



# The Philosophy of Mannerism

From Aesthetics to  
Modal Metaphysics

Sjoerd van Tuinen

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# The Philosophy of Mannerism

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*From Aesthetics to Modal Metaphysics*

Sjoerd van Tuinen

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## Preface

In the face of modernity's 'side-effects,' this book excavates and reconstructs a concept that I deem crucial to any contemporary resurgence in ontology. At the same time, it sets out from the acknowledgement that philosophy does not have an original domain. It certainly has its own means, but it has no intrinsic ends, except for the difference its concepts make to problems that it encounters in other disciplines and practices. Taking up a point of view immanent to art history, namely the problem of the 'secondary' and 'artificial' nature of mannerism, the aim of the six chapters that follow is to develop a new interpretation of the early modern insofar as it involves a contemporary reevaluation of mannerist modes of imagining and inhabiting the world. This task is introduced by a series of short historical and methodological considerations that lead up to a first systematic philosophical positioning.

The texts presented here find their origin in research done for my PhD dissertation on Gilles Deleuze's use of Leibniz, *Mannerism in Philosophy*. Despite the programmatic title, many of my intuitions regarding the consistency of a mannerist philosophy were still inchoate and vague at the time of its defense at Ghent University in 2009. Their subsequent development would not have been possible without several groundbreaking publications and the manifold work of relaying that surrounds them: Bruno Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2012), Giorgio Agamben's *The Use of Bodies* (2014), as well as the English translations of Étienne Souriau's *The Different Modes of Existence* (2015) and Gilbert Simondon's *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (2020). The result is a coming to terms with what is perhaps less a tradition than an echo, a delayed Copernican revolution in which ontology, ethics and aesthetics intersect in the idea of a continental modal philosophy.

Mannerism approaches things from the middle. It does not start from their identity or essence but by following their multiple modes of existence. These are the immanent and operative forms, relationally constituted and forever incomplete, in which they become concrete. The coming about of this book, too, is the result of a decade of intensive participation in the plethora of styles of writing, conversing, teaching, and living that makes



up contemporary academia. In particular, I wish to thank the following people for their inspiration and/or complicity: Robin van den Akker, Ridvan Askin, Jelle Baan, Erik Bordeleau, Vlad Ionescu, Bertrand Prévost, Andrej Radman, Heleen Schröder, Peter Sloterdijk, Isabelle Stengers, Frans Sturkenboom, Rosa Vieira de Almeida, Stephen Zepke, and the students at ESPhil, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

## Acknowledgements

There are some fragments included in this text from two of my previous publications, listed below. These fragments have been thoroughly revised, partially rewritten, and much extended as part of the larger argument of this book.

‘The Cosmic Artisan: Mannerist Virtuosity and Contemporary Crafts’, in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth*, eds. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018), 69–82.

‘Disegno: A Speculative Constructivist Interpretation’, in Ridvan Askin et al, *Speculations V* (Punctum Books), 434–73.



# Introduction

## Posthumanism

'And yet the earth moves.' Following Michel Serres, Bruno Latour makes the striking claim that the Anthropocene is closer to the sixteenth century than to the self-image of the modern world. Through a complete reversal of Western philosophy's most cherished trope, the domination of nature by the human subject, our societies seem to be playing the role of the dumb object while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject. 'Such is the frightening meaning of "global warming": through a surprising inversion of background and foreground, it is human history that has become frozen and natural history that is taking on a frenetic pace.'<sup>1</sup> This image of the foreground sinking into a background that rises up of itself reminds us of the mannerist compositions of El Greco. While in the High Renaissance, clear and distinct forms functioned as humanistic representations of a *storia* situated on a natural stage (Alberti), they now participate in a metamorphic zone in which it is no longer clear who acts and who is acted upon. In the crisis of form, Gilles Deleuze echoes Schelling, 'it is as if the ground [*fond*] rises up to the surface, without ceasing to be ground.'<sup>2</sup>

