

Das Eine im Wandel: music and Kunstwissenschaft

Robert Williams

Belief in the importance of the relationship between music and the visual arts had a profound effect on the development of artistic modernism in the decades around 1900, most obviously on the emergence of abstract painting. Kandinsky is the figure who first comes to mind and whose example and influence were probably most important historically, but interest in music was shared by many of the pioneering abstractionists, from Gauguin and Seurat to Matisse, Mondrian, and Klee. At the same time, though in a less conspicuous and perhaps largely indirect way, music helped to shape 'formalist' art theory and criticism. Pater's emphatic claim that '*all art constantly aspires to the condition of music*',¹ published in 1873, was frequently invoked during the subsequent decades, and Kandinsky's elaboration of the relation between music and painting in *On the Spiritual in Art*, of 1911, based on his belief that all the arts now receive their 'most valuable lesson' from music,² can be understood as an effort to follow through on the project implicit in Pater's remark, even though Pater is not mentioned by name. The sense of an analogical relationship between music and painting seems to have been so pervasive that explicit references to it, numerous as they are, do not indicate the real the extent of its importance. One is tempted to characterize it as culturally overdetermined, partly accessible to the consciousness of the protagonists, certainly, but also partly structured by larger forces that are more difficult to objectify.

The aim of this essay is to show that a sense of the relation of music to the visual arts also exerted an influence on the development of *Kunstwissenschaft* and the modern discipline of art history during the same period, and that this influence, too, was more pervasive than explicit references to it would lead one to suspect. This case is worth making with some emphasis because the scholars in question, eager to establish their discipline upon rigorously empirical, 'scientific' methods, made a point of centering their inquiry upon the specifically visual properties of the works involved, and subsequent art history – including much recent work that is pointedly anti-empirical – has perpetuated, even intensified, this fixation on the visual. The fact that the influence of music should come to the fore at just the moment when art history was trying to specify its area of competence most precisely indicates the unique importance of music in the culture of the period, especially in the German-

¹ W. Pater, *The Renaissance*, London: William Collins & Sons, 1910, 135.

² W. Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1912, esp. 37.

speaking lands: given that importance, indeed, such influence should hardly surprise us; one wonders how an intellectually ambitious *Kunstwissenschaft* could have remained *un*influenced by music. On another level, however, it also offers a critique of the visual fetishism of contemporary art history. To return to the moment around 1900 is thus to invite the reconsideration of methodological possibilities that the subsequent development of the field has neglected or suppressed.

By way of making the connection between music and *Kunstwissenschaft* at the deepest, most crucial level, this essay will concentrate on the work of Alois Riegl. A figure of indisputable importance in the formation of the discipline, Riegl has been the object of much careful study: his intellectual development and the nature of his achievement, especially the origin and meaning of his concept of *Kunstwollen*, have been scrutinized again and again by scholars of diverse orientations and interests, and their interpretations have ranged widely.³ Art history in the English-speaking world seems finally to have moved beyond Gombrich's highly prejudicial account, according to which Riegl was a dogmatic idealist in the tradition of Hegel. More recent studies have drawn attention both to the philosophical irrationalism to which Riegl was exposed as a young student at the University of Vienna in the mid-1870's and the positivism predominant at the Institute for Austrian Historical Research, where he enrolled in 1880; they have emphasized the complex balance of ingredients that contributed to Riegl's mature and most influential work. The suggestion advanced here is that music was another such ingredient, and that it helps to explain aspects of *Kunstwollen* – and thus of Riegl's influential conception of *Kunstwissenschaft* – that deserve more attention than they have received from contemporary art historians.

³Important studies include: E. Panofsky, 'Der Begriff des Kunstwollens', *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, H. Oberer & E. Verheyen, eds., Berlin: Verlag Bruno Hessling, 1964, 33-47 (trans. 'The Concept of Artistic Volition', K.J. Northcote & J. Snyder, *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 1981, 17-33); M. Dvorak, 'Alois Riegl', *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kunstgeschichte*, Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1929, 279-99; H. Sedlmayr, 'Quintessenz des Lehren Riegls', *Alois Riegl: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, K. Swoboda, ed., Augsburg: Benno Filser Verlag, 1929, xii-xxxiv (trans. 'The Quintessence of Riegl's Thought', in *Framing Formalism*, cit. below) 11-31; O. Pächt, 'Art Historians and Art Critics - vi: Alois Riegl', *Burlington Magazine* (105: 1963) 188-93; H. Zerner, 'Alois Riegl: Art, Value, and Historicism', *Daedalus* (105: 1976) 177-88; W. Sauerländer, 'Alois Riegl und die Entstehung der autonomen Kunstgeschichte am Fin de siècle', *Fin de Siècle: Zu Literatur und Kunst der Jahrhundertwende*, R. Bauer et al., eds., Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1977, 125-39; M. Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982; W. Kemp, 'Alois Riegl', *Altmeister moderner Kunstgeschichte*, H. Dilly, ed., Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1990, 37-60; M. Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art*, University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1992; M. Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993; D. G. Reynolds, *Alois Riegl and the Politics of Art History*, Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1997; L. Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes: Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik*, Reinbeck b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997, esp. 57-71; *Framing Formalism: Riegl's Work*, R. Woodfield, ed., Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001, 11-31; A. Reichenberger, *Riegls Kunstwollen: Versuch einer Neubetrachtung*, Sankt Augustin: Akademia Verlag, 2003; M. Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006.

If, by the middle of the nineteenth century, music enjoyed pre-eminence among the arts, its rise to that position had been very rapid. In his *Critique of Judgment*, of 1790, Kant had placed music at the bottom of his hierarchy of the arts: poetry occupied the highest position, the figural arts were next, and music last because, in his words, it ‘plays merely with the sensations’.⁴ Hegel understood poetry to be the highest art form, music next, and the visual arts, as the most material, lowest of all.⁵ With Schopenhauer, things change dramatically: although he considered himself a Kantian, he inverted Kant’s hierarchy of the arts, putting music at the top and making a case for its superiority that surpasses even the exalted claims made for art in general – usually for poetry – by early Romantics such as Schelling and Novalis.⁶ Indeed, he anticipated Pater by more than fifty years when he wrote that ‘to be like music is the aim of every art’.⁷ In *The World as Will and Representation*, published in 1819 – less than thirty years after Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* – he argued that while the other arts only have access to intermediary objectifications of reality, music is a direct expression of that reality – in Kantian terms, the thing-in-itself – which he calls the Will.⁸ So complete is the identification of music and the Will that he says ‘We could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied Will’.⁹ Unlike the other arts, dependent on the imitation of the phenomenal world, ‘music . . . could to a certain extent exist if there was no world at all’.¹⁰

Several aspects of this assessment require emphasis in this context: the first has to do with the qualities of ‘immateriality’, ‘interiority’, and their interdependence. Music allows us to penetrate the world of phenomena to achieve direct contact with a deeper reality. It does not ‘express the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena, the Will itself’;¹¹ it accomplishes in

⁴ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, J.C. Meredith, trans., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, 195; see also C. Fricke, ‘Kant’, *Musik in der deutschen Philosophie: Eine Einführung*, S. L. Sorgner & O. Fürbeth, eds., Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2003, 21-30, esp. 29-30.

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on the Fine Arts*, J.M. Knox, trans., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, esp. I, 82-90. The case for the historical significance of Hegel’s ideas about music is summarized by H. Schnädelbach, ‘Hegel’, Sorgner & Fürbeth, eds. (n. 4) 55-75.

⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, P. Heath, trans., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978, 19-36; Novalis’s claim that poetry is ‘the peculiar mode of action of the human spirit’ (‘die eigentümliche Handlungsweise des menschlichen Geistes’) is cited in R. Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, I, 83.

⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer: *der handschriftliche Nachlass*, A. Hübscher, ed., Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966, I, 210): ‘Wie die Musik zu werden ist das Ziel jeder Kunst’.

⁸ A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, R.B. Haldane & J. Kemp, trans., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, I, 330-46 (sec. 52); *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, W. von Löhneysen, ed., Stuttgart: Cotta, 1960, I, 52-72.

⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World*, 340 (*Die Welt*, 366): ‘man könnte demnach die Welt ebensowohl verkörperte Musik als verkörperten Willen nennen’.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, *The World*, 333 (*Die Welt*, 359): ‘. . . die Musik. . . könnte gewissermassen, auch wenn die Welt gar nicht wäre, doch bestehn’.

¹¹ Schopenhauer, *The World*, 338 (*Die Welt*, 364): ‘. . . nie die Erscheinung, sondern allein das innere Wesen, das An-sich aller Erscheinungen, den Willen selbst ausspricht’. For succinct and lucid

immediate, sensuous and irresistible fashion that effacement of the phenomenal world, which for Kant – as for Plato – could only be accomplished by pure intellectual intuition. Much of the power of music depends upon the liberating, uplifting, and consoling emotional effect that such effacement has on us. Even when expressing emotions, music does so in special, transformative fashion, stripping them of their particularity: ‘It does not therefore express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their motives’.¹² Schopenhauer’s language constantly emphasizes the immaterial aspect of the truth thus revealed: in music, our emotions are recalled to us, but ‘always in the universal, in the mere form, without the material, always according to the thing-in-itself, not the phenomenon [but] the inmost soul, as it were, of the phenomenon, without the body’.¹³ The composer reveals ‘the inner nature of the world’;¹⁴ music expresses the ‘quintessence of life’,¹⁵ ‘the inner nature, the in-itself of the world’.¹⁶

Before proceeding with his new explanation, Schopenhauer mentions the traditional account of the appeal of music in terms of the numerical relationships it contains, an approach exemplified for him by a remark of Leibniz: ‘music is an arithmetical exercise in which the mind does not know it is counting’. Leibniz is right, as far as *form* is concerned, Schopenhauer admits, but if such an explanation were sufficient, the satisfaction which music offers us ‘would be like that which we feel when a sum in arithmetic comes out right, and could not be that intense pleasure with which we see the deepest recesses of our nature find utterance’.¹⁷ A few pages later he intentionally parodies Leibniz – but also clarifies his relationship to the formalist approach – by insisting that music is ‘an unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophizing’.¹⁸

contextualizations of Schopenhauer’s ideas as they bear upon art in general: M. Podro, *The Manifold in Perception: Theories of Art from Kant to Hildebrandt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, esp. 92-110; J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990, esp. 73-85. On his ideas about music in particular: L. Ferrara, ‘Schopenhauer on music as the embodiment of Will’, *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*, D. Jacquette, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 183-99; L. Goehr, ‘Schopenhauer and the musicians: an inquiry into the sounds of silence and the limits of philosophizing about music’, in Jacquette, ed., *Schopenhauer*, 200-28; G. Zöller, ‘Schopenhauer’, in Sorgner & Fürbeth, eds. (n. 3) 99-114; L. Goehr, ‘*Doppelbewegung*: The Musical Movement of Philosophy and the Philosophical Movement of Music’, *Sound Figures of Modernity: German Music and Philosophy*, J. Hermand & G. Richter, eds., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006, 19-63; A. Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, esp. 194-202.

¹²Schopenhauer, *The World* (n. 8) 338 (*Die Welt*, 364).

¹³Schopenhauer, *The World*, 339 (*Die Welt*, 366).

¹⁴Schopenhauer, *The World*, 336 (*Die Welt*, 363).

¹⁵Schopenhauer, *The World*, 338 (*Die Welt*, 364).

¹⁶Schopenhauer, *The World*, 342 (*Die Welt*, 368).

¹⁷Schopenhauer, *The World*, 330-1 (*Die Welt*, 357).

¹⁸Schopenhauer, *The World*, 342 (*Die Welt*, 369).

A third point is that, because music is thus a form of philosophy, and philosophy is 'a complete and accurate repetition or expression of the world in very general concepts', *writing* about music is also a kind of philosophy:

Thus, whoever has followed me and entered into my mode of thought, will not think it so very paradoxical if I say, that supposing it were possible to give a perfectly accurate, complete explanation of music, extending even to particulars, that is to say, a detailed repetition in concepts of what it expresses, this would also be a sufficient repetition of the world in concepts, or at least entirely parallel to such an explanation, and thus it would be true philosophy.¹⁹

Since the work of music is to reveal the essence of things, it has innate philosophical content. To write about it is to articulate, and perhaps even to advance the philosophical project implicit in it.

The revaluation of art as a philosophical enterprise was one of the great achievements of German Romanticism, and Schopenhauer's treatment of music can be seen as the climax of that process: it set a new standard and offered new terms for the understanding of what art, in its most serious, most exalted form, might be thought to accomplish, the truth it might be thought to reveal. His ideas were endorsed with great fanfare by Wagner, who read *Will and Representation* in 1854 and claimed that they influenced his composition of *Tristan and Isolde*, completed in 1859; he also discussed them at length in his widely-read essay on Beethoven, published in 1870. Wagner's discipleship vastly extended the influence of Schopenhauer's ideas, helping to popularize them among the French Symbolists, for instance.²⁰ For Nietzsche, who read Schopenhauer in 1866 and soon thereafter came under Wagner's influence, music exposes the hidden truth of human nature; it addresses all those issues that academic rationalism had suppressed but which the philosophy of the future should boldly confront. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (originally *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*), published in 1872, and in subsequent writings, music figures as the privileged art, uniquely able to probe those aspects of human experience that the other arts cannot reach, and thus

¹⁹Schopenhauer, *The World*, 342 (*Die Welt*, 368-9):

. . . so wird, wer mir gefolgt und meine Denkungsart eingegangen ist, est nicht so sehr paradox finden, wenn ich sage, dass, gesetzt, es gelänge, eine vollkommen richtige, vollständige und in das einzelne gehende Erklärung der Musik, also eine ausführliche Wiederholung dessen, was sie ausdrückt, in Begriffen zu geben, diese sofort auch eine genügende Wiederholung und Erklärung der Welt in begriffen oder einer solchen ganz gleichlautend, also die wahre Philosophie sein würde. . .

²⁰S. Doss-Davezac, 'Schopenhauer according to the Symbolists: the philosophical roots of late nineteenth-century French aesthetic theory', Jacquette, ed. (n. 11) 249-76.

uniquely able to present a deeper, more complex, more advanced – more modern – account of the world.²¹

Schopenhauer can thus be seen as having provided philosophical support for what might be called a ‘metaphysical’ or ‘expressionist’ approach to music. In the same year in which Wagner first read Schopenhauer, 1854, the music critic Eduard Hanslick published his essay *On the Musically Beautiful*. Aggressively polemical in its empiricism and anti-expressionism, rigorously attentive to the objective formal properties of the music itself, it aimed to refine upon the tradition that Schopenhauer associated with Leibniz, but inflected that tradition with a new emphasis on movement. In Hanslick’s formulation, music is essentially ‘tonally moving forms’ or ‘tonal forms in motion’ (*tönend bewegte Formen*).²² While such an approach, together with his vehement criticism of Wagner, would seem to put Hanslick at the opposite pole from Schopenhauer, he did share some of the philosopher’s fundamental assumptions: he denies the ability of music to represent specific emotions, for instance, but does not deny that it works upon our emotions and that much of its interest depends upon the fact that it does so; his insistence that music engages emotion indirectly, by creating dynamic formal structures that often seem to resemble the dynamic patterns of our emotional life, is not unlike the way in which, for Schopenhauer, music elevates emotions from their specificity. In the first edition of the essay, Hanslick had included two brief excursions into the metaphysical, describing music as a ‘an image in sound of the great motions of the universe’.²³

As a student in his early twenties, Riegl belonged to a reading club in which Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were discussed,²⁴ and he would certainly have been aware of the polemical exchanges between Wagner and Hanslick: by the time he was a student, Hanslick had become a professor of musicology at the University of Vienna; Riegl took courses from one of his friends and allies, the philosopher Robert Zimmermann. In 1865, Zimmermann had completed a monumental *Aesthetics*, in which he elaborated a systematically empirical approach to form, discussing music side by side with the visual arts. At his urging, Hanslick had decided to suppress the metaphysical passages in all subsequent editions of *On the Musically Beautiful*.²⁵

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, D. Smith, trans., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, esp. 85-90 (sec. 16); S. Dieminger, *Musik im Denken Nietzsches*, Essen: Blaue Eule, 2002; S.L. Sorgner, “Nietzsche”, in Sorgner & Fürbeth, eds. (n. 3) 115-34.

²² Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, G. Payzant, trans., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1986, 29; *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1910, 59.

²³ Cited in Zöllner (n. 11) 109-10: ‘ein tönendes Abbild der grossen Bewegungen im Weltall’. See also C. Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, R. Lustig, trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 27-8, 72-3.

²⁴ On the reading club: W. McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Vienna*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974; other members included Mahler and Freud, who both remained admirers of Schopenhauer throughout their lives. On Riegl’s participation in the club: Reynolds (n. 3) 14, 27; on Schopenhauer’s reception in Vienna: D. Luft, ‘Schopenhauer, Austria, and the Generation of 1905’, *Central European History*, 16, 2003, 53-75.

²⁵ R. Zimmermann, *Geschichte der Aesthetik als philosophischer Wissenschaft*, Vienna: W. Baumüller, 1858; *Allgemeine Aesthetik als Formwissenschaft*, Vienna: W. Baumüller, 1865. For discussions of his thought

Whatever the impact of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on the young Riegl, and whatever his interest in the debate between the expressionism of Wagner and the formalism of Hanslick and Zimmermann, his decision to enter the Institute for Austrian Historical Research must be taken to indicate a dedication to the rigorous empiricism predominant there. His early work, too, indicates a wholehearted acceptance of that approach and, as has often been remarked, he continued to think of himself as a 'scientifically trained specialist' throughout his life.²⁶ There is little indication of the influence of Schopenhauer until much later in his career, although at least one commentator believes that his early preoccupation with the decorative arts, culminating in *Problems of Style*, published in 1893, may have been inspired by a passage in which Schopenhauer claims that the spirit of an age (*Zeitgeist*) can easily be glimpsed in architecture and in other non-representational artforms, 'ornaments, vessels, furniture, and utensils of all kinds'.²⁷ The second version of Riegl's *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, drafted in 1899, has been said to mark a shift in his thinking, a new emphasis on human creative activity as a response to the hostile conditions of existence that is reminiscent of Schopenhauer.²⁸ His book *Dutch Group Portraiture*, published in 1902, makes extensive use of the notion of 'will-less attentiveness', which obviously derives from Schopenhauer and indicates a deep appreciation of the philosopher's ideas regarding art in general.²⁹

Of greater significance is the extent of Schopenhauer's influence on the idea of *Kunstwollen*. Otto Pächt cautioned against assuming any connection between Riegl's term and Schopenhauer's *Wille* by pointing out that Riegl did not use the word *Kunstwille*, which he might have done had he wished to make the connection to Schopenhauer explicit.³⁰ For Lambert Wiesing, however, Riegl's indebtedness to Schopenhauer is already evident in the opening pages of *Problems of Style*, where the 'materialism' of Semper and his followers is strongly criticized. Since for Schopenhauer, the Will cannot be fully reduced to rational analysis, *Kunstwollen* offers a way to account for the essence of a work of art, that element within it which cannot be reduced to explanation in terms of cause and effect.³¹ Diana Graham

and influence on Riegl: Wiesing (n. 3) 27-54; Gubser (n. 3) 97-104. For his influence on Hanslick: Dahlhaus (n. 23) 28.

²⁶ Reynolds (n. 3) 57, also 66: 'Riegl remained committed to positivist methodology all his life, but his lasting achievement was to combine his positivism with the critique of scholarly culture he had learned from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche'.

²⁷ Reynolds (n. 3) 224-5, 231

²⁸ Olin (n. 3) 113-22; For the sources of Riegl's irrationalism, see Reynolds (n. 3) 29-45, who goes on to argue that Riegl eventually developed 'a highly-articulated philosophical pessimism close to Schopenhauer's philosophy of will' and explicitly anti-Hegelian (215), even that he 'incorporated significant elements of Nietzsche's theory of culture into his mature theories of art' (44). She also finds evidence of sympathy with Nietzsche in Riegl's claim that innovative art history depends on knowing how to ignore certain facts at the right moment (239), and connects Riegl's turn toward philosophical irrationalism with the Wiener Secession (esp. 225-31).

²⁹ First observed by Pächt (n. 3) 191-2; see also Iversen (n. 3) 97-8, and esp. Reynolds (n. 3) 247, 262-9.

³⁰ Pächt (n. 3) 190

³¹ Wiesing (n. 3) 72-9.

Reynolds emphasizes the significance of Schopenhauer's 'idealistic pessimism' and of the way in which it offered an alternative to the teleological rationalism of Hegel: 'Throughout the decade of the 1890's Riegl expanded his concept of *Kunstwollen* until it became an unmistakably idealist formulation that challenged the claims of academic rationalism.'³²

Whatever the difficulties involved in reconciling Riegl's different uses of the term or in understanding its larger methodological implications, he clearly thought of *Kunstwollen* as an invisible – immaterial and internal – yet real and objective principle or force that determines the form of individual works of art and that drives the development of art over time: it is thus *the necessary object of art-historical inquiry*. Before it is anything else, *Kunstwollen* is that thing-in-itself which the discipline of art history must assume to exist as the condition of its own possibility as a science.³³ *The revelation of the truth of things that, for Schopenhauer, is uniquely available in music, serves as