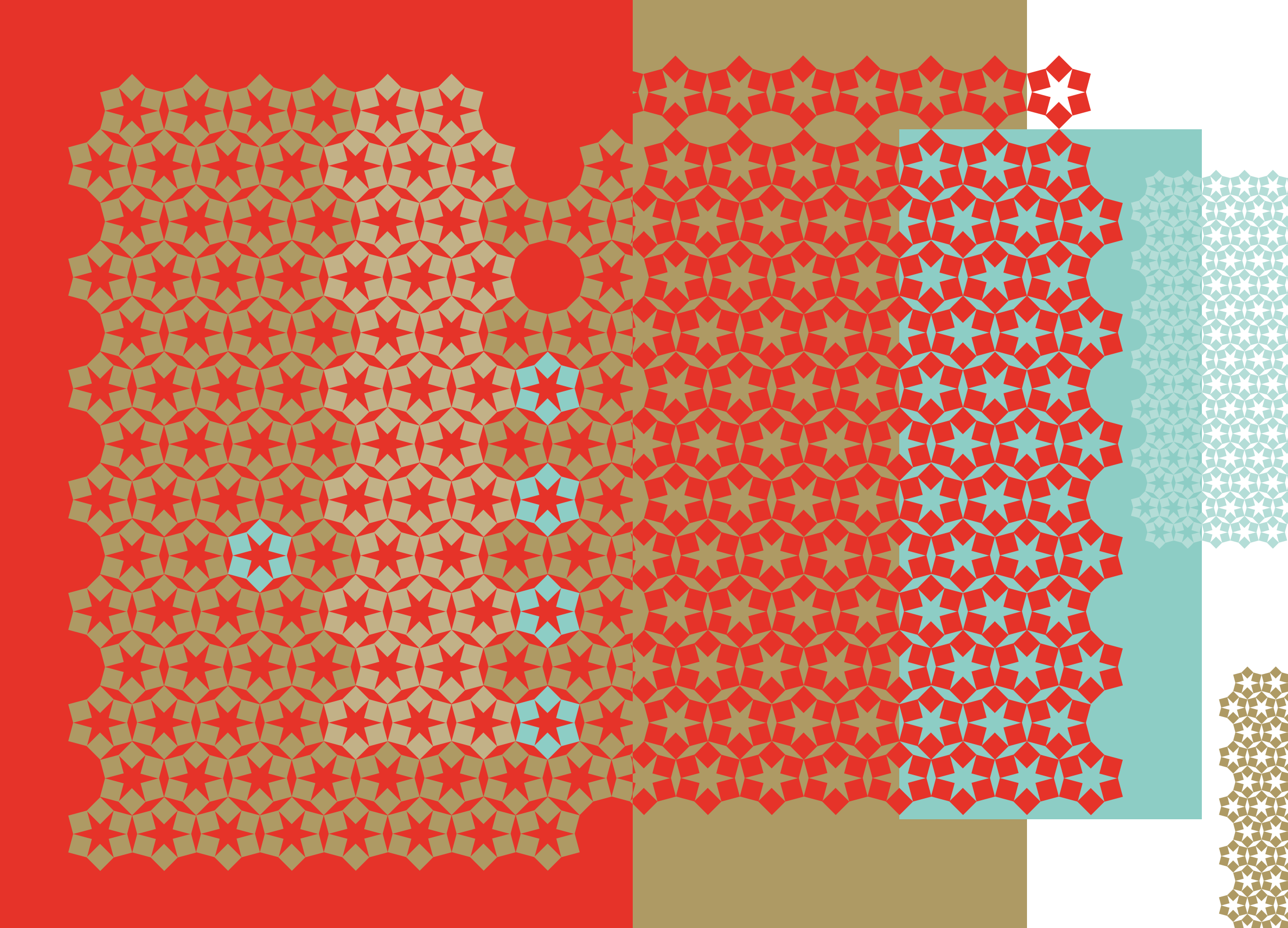
11. Breton, A. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

12. Mann, P. *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 14.

13. Stiegler, 'The Age of De-proletarianisation,' 19.

14. Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 4.

15. Stiegler, 'The Age



Equally, the avant-garde as a concept is rich enough to permit a pharmacological critique, be it in terms of collective action through political agitation, inevitable exhaustion through commercial co-option, or otherwise. Such features can be posited as both beneficent and maleficent aspects of the avant-garde as *pharmakon*. The avant-garde, at its most potent, provides a critical alternative to the problems that arise out of contemporary culture and to the institutional framework of bourgeois society.

In the words of Peter Bürger: “the intention of the avant-gardiste may be defined as the attempt to direct toward the practical, the aesthetic experience (which rebels against the praxis of life) that aestheticism developed.”¹⁶ For Stiegler, like Bürger, the value and the benefit of the avant-garde lie in its reclamation of aesthetic experience in terms of the everyday. “[t]his *everydayness* that creativity always trans-figures into something *improbable*, that is, into something singular and as such *extra-ordinary*.”¹⁷ This is an attempt to redeem aesthetic experience from a hyper-consumerist and profoundly segregationist model.

16. Bürger, P. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 34.

17. Stiegler, 'The Age of De-proletarianisation,' 12.

Avant-gardiste redemption is conceived in terms of reclamation of the mystery at the heart of aesthetic experience. In light of this, Stiegler’s process of grammatization, as a mode of critique, seeks to rehabilitate existing accounts of aesthetic experience in terms of the *pharmakon*.

Plato’s *essence*, Kant’s *transcendental*, the object of Freud’s desire: all of these come from such a mystery. All of these are the extraordinary that a narrow-minded rationalism thinks it can and must eliminate. The excuse being that the extra-ordinary is indeed always *also—but not only*—the reign of simulators.¹⁸

18. Stiegler, 'The Proletarianization of Sensibility,' 9.

The positive *pharmakon* wrests attentional territory from a dis-individuated aesthetic experience in the service of the cultural industry and hyper-consumerism. This is made possible through a “de-professionalization of instruments”¹⁹ in the field of avant-garde practice as witnessed in the digital. A characteristic of avant-garde movements is that, via praxis, they tend to transcend the confines of art and culture and bleed into the extraneous substance of daily life. For Stiegler, the creation of cultural territories “... only makes sense on the condition that this territory

19. Stiegler, 'The Age of De-proletarianisation,' 18.

becomes an avant-garde territory—on the condition that it rediscovers the question of the avant-garde.²⁰ The term ‘avant-garde’, given its co-option, has to be treated in this redemptive manner. For Stiegler it is imperative that the term and concept ‘avant-garde’ be maintained because it is part of the circuit of trans-individuation. By trans-individuation Stiegler refers to a process of accessing collective or pre-individual ‘funds’ ranged across time to generate new non-market driven educational and cultural practices. Maintaining the term ‘avant-garde’ enables critical reflection upon our and preceding epochs. Art is always linked with politics and needs to be reworked over time. Both are answerable to collective trans-individuation and the artist and artwork are key to this process which is a general organology. This concept of ‘organology’ describes not only physiological organs but ‘technical’ organs as well as articulating forms of transmission and social organisation.

As Stiegler seeks to embrace the concept of critique in the relationship of deconstruction and aesthetics, with his focus on grammatization, how does he avoid historical problems associated with concepts of the avant-garde? An inevitable fact when invoking the term ‘avant-garde’ is that it has been the subject of disinterment and redefinition. Given the stigma concerning the term ‘avant-garde’, Paul Mann, for example, frames and understands the avant-garde to have opened the assertion that it is thoroughly dead: “Nothing could appear more exhausted than its theory, its history, [and] its works.”²¹ Stiegler’s pharmacological mobilisation of the avant-garde potentially refocuses the dialectical deadlock imposed upon what may be understood as a process of perpetual remedy and poison, via concepts of ‘*therapia*’.

20. Ibid. 15

Therapia rebalances the toxic levels of dis-individuated grammatization—*Sola dosis facit venenum*; the dose alone makes the poison. For Stiegler, critique performs a therapeutics of the *pharmakon* from which “one can invent a new form of autonomy.”²² Stiegler posits a ‘politics of memory’ through therapeutic practices by re-appropriating and re-composing critical discourses on aesthetics in order to invoke a rejuvenated conception of the avant-garde. He calls for an art of therapeutics evoking the spirits of both Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Beuys to whom he attributes an awakening

21. Mann, *The Theory-death of the Avant-garde*, 3.

22. Roberts, Ben, Jeremy Gilbert and Mark Hayward, 'Bernard Stiegler: A Rational Theory Of Miracles: On Pharmacology And Transindividuation,' *New Formations* 77

(Spring 2013), 171. of the possibility of a new politics of aesthetic experience. Stiegler sees the scandal of Duchamp's *Fountain* as representative of the first turn of mechanical sensibility, whereby industrial reproductive techniques eliminate the mystery vital to aesthetic experience. "It is only within such a turn that an event as extra-ordinary as *Fountain* can come about."²³

23. Stiegler, 'The Proletarianization of Sensibility,' 15.

24. *Ibid.* 4. A second turn has emerged through the ubiquity of digital technologies whereby individuation is made possible by "captivation, postproduction, indexation, diffusion, and promotion."²⁴ The evocation of Duchamp and Beuys, in the context of these two turns of mechanical sensibility, is framed by his concept of the amateur.

Stiegler values Duchamp's reflection on his epoch as an exemplar of trans-individuation. Duchamp's reflections/scandals have become reworked and reinterpreted through long circuits through consistent reflection. "To see a work by showing what it makes us do [...] initiates a circuit of transindividuation (of the formation of an epoch), yet it must also be remembered that such circuits can take a very long time to develop."²⁵

25. Stiegler, 'The Age of De-proletarianisation,' 17.

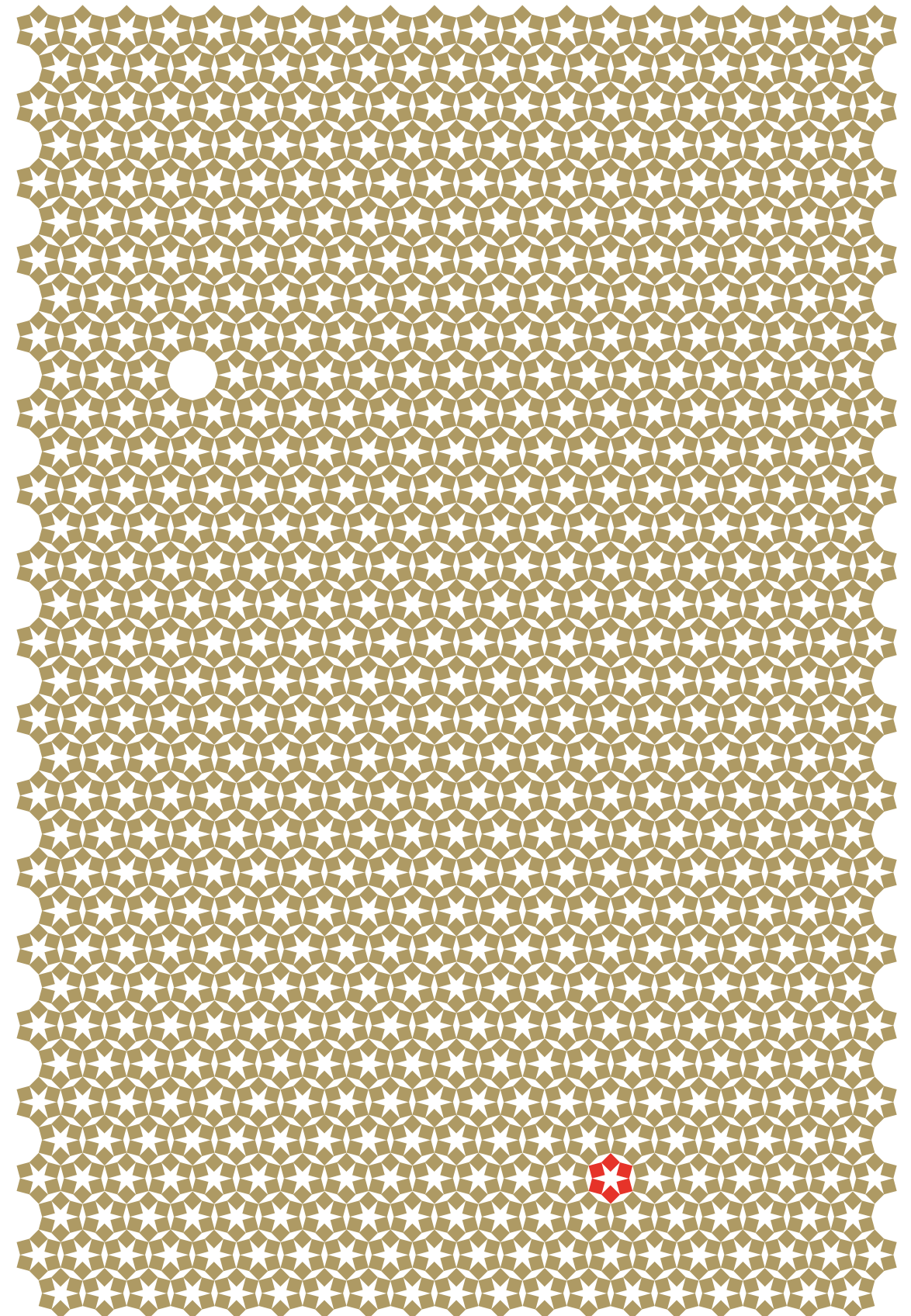
In the aftermath of a scandal there is an effect of interruption eventually resulting in collective individuation/trans-individuation which constitutes an epoch.

In Stiegler's terms the destruction of desire and love leads to the negation of scandal in contemporary art. Evidence of the loss of faith is the failure of art to produce scandal.

If it is true that today the adjective "contemporary" means *without scandal*. There used to be a time of the scandal: a time when transgression *produced* a scandal. But this is no longer the case—it's as if there no longer were any possibilities for transgression, as if one could no longer expect anything from transgression. Or from a mystery. As if there no longer was a mystery.²⁶

26. Stiegler, 'The Proletarianization of Sensibility,'

27. *Ibid.* Here the role of aesthetic elevation is reiterated in relation to practices that originate in resistance to it. Considered pharmacologically the term



avant-garde retains notions of both collapse and elevation, but elevation experienced communally and at a temporal distance from the original work. Stiegler employs the amateur as a figure transformed by aesthetic experience. This transformation, considered pharmacologically, can enable individuation or dis-individuation. Dis-individuation is constituted through uncritical absorption into the culture industry. For Stiegler, individuation is inseparable from co-individuation. This connection means that meaningful political engagement is essential to positive aesthetic experience. Throughout the twentieth century, the development of technologies of what Walter Benjamin calls “mechanical reproducibility” leads to a generalised regression of the psychomotive knowledges that were characteristic of art amateurs.²⁸

28. Ibid, 3.

Stiegler expands on a positive *pharmakon* of the amateur by focusing on the etymology of the term (“amat,” from the Latin verb “amare,” “to love”), the practice of good repetition and true understanding. The art amateur loves art and through this is individuated by the work. Any work of art, to be called a work of art, must engender belief in the viewer, “the work of art only works as art to the extent that one believes in it.”²⁹ This aesthetic judgement is a state of belief necessarily shared with a community or received independently as an idea which is always “[...] intrinsically doubtful and improbable, unprovable”³⁰ and maintains the mystery vital to aesthetic experience. Such belief is motivating, giving rise to action and hence capable of instigating social change. Within this space of pharmacological thinking, Stiegler targets aesthetics as a means to develop a new articulation of deconstruction, where aesthetics is re-thought through technics and made manifest through new considerations of the amateur and avant-garde.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid, 10.

In response, Stiegler sees the potential for a new politics of aesthetic experience through a new concept of the art amateur as an economic actor. This actor is situated in a “new mechanical turn of sensibility,”³¹ the digital. Arising from the emergence of the digital is the possibility of a rebirth of the figure of the amateur. This possibility for individuation, through the reconstitution of desire, enable a positive “libidinal economy” that allows production of singularities based on desire as opposed to drives. In this

31. Ibid, 4.

economy, unlike the dominant economy of mechanical reproducibility and hyper-consumerist co-opting of the avant-garde, individuation and desire are co-generative and transductive.

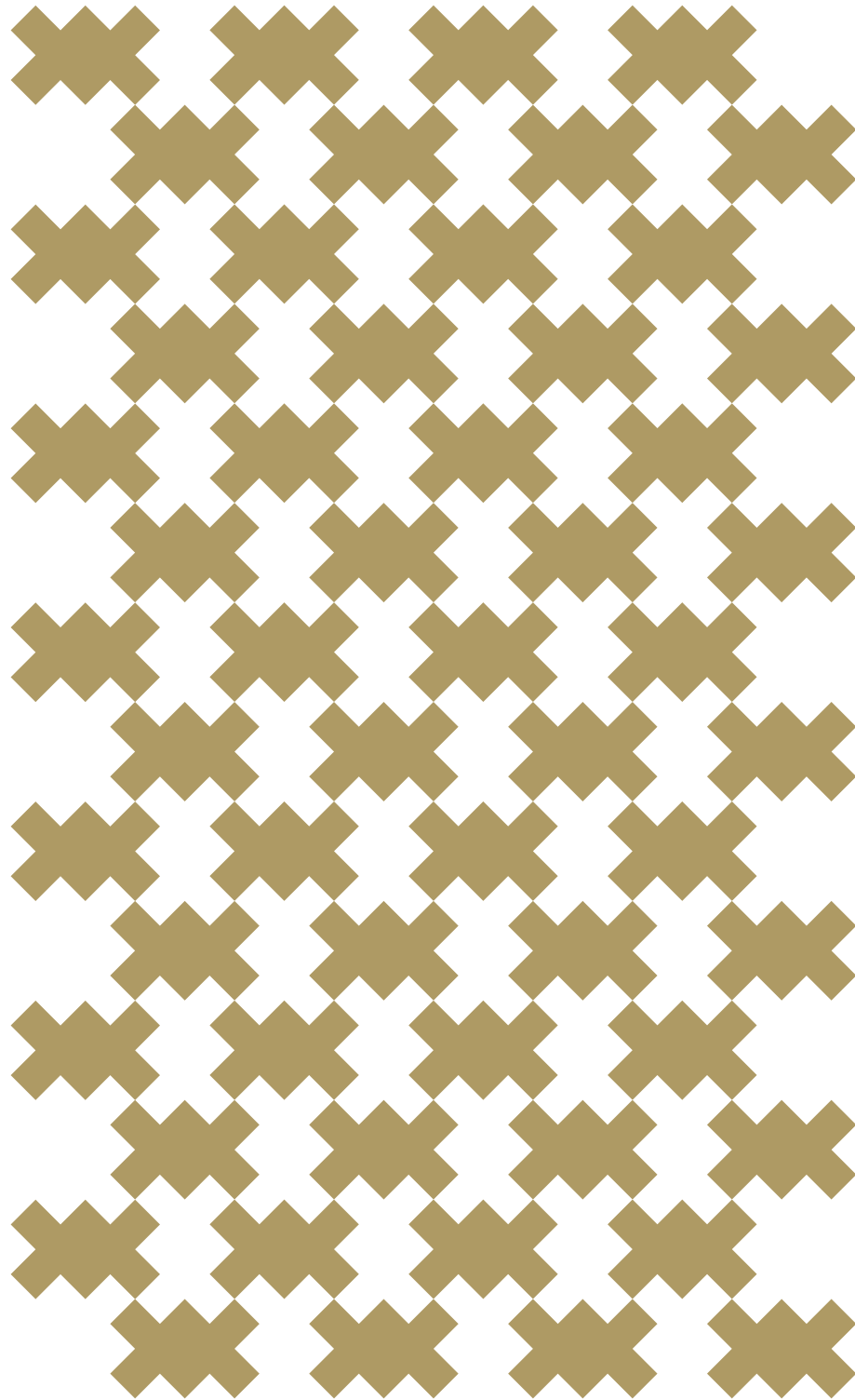
Stiegler’s use of the avant-garde is related to an economy of contribution he associates with Joseph Beuys. “Joseph Beuys said...that the nurse and the baker are, like all of us, also artists.”³² Beuys’ work, despite not being contemporaneous with the digital, for Stiegler, privileges the amateur motivated by desire to directly affect society. “Art that cannot shape society and therefore also cannot penetrate the heart questions of society, [and] in the end influence the question of capital, is no art.”³³ Beuys’ work could also be considered pharmacological in his use of materials and the narratives around his practice. Stiegler posits the territory of the avant-garde as a redemptive milieu insofar as it can be that space that enables and encourages such critical praxis. Beuys assigned himself the role of healer and shaman, speaking of a vast social wound that needed repair. He saw his role as a therapeutic artist as transformative in a wider socio-economic and spiritual sense. For Stiegler, this returns us to the mystery at the heart of aesthetic experience.

32. Stiegler, ‘The Age of De-proletarianisation,’ 16.

33. Beuys, J. Walker Art Center, 1998, <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/2/>

Central to Stiegler’s consideration of the interplay of grammatization and trans-individuation is the ‘mystagogical performativity’ of the art work. Mystagogy relates *in a critical way* to the initiation into the mystery that is the work of art. Contemporary cultural mediation, in attempting to explain individual works of art equally and without judgement, serves to mediocritise art and obscure the crucial and dynamic role aesthetics plays in self-individuation and social change.

For Stiegler, working against a dominant tradition of the avant-garde, the work of art is recognised as capable of elevating the spectator to an extra-ordinary plane of consistency. Instead of the distanced stance of the ‘cultural philistine’ (what Stiegler calls “the proletarianisation of sensibility”), he invokes a profane mystagogy of immanence adequate to the possibilities of the work and the engaged judgement of the enthusiastic amateur. Both the philistine and later, “elevated” experience of art are contained within the orbit of the experience of contemporary art which navigates the terrain of trans-individuation of an epoch. The mystagogy of art is constantly



threatened by the mystification of consumer capitalism, a mystification which contemporary art turns into its raw material.

Stiegler's use of the figure of the mystagogue is problematic given his deployment of Beuys and Beuys self-appointment to a mystagogue-like role. In practice the aura that Beuys cultivated within the consumerist economy of the art world undermined the transformative possibilities of his work as it maintained existing hierarchies of power and avoided the implications of the evolution of art post-Duchamp.³⁴ Beyond Beuys, this problem extends to wider considerations of the avant-garde and thus how Stiegler's pharmacological approach to a mystagogical aesthetics can enable a good "articulation to economy". Given the problems associated with deploying an artist like Beuys in the context of redemptive avant-garde practice, Stiegler's reasoning is best understood in terms of the *pharmakon* both positive and negative.

Stiegler's *pharmakon* also rejuvenates a critical avant-garde after a loss of faith inherent in the emergence of Post-modernism. This loss was already evident in the 'The End of Art' thesis as exemplified in the work of Arthur Danto.³⁵ Danto depicted the Hegelian evolution of art as culminating in a state where everything is permissible and multiple paths are equally valid. Baudrillard made a similar declaration: art is dead as its significance is now only commercial.³⁶ These positions diminish the possibility of an avant-garde as there is no scope for a positive critique.

We recognise in Stiegler's pharmacological response a way out of this impasse through the need to "deconstruct deconstruction"³⁷ and the repositioning of critique at the centre of contemporary art. Rather than scandal, contemporary art colludes with processes of maleficent individuation. In a climate where everything is permissible, critique as a project of the critical left exists in parallel with contemporaneous projects which perform for the market and 'the embellishment of the chamber'. These practices are subsumed under the heading of 'Contemporary Art'. Objects of protestation also function as aesthetic/commercial objects.

I believe that we can't abandon the concept of critique...it is not only a pure coincidence that makes Lyotard say that it is 'the end of the grand narratives' and Thatcher explaining that 'there is

34. See Buchloh, B.H.D. 'Beuys: 'The Twilight of the Idol, Preliminary Notes for a Critique,' published as an appendix in *Joseph Beuys, Mapping the Legacy*, edited by Gene Ray, (New York: DAP/Ringling Museum of Art, 2001)

35. See Danto, A. *Beyond the Brillo Box; The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993).

36. See Baudrillard, J. *The Conspiracy of Art; Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, (Paris: Semiotext(e), 2005).

37. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

no alternative'. It is the same statement at the end and it is not at all a coincidence, it is a failure of thinking, of thought, of critical thought.³⁸

38. 'Interview with Bernard Stiegler.'

One approach, however, has been dismissed by Stiegler. That is an abandoning of critique. For Stiegler, the creative cultural industries and philosophy (for example Lyotard) have abandoned the question of the aesthetic. Aesthetics must begin anew. "Symbolic misery" is the result of the abandonment of the question of the aesthetic. Our ability to individuate the world has been hijacked by the culture industry. "...symbolic misery leads to the ruin of narcissism and to political and economic disarray."³⁹

39. Stiegler, B. 'Suffocated Desire, Or How the Cultural Industry Destroys the Individual,' *Parrhesia* 13 (2011): 52-61; *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 6.

How can the aesthetic object counter act symbolic misery? For Stiegler the answer is participatory art, participation in the symbolic production of artworks, embodied in the figure of the amateur and the use of iterative technologies. This appears to align his views on art with a strand of practice which emerged with 'relational aesthetics' and 'postproduction' as described by Nicholas Bourriaud.⁴⁰ Stiegler, when suggesting the possibility of trans-individuation through the materiality of systems and relationships, echoes concerns of 'relational' practices. His mobilization of the 'amateur' in terms of deploying the digital implies 'postproduction'.

40. See Bourriaud, N. *Postproduction* trans. J. Herman, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001).

The role of the 'amateur', as envisioned by Stiegler, can be both maleficent and beneficent, as regards 'relational' practices. There is, as Hal Foster described, the danger of participants simply functioning as 'extras'.⁴¹ However 'post-production' allows for the empowerment of the 'enthusiastic amateur'.

41. Foster H. 'Arty Party,' *London Review of Books* 25, no. 23 (4th December 2003): 21-22.

Exchanges between art critics Grant Kester and Claire Bishop on participatory art have extended critical discourses that confirm a shift in art toward process led exchange over object led production. Kester, in particular, acknowledges that the move toward collaborative practice demonstrates a "paradigm shift *within* the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves an increasing permeability *between* 'art' and other zones of symbolic production."⁴² Stiegler, by invoking the figure of Beuys would appear to sympathise with such artistic practices that promote collective projects that produce experiential forms of knowledge that are contingent on unique, non-scripted exchanges and outcomes. Kester is supportive of a potential

42. Kester, G. *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, (Durham, CO.: Duke University Press,

2011), 7. production of materiality in the form of relationships. However, Bishop is skeptical that relationships based on equality may be generated in view of the divide between active and passive engagement with art along the lines described by Kester.⁴³

43. Bishop, C. 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,' *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (February 2006), 7–8.

Politics and aesthetics therefore overlap in their concern for equality, their ways of intervening in how ideas are made and distributed, and the forms of their visibility [...] the aesthetic need not be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it already contains this ameliorative promise.⁴⁴

44. Ibid, 10.

For Bishop, the problems associated with art's autonomy and social effects are interrogated through the lens of Jacques Rancière's work. Like Stiegler, Rancière contends that we need to rethink the question of aesthetics that extends beyond reductive definitions of the status of the art object and the aestheticisation of politics. Instead Rancière is concerned with the political partitioning of the sensible and how it is distributed differently through different historical contexts by aesthetic means. This places the aesthetic at the centre of politics. Rancière argues that attempts to activate and empower the spectator associated with avant-garde practice often act to reinforce existing hierarchical structures in its division of a population into those with capacity on one side, and those with incapacity on the other.⁴⁵

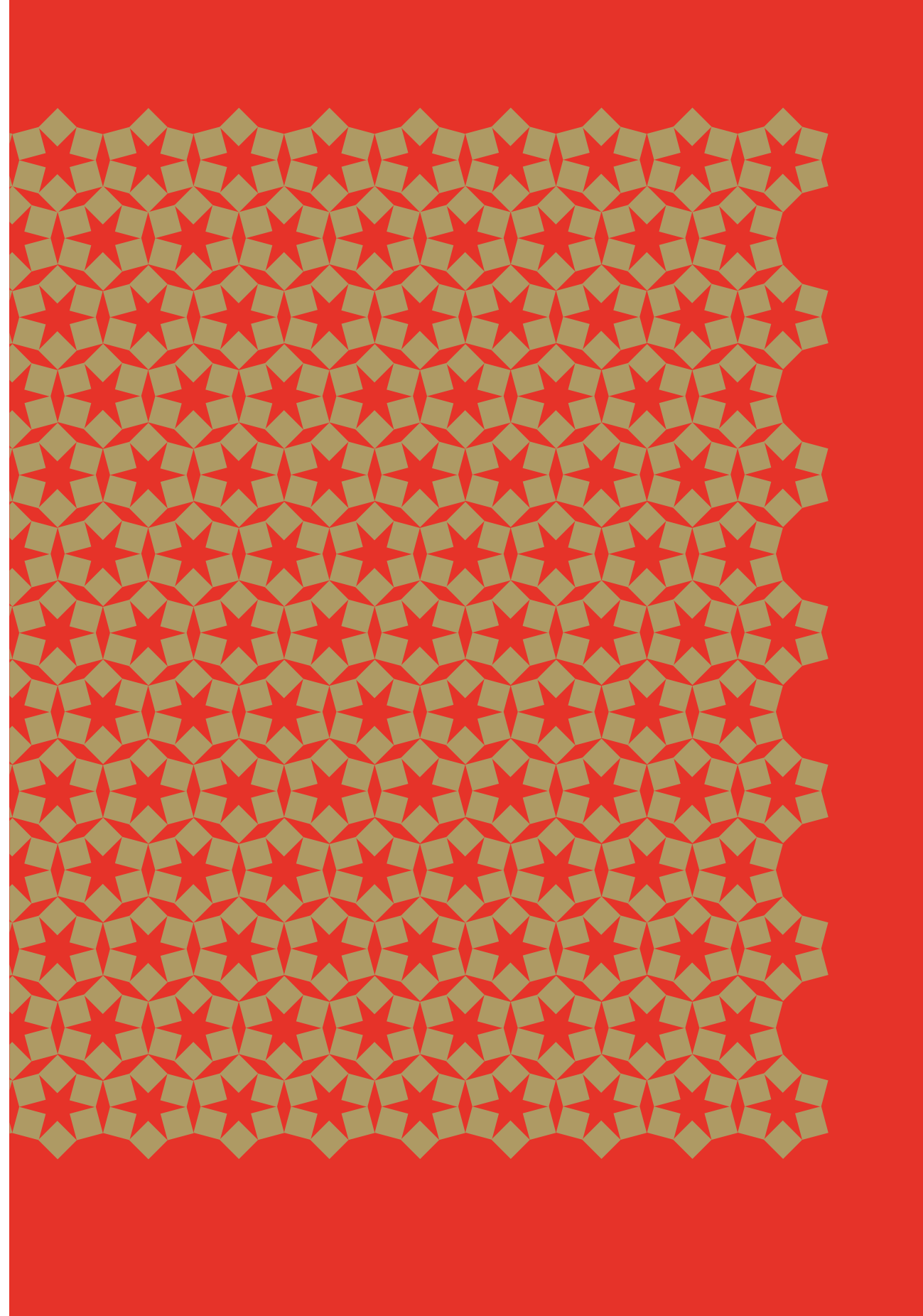
45. See Rancière, J. *The Emancipated Spectator*, (London: Verso, 2004).

However, Rancière, for Stiegler, ignores the manipulation of aesthetic experience by the culture industry.

But what Rancière fails to think is that aesthetics, that is, sensibility and feeling, has become the very means by which every aspect of life is calculated and controlled, through the invention of aesthetic and affective technologies configured toward synchronising experience, and therefore desire, and therefore behaviour, to the point of becoming "counter-productive," that is, to the point of threatening the destruction of desire itself, and therefore politics, if not indeed economics.⁴⁶

46. Couze Venn, Roy Boyne, John Phillips and Ryan Bishop, 'Technics, Media, Teleology: Interview with Bernard Stiegler,' *Theory, Culture &*

What does Stiegler fail to think? Like Rancière, Stiegler prioritises aesthetic experience as essential to political agency, yet avoids an account of the equality of individual experience. This can be seen in his insistence



on the ever-present influence of the mystagogue in aesthetic practice as initiator of trans-individuation. While keen to rework, re-inscribe and re-invent the avant-garde in terms of a beneficent pharmacology, as seen in his emphasis on the role of the “amateur”, he is reluctant to consider aesthetics and deconstruction beyond a hierarchical avant-garde. The amateur, after all, through experiences of practices of love and care, has a privileged position in the production, transmission and reception of aesthetic experience.

It is possible that Stiegler would align the (inevitable) failure of the historical incarnations of the avant-garde with the “grammatology” at the heart of Deconstruction. These are potential problems that Stiegler recognises, to some degree, when he speaks of “a bad articulation to economy” and the need to avoid becoming “speculative in the sense of the market”. In the face of such difficulties, Stiegler’s approach is understandably not to outline a strategy, a curriculum or a “grammatology”. Rather, through the process of grammatization Stiegler uses a pharmacological approach to work through each element of a general organology. This pharmacological approach, perhaps inevitably, opens the potential for new articulations of the avant-garde.