Today this 'melting [*effondement*]' or 'deterritorialization' of the surface means that while, from the brain to the planet, the human world continues to depend on its natural and historical conditions, at the same time these conditions rumble with a life of their own and are now on the verge of becoming uninhabitable to us. 'Like a mannerist painting that stretches the rules of classicism to breaking point,' Timothy Morton writes, 'global warming has stretched our *world* to breaking point.'<sup>3</sup> The intrusion of Gaia does away with the romantic concept of nature as unavoidable *Urgrund* of harmonious living. Or rather, it shows that nature is immanently deviant. Instead of being limited to nature, contemporary ecology concerns the manners in which things exist, that is, the ways in which they express, and thereby change, themselves, each other, and their environment. We live in a thoroughly synthetic world in which everything comes to show signs of human conditioning. But contrary to being transformed into the manifest image of the human or aligning itself to our privileged conduits, this general anthropomorphism teaches

us just how not alone we are. The whole earth system increasingly turns out to be a patchwork of interlocking machines, composed through microbiotic, financial, digital, industrial, institutional, algorithmic, and infrastructural feedback, which are as maladapted to humans as they are to each other.

To speak of the world as a problem of composition and synthesis is to break with the modern habit of making a strict distinction between the natural and the artificial. Chemists speak of synthesizing natural products when they want to express a relation of identity—imitation, simulation, completion, improvisation, or counterfeit—between the natural and the manufactured product. From margarine and polystyrene pearls to phosphorescent rabbits and Frankencorn, this relation is generally far from perfect. In art, by contrast, the copy occasionally claims to be more complete than the original. Just as contemporary biotechnology and AI rival nature in their replication, the mannerist artists and craftspersons already showed that no material is entirely natural, just as no artifact is entirely unnatural. Once we take the emphasis off the product itself and focus on its *mode* of production, something as seemingly unnatural as glass is actually a product of nature, whereas the exaggeration of nature in art can acquire its own degree of perfection.<sup>4</sup>

The classical concept of art, or rather of the fine arts, is established on the exclusion of mannerism (together with baroque), which the European aestheticians of the eighteenth century deemed either too close to nature (the paradox of the ‘rustic style’<sup>5</sup> in a massive building such as Giulio Romano’s *Palazzo del Tè*) or too artificial (the paradox of the ‘stylish style’<sup>6</sup> of Giovanni da Bologna’s serpentine figures), but in any case kitschy, tasteless, and decadent. Much of the development of romanticism and modern art would be based on the subsequent dialectic between art and its historical other. In the spirit of Baudelaire, it has been argued that mannerism is both the negation of art and its convex mirror, as if modernity is driven by something that escapes it and that can only be rendered visible in an oblique way.<sup>7</sup> However, we will see that even today, when artists and art theorists seek to move beyond the postmodern deconstruction of their historical self-understanding, the concept of mannerism retains its problematic status. Mannerism continues to haunt contemporary art as a source and an element even if it remains without identity. If we have never been modern, and if the conjuncture just before the flight of modernity took off gives us a more adequate historical image of ourselves and our world, then perhaps the time has come to investigate the nature of this mirror and revisit a question that is as old as art history itself, but that will now be asked also from outside of it: What is mannerism?

## Compositionism

If mannerism can be said to be at once too natural and too artificial, this is because it is the symptom of a culture 'that relished accumulations of all sorts'.<sup>8</sup> One of the main motifs of mannerist art, Peter Sloterdijk points out, is to bring to the fore the arrangedness of works (in the sense of their 'workings'). Instead of organic beauty and proportion, it gives us ugly and sterile deformations highlighting 'that the artificial, the artful, the human-made non-human is always much too complex to be merely aesthetically and organically pleasing'. At the same time, this formalism regains a natural quality to the extent that forms do not stand alone, but are folded, sometimes smoothly but more often in a fraught way, into their surroundings. What makes mannerist forms interesting is the vital force that makes them vibrate in a variable and open field of nested compositions: 'bodies out of bodies, works out of works, figures out of figures'.<sup>9</sup> Combining reptiles, herbs, mythical creatures, foliage, and scrolls on sumptuous objects apparently made for human use (e.g., Wenzel Jamnitzer's fruit serving vessel personifying Mother Earth (1549), a mixed product of engraving, goldsmithing, and enameling), the mannerist grotesque is a labyrinth full of transformation, hybridity, creation, and disintegration.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely to the extent that it exacerbates this tension between the artificial and the natural into a plastic continuum, that mannerist art already seems to point ahead into a radically constructivist future made up of an infinite scale of entities that have no prior or independent existence.<sup>11</sup> Every composition is already a decomposition of prior and posterior compositions. Against its discursive closure in pathology, our aesthetic task is therefore to release the ontological dissonance of mannerism from the anticipation of order and the presumption of meaning.

In the tradition of composite painting, the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is typical of classicism. It is the organism of the sovereign subject composed of individual human souls who have emancipated themselves from the state of nature. The social body towers over the objectified earth as its Master and Possessor. Contrast this to Arcimboldo's grotesque portraits, composed as crowded tableaux of animals, fruits, and vegetables. In both cases, we are dealing with highly artificial compositions, but the latter no longer reflects the power of the human subject. Both designs are highly anthropomorphic, but the latter is no longer anthropocentric. Rather, heterogeneous elements that mingle nature and history now make up the portraits of Adam, Eve, princes and princesses, The Sense of Smell, the seasons, admirals, and jurists.<sup>12</sup> As with fractals, the visual field cannot be totalized. The shallowness of the foreground and the flatness of

the background emphasize a deep ambiguity between planimetric outlines and volumetric details. In a multifocal panorama, not lit by any natural light, things radiate of themselves, in full transparency, leaving no interval or demarcation between them.

Referring to the portrait of Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor disguised as Vertumnus (1590–1), the Milanese cleric Gregorio Comanini called Arcimboldo an artificer of fantastic imitation (*imitazione fantastica*, also *sprezzatura artificiosa*). The work is both natural in its analytical attention to detail and unnatural in its combinations.<sup>13</sup> In the friction between extravagance and common sense, it is no longer clear what is ideal and what is real. Or rather, instead of a privileged commitment there is always the possibility of their reversal. Between cultivated produce and sovereign power, still life and portraiture, the raw and the cooked, there is no hierarchy, although everything is aligned with everything. What is the secret of this strange mimesis?

Paul North mobilizes the Plotinian notion of circumradiation (*perilampsis*). He contrasts Arcimboldo's *Vertumnus* to Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), painted half a century later. Instead of a royal surveying his family, we experience the immaterial power of the sovereign to produce natural abundance and receive it in return as tribute in a circuit of riches. From a classical (representational) point of view we could say that in Arcimboldo things, fruits, objects, and beings together approximate the contours of a face. But from a mannerist point of view, it is the 'gift of traits'—contours and colors—that distributes likenesses beyond all ontological relations of commonality, belonging, or dominion. To paint is to rotate a bizarre kaleidoscope made up of overlapping 'likenesses' in which 'mimesis turn[s] in on itself and become[s] another mode': 'a surreal misbirth, the instauration of a nonspatial, antiperspectival mode, in the midst of the other, better-known revolutions' of geometric perspective and naturalist verisimilitude. In effectuating a total mutual possession or 'through-reflection' of components, painting brings 'homeotically' near what seemed ontologically distant, revealing the whole cosmos as 'family' (which North defines as 'homeotic vicinity').<sup>14</sup>

Earlier on, Roland Barthes had sought to explain the magic of an Arcimboldo face in the double articulation, or double bind, of meaningful sign and mirage. Take one element away and the composition changes completely. What in detail or in the whole appears as a full-blown organism, on another scale or from another point of view turns out to be a hypertrophied organ or a skin disease. This is the key to Arcimboldesque semiosis: at their surfaces, all things lose their

literality. It is the very method of composition which disturbs and pulverizes the unitary development—the beauty—of form in an audacious *coup de force*:

Arcimbolde's flesh is always *excessive*: either ravaged, or flayed (Herod), or swollen, or sunk, dead. . . . What . . . dooms Arcimboldo's heads to an effect of *malaise* is precisely that they are composite: . . . not only does the figured head proceed from a labor, but even the *complication* and hence the duration of this labor are represented. . . . Arcimboldo's heads are monstrous because they all refer, whatever the grace of the allegorical subject (Summer, Spring, Flora, Water), to a *malaise* of substance: *seething* or *swarming*. The swarm of living things (plants, animals, babies), arranged in a close-packed disorder (before joining the intelligibility of the final figure), evokes an entire larval life, the entanglement of vegetative beings, worms, fetuses, viscera which are at the limits of life, not yet born and yet already putrescible.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding their differences, both North and Barthes agree in this respect: Unlike with Hobbes, we see nature out of control. Instead of being nicely compartmented in essences and accidents, portrait and landscape, nature turns out to be a continuous movement that invades and decomposes forms just as much as it provides their ground: "The principle of the Arcimbolde'sque "monsters" is, in short, that *Nature does not stop*."<sup>16</sup>

For nature not to stop means, first of all, that it no longer submits to the Aristotelian taxonomy of genera and species, that is, of the stable subordination of matter under form (hylomorphism). Instead, the world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries harbors an infinite movement or hylezoism, not in the sense of the universe as a living being but in the sense that life is everywhere, although not everything is alive. Neither finite nor indefinite, matter is 'actually infinite'. It cannot be divided without further changing its nature. As Giordano Bruno puts it, matter is endowed with a pervasive desire for new beginnings. Reality must be conceived as a 'unitary process in which matter is both content and form', all the while 'forms vary infinitely, one after the other, and the matter always remains the same.'<sup>17</sup> There are no such things as substantial forms; instead, there is an infinitely fecund matter in which potentiality and actuality are both one and forms only modally or provisionally individuated. Alexandre Koyré famously described the age of Bruno, Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Bartholomeus Spranger, and Hans von Aachen as an opening of the closed world to the infinite universe. The macrocosm is no longer reflected in the microcosm of the human mind, but opens up to 'the immeasurable and inexhaustible abundance of reality and the unrestricted power of the human intellect.'<sup>18</sup> What



seemed solid now turns out to be fluid, such that, as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz put it a century after Bruno, in each fish there is a pond that is itself teeming with other fish and so on.<sup>19</sup> This is the age of the Copernican revolution, which decentered the human in the affirmation of infinite possible worlds. At the same time, it is an age which has not yet succumbed to the mechanist project of the total geometrization of nature. The development of 'science' coincides with an acceleration in the domains of magic and the art of memory (*ars memoriae*): systems of hieroglyphic signs and gestational images rather than clearly identifiable causes. Henceforth the first principle for reality itself to become possible is neither God nor Nature, neither the Subject nor simply Being as differentiated from beings, but multiplicitous becoming.

Just as nature lacks a stable identity, so too does art, which becomes increasingly unlocalizable within it, with a multiplication of artificial grottos, gardens, and topiaries directly confronting the earth's own processes of generation and corruption. If it is a classical requirement that all bodies are a composite of form and matter (or, say, of line and color), then mannerism, in its rivalry with nature, invents a new way of combining form and matter, namely by treating them both next to and in one another. In the 1930s, Erwin Panofsky pointed to the rise of 'antihuman and antinatural forces' that meant a fundamental rift in the society, religion, economy, and art of the renaissance, and that somehow needed to be integrated: 'The rise of these new forces, not the baroque movement, means the real end of the Renaissance, and at the same time the beginning of our own epoch of history—an epoch which is still struggling for an expression in life and art, and which will be named and judged . . . by the generations to come.'<sup>20</sup> In the renaissance, art still referred both to what would later be known as the 'fine arts' and to technology and the science of materials. With mannerism, this explodes into a general ecology of practices such as ceramics, magic, and diplomacy—arts which, each in their own way, already anticipate the traumatic difficulties with the earth as an open-ended problem of cosmopolitical construction.

It is true that all these arts were still regarded as so many vicariants of nature, technics in which nature reflects itself. But with every art, nature is further diversified into an infinite variety of modes of existence. At the threshold of modernity, mannerism is the ecstasy of matter, its continuous aspiration to forms and experiences that remain strangely contingent and inchoate.<sup>21</sup> Instead of leading back to an unchanging and more perfect foundation, it would be better to say, with Étienne Souriau, that the different modes or manners rise up from being 'like the tip of the sword from the sword.'<sup>22</sup> The mannerist world is one of spontaneous duplications and reduplications that endlessly redistribute what it

means to exist. And as we may ask with Latour: What are today's multifarious intersections of politicians, activists, fishermen, sushi bars across the planet with the biological species and ecological territory of the red tuna, if not a marvel from the cabinets of curiosities, the microcosms of the Florentine *studiolo*<sup>23</sup> and the Prague *Kunstkammer* (more than the more religiously connotated Habsburg *Wunderkammer*)?

## Metamodernism

We do not lack historical determinations of mannerism. There are expressionist, surrealist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, semiotic, and postmodern conceptions of mannerism to name but a few, and then there are also those who, precisely because of this very multiplicity, argue that mannerism has never existed at all. This ambivalence and pluralism, however, is in fact essential to the philosophical concept of mannerism, and it is also an essential component of our contemporary condition. Just as contemporary art actualizes transhistorical tendencies, the sixteenth century offers not a model for the present but a futurity that is already included in it and that allows for new alliances between the old and the new.<sup>24</sup>

In this book, mannerism is not another name for the postmodern condition, but neither is it a-modern, as Latour would have it. Rather, it is a different interpretation of modernity and modernism, a decentering one, which may shed new light on what it means to have been early modern as well as measure the extent to which we continue to be modern today. Colin Rowe already spoke of a mannerist modern movement in which modern architecture discovers ways of regenerating itself, exemplified by the repetition of Sebastiano Serlio's blind windows and niches in Le Corbusier's *Villa Schwob* (1912).<sup>25</sup> More recently Peter Eisenman has pointed to a mannerist lateness in Adolf Loos, Aldo Rossi, and John Hejduk, in whose designs the intransigence of conventions to history (the objectivity of style) and expression (subjectivity of style) produces a temporal ambiguity. Treading in the footsteps of Theodor Adorno, he claims that lateness is 'different from the modern relationship to history, which focused on a break with precedent, and different from the postmodern relationship to history, which focused on citation and a return to past historical cycles.'<sup>26</sup> Thus mannerism is syntactic rather than citational. It is not a system of sterile linguistic signs, to be varied at will, but of vital gestures that insist in and apart from the present. Every material—say, a building or a language—is a body with its own character, that is, its proper, historically grown, obstinacy (*virtus*). This constitutes the

implicit potential of its linear development, or explication. To the extent that we already know what the end product must be like, the implicit is generally passed over. Yet virtuosity is a matter of showing what a given material can do in a repetitive gesture. The mannerist re-implicates her- or himself in it by asking the complicating, infinitizing, speculative question: What else is it capable of?<sup>27</sup> Of what other modes of accomplishment?

Nowadays this question of the use of bodies returns with a concept such as 'metamodernism': instead of a parody and pastiche of clearly defined historical moments, other repetitions have already replaced the classical chronology with a wave that knows only singular manners, each of which revirtualizes the actuality of modernism in its own way. Just as historical mannerism was the hyperbole of the renaissance in which the mastery of primary geometry or the depiction of the human figure was put to 'unnatural' use, there is also a virtuoso modernity in which any given material or technique is pushed to its limit and tested for further artificial becomings. Giorgio Agamben suggests that the word 'modern' comes from the Latin *modo*, meaning 'just now',<sup>28</sup> a temporal gap or tension between the present and its immediate past. Mannerism, in other words, is not so much an ironic critique of the past as an intensification of its genetic moments and an expansion of memory.<sup>29</sup> Instead of a critique of originality or authenticity, it is the repetition of the forces of a past potential that was never, and could never be, fully actual. It is a prenatal modernism.

In their conjunction, both mannerism and modernism become something quite different from what canonical art history makes of them. Mannerism is perhaps more modern than modernism, but in the sense of a non-modern dialectic that reverses their priority: modernism already stirs in the sixteenth century, in the guise of a mannerist classicism, but only begins to rediscover its own rupture by the end of the nineteenth century. This explicitation of its own mannerist condition has perhaps culminated in postmodernism, which is sterile precisely because it suffices with manipulating established codes and recreating what it already knows. Nevertheless, as the ongoing self-historicization of art in terms of beginnings, breaks, and ends is replaced by a-historical and non-artistic forces, should we not rather say that modernism itself is now absorbed into a mannerism of cosmic proportions, and that its temporality exceeds any essential relation to the twentieth century?

In contemporary aesthetics, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are the most rigorous theorists of this Copernican revolution. For them, modernism is not just the historical moment of the final crystallization of the canonical fine arts, each with its specific matter and form. Neither is it exhausted by the

event that Alfred North Whitehead named the 'bifurcation of nature' into the (objective) domain of Science and the (subjective) domain of Art. Rather, as perhaps prefigured in Russian constructivism, it is the moment when art becomes exclusively a question of technicity, the elaboration and assemblage of any material whatsoever charged with harnessing unformed and unlocalizable forces. Deleuze and Guattari speak of modern art as 'abstract machine' and of the modern artist as 'cosmic artisan': 'we must become machinists, operators.'<sup>30</sup> But what is cosmic about the modern?

At stake is the unity of the arts, the absolute or outside of art that normally remains invisible. The classical artist found this unity in the pre-established harmony of God's creation, or rather, in the assumption of God's task as his own: to confront chaos with the creative organization of raw and untamed matter into stable, analytical relations of form and content. The romantic artist saw himself as the privileged mediator of Nature or the earth producing itself as infinite and continuous variation of synthetic form, thus keeping the *a priori* unity of the earth even in its constant deterritorialization. The modern artist, by contrast, no longer confronts or mediates chaos through any kind of form at all but immediately operates an informal 'synthesizer' of matter-energy. She inverts the genealogical relation between earth and cosmos, or indeed between the infinite depth of the past and the unlimited finitude of the future. Nature is redistributed without reserve onto the disjunctive unity of the contemporary where it is in fact indiscernible from an apocalyptic multiplicity.

Crucially, for Deleuze and Guattari this sequence in thinking about the unity of the arts is neither part of history nor a post-historical conjecture. Rather, it is a matter of discerning tendencies. 'Everything we attribute to an age was already present in the preceding age', even if it had been obscured by 'different perceptual conditions'.<sup>31</sup> Just as early modern physics is based on a vitalist materialism, mannerist art already replaced the organic regime of form and content with 'a life proper to matter, a vital state of matter as such, a material vitalism that doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable, dissociated by the hylomorphic model'.<sup>32</sup> Paul Cézanne discovered in Tintoretto a 'cosmic obsession' with impersonal forces, a blend of the supraterrrestrial within the terrestrial that is not given in perception but is itself a perception.<sup>33</sup> As with El Greco, earth and sky collide and combine in an electric sensation that precedes any symbolic or figurative code. In molecularizing perception, similarly, Arcimboldo managed to capture the infinite in the finite without any notion of transcendent design, whether theological or humanist. These forces/sensations/infinities are cosmic in the sense that they constitute 'pure beings of

the sensible.' If they are usually hidden, this is because they reveal sensation to be durational, not spatial or historical; they are 'a bit of time in its pure state': 'The image is a little ritornello. . . . The image is not an object, but a process.'<sup>34</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari claim that the 'eternal object' of art is to make a monument for sensation, a hallucinatory memory as it were, not of a past present mediated by the flow of time, but of a past that has never been present but that nonetheless retains a potential for the present's becoming. Or put differently: to produce an aesthetic fact is to construct a possible world from the chaotic interstices between a material and the deterritorializing forces to which it is exposed. Whereas for art history, art is always a thing of the past, they follow Bergson in taking the entire past as coexisting, virtually, with each moment of the passing present as the condition of the new. Art itself is a mode of figuring the past differently, of encounters and experiments with the depth of duration (*l'épaisseur de durée*).<sup>35</sup>

Looking back, a more adequate model for creativity than the classical or romantic artist-genius, who belongs only to art's official and exclusive 'history', is therefore the artist-alchemist as cosmic operator, not so much of the past but of pastness, who destabilizes and redramatizes the very relation between art, history, and life. The challenge of composition is neither that of God's creation nor that of a romanticized Nature but that of geo-engineering, bio-art, and living currencies, all of which open up the experience of a strangeness or untimeliness (as opposed to the timeless) that remains entirely immanent to material construction but without coinciding with it. From matter to manner, art makes matter 'ascend' into a spiritual domain of sensations 'where', as Deleuze and Guattari write, 'all disparate and heterogeneous elements are convoked.'<sup>36</sup>

## Continental Modal Metaphysics

Yet while it shares their methodological premises, my aim here is not a commentary on Deleuze and Guattari. Elsewhere I have put forward a reconstruction of their take on mannerism,<sup>37</sup> as well as an account of their contributions to art history.<sup>38</sup> Here the task is to develop their point of view further toward what could be called a continental modal metaphysics. Perhaps it should be said that this book paints a group portrait in neo-mannerist philosophy. It does not summarize or inventories, it redistributes and multiplies. Combining early modern philosophers such as Bruno and Leibniz with modern philosophers such as Henri Bergson, William James, Alfred North Whitehead,

John Dewey, Étienne Souriau, and Gilbert Simondon, the aim is to distill from them a concept with enough historical and systematic depth for expressing the signature of mannerist practices in art, philosophy, and beyond. For just as, from its inception, the question of mannerism's historical existence has been a constituent problem for the history of style, there is a way of thinking and acting that one can call properly mannerist.

Bergsonian philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch opens his trilogy *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (1980) with an opposition of 'modal' to 'substantialist' philosophy. Personified by the mannerist poet Baltasar Gracián, who argued that manner constitutes a 'second being', modal philosophy means that 'all is an effect of style', that there is 'nothing behind appearances', and that 'being is practically what it resembles'. This notion that appearances are not less than being but otherwise than being takes the form of a 'rehabilitation of the accident' from its Aristotelian subordination to substance and the ensuing dialectic of essence and existence.<sup>39</sup> Whatever exists exists because there is change. Identity as expressed in subject-predicate logic is only the mode in which a being has being in becoming, but there is no additional underlying reality to explain its continuity over time. Rather, there is appearance creating its own being, and thereby its own possibility. For in itself, a mode is nothing but what will be; it is pure 'advent'.<sup>40</sup> As with charm or grace, Jankélévitch argues, the mode of making something is both less and infinitely more than the thing made. It is at once the *presque-rien* that is a merely qualitative addition to a being, like a second nature, and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that constitutes the individuality of beings, their intrinsic *pneuma* or magnetic pole. Passing between being and becoming, modality is the potential (*quod*) by which a thing (*quid*) becomes what it is, by which it is differentiated from abstract flux, and by which it continues to communicate with other things in a metastable state:

the fact is nothing without the making, just as the making is nothing without the manner of making, and equally the determined manners of indeterminate being are nothing without the great determining Manner of all these manners, and finally the being of manners is nothing without the great Manner of being which goes by the name of *Becoming*.<sup>41</sup>

There are things that exist, the ways in which they are produced, the generic being of those ways, and the way of this being, which is pure becoming. In modal philosophy, being and becoming are formally distinct but not really. There is an ongoing spiraling between them, but neither is foundational for, or opposed to, the other. Rather, as Simondon writes, becoming is an immanent,

non-dialectical dimension of being corresponding to its capacity to dephase and overflow itself.<sup>42</sup> Being in general has no unity of identity but becomes as the being that it is by way of a cascade of modes or thresholds of individuation. Whatever exists exists because it has a manner of coming about, yet manners are real only insofar as they inhere in individual existence—which is to say that while manners have no actuality in themselves, they subsist and insist virtually as relative unities and real continuities in the material processes in which things come about.

With the concept of modal philosophy in hand, it is possible to identify key moments in twentieth-century philosophy that are more or less mannerist. The later Wittgenstein was to define language as a form of life, thus making meaning entirely conditional on its fluctuating manners of use and doing away with all external criteria. For Heidegger, the being of the phenomenon is defined by the way in which it reveals itself (*ta phainesthai*, for example the thing ‘things’), just as ‘existentials’ such as *In-der-Welt-sein* and *Mit-sein* are the factual (*faktische*) possibilities or ‘guises’ (*Weisen*) of an otherwise propertyless ‘being-there’ (*Dasein*). In phenomenology, experience is not the subjective qualification of real quantifiable objects in nature; rather nature, things, relations, quantities, qualities, events, and meanings are themselves constituted by the plurality of ways in which they are experienced. What all three examples reveal is how every mode of being equals an inessential *modus operandi*. Being is resolved into praxis and praxis is substantiated into being. At the same time, we are still dealing with modalities of something that remains constant regardless of its actual modifications: the stable form of language, the monolithical question of Being, the originary nature of lived experience. They are modalities predicated on something else that remains constitutive of them and that transcends them. (Husserl wanted to ‘overthrow the Copernican theory in the usual interpretation of a worldview’ because it deterritorializes ‘man’ from his horizon whereas ‘the original ark [*archè*], Earth, does not move.’<sup>43</sup>) As a consequence, classical substantialism and its oppositions of depth and appearance, essence and accident, ground and phenomenon, being and becoming, potential and actual, form and matter, and subject and predicate persist. At times they are suspended, but they are not overcome.

Contemporary analytical metaphysics or so-called modal logic, too, is still Aristotelian insofar as it moves within the holy trinity of ground, essence, and modality. Its three categories of modality are necessity, possibility, contingency, and impossibility, each of which is predicated on the primordial logical modality of identity or essence rather than existence.<sup>44</sup> But modes are not categories,

that is, concepts applicable to all possible things, like forms independent from their contents. As different ways of saying many things about the same thing, categories partake of one and the same mode of existence, that of essence.<sup>45</sup> This amodal mode then tends to be seen as merely possessing a varying degree of reality on a scale from potency to act. To put it in the words of Thomas Aquinas: 'Each thing is perfect according as it is in act, and imperfect as it is in potency.'<sup>46</sup> Moreover, this division between ideal and real, in which the latter limits and selects the former, hides the problem of modal indeterminacy: In what way does the possible exist in actuality? Traditionally, the mode of existence of the possible is qualified either by being separate from actuality according to modal priority or by separating the multiplicity of possibles through the conceptual scaffolding of 'worlds'. In Aristotle, actuality is for the most part prior to potentiality; for David Lewis, each world is actual to itself and possible to all others. Either way, only one world exists, the rest subsists. In both cases, this separation of possibility and actuality renders mysterious the mode of existence of potential, or indeed of anything non-actual or inessential considered in itself.<sup>47</sup>

The crux of mannerist philosophy lies precisely in the contestation of the separation of ideal and real. Agamben expresses it succinctly: 'If essence and existence have to be divided like potential and act, nothing is more problematic than their relation.'<sup>48</sup> What is at stake is the reality of the modes of individuation, which can be taken for granted neither in essence nor in existence, and which remain obscure as long as we derive the principle of individuation solely from what is already individuated. The problem is that, as Simondon says, 'anything that can serve as the basis for a relation is already of the same mode of being as the individual.'<sup>49</sup> In order to approach the operation of individuation, we must therefore modalize the relation itself between potential and the actual: what passes from potential to actual is not an essence, but the modality or sense in which being alters itself.<sup>50</sup> As being 'is' not, but must itself be effectuated and actualized, *energeia* or 'power in action' is no longer opposed to *potentia*. At the threshold of potential and act, modes are transgeneric principles contemporary with individuation. Each mode is its own more-than-logical genre in the sense of 'kind': not just a class of similar things (genera and species), but the real and continuous relationship that generates them.<sup>51</sup> There are in fact just as many modes of existence or degrees of perfection as there are becomings, since modes are not quantities of essence but mutant potentialities in which quantity turns into quality (instead of vice versa<sup>52</sup>).

The problem with logical essentialism is not just that, in reality, existence always precedes essence, but that essence is itself only one mode of existence, and



a very limited mode at that. Essence not only hides the pre-individual field with which it forms a conduit but also excludes becoming. Every mode is relation-in-becoming, a dynamic equilibrium of different potentials; not itself existence, it is a way of making exist. Simondon shows that a genetic understanding of being must not be based on complete individuality, but on provisional resolutions of pre- and transindividual tensions. 'Individuation must . . . be considered as a partial and relative resolution that occurs in a system that contains potentials and encloses a certain incompatibility in relation to itself—an incompatibility made of forces of tension as well as of the impossibility of an interaction between the extreme terms of the dimensions.'<sup>53</sup> This means, first, that to be is to relate and to be related to, such that being is never individual, and secondly, that a mode of existence is always only half individual and remains half pre-individual. Because of this relationality and 'metastability' of modes, as opposed to the atomism and unchangeability of essences, nothing is ever fully concrete in itself. Things are always affected by a certain attraction, a tending to whatever tends their way. They are part of a series in which there are limit states, but no unique and superior ends. In turn, a mode is the law of a series, but as such it is the realization of a system that has larger dimensions than any essence, as its tendency is the operation through which potentiality itself acquires reality and produces determinate (thing-like) effects.<sup>54</sup> Thus, neither the modality nor the existence of a table is the same as, or similar to, those of an electron, a language, a value, a world, a soul, a law, a fictional being, an idea, a phenomenon, a subject, an object, a work of art, or a god. No matter how fragile, all these things 'are' only insofar as they effectuate and transform certain existential relations that define their unique reality. These relations do not inhere in them individually, however, but collectively. Neither things nor concepts, modes are perhaps best understood as habits. They are recursive systems that have an (in)operative mode of existence: they are dispositions to behave in a certain way under certain types of circumstances, but also the ability to not-do, to remain suspended in their own potentiality.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, individuation and modality, the real and the possible, are inseparable but not the same. Being itself is not one or equal, but a multiplicity—not only of individual beings and their classes but of capacities, operations, and interactions. 'To exist is to differ',<sup>56</sup> writes the neo-Leibnizian Gabriel Tarde, since it implies a vast multiverse made up of different modes of existence with no unified or unifying ground.

This operative sense of being as ontogenesis indicates that modal already meant modern. First formulated by Duns Scotus, for whom the freedom of every creature is at the center of the universe and immediately reveals God simply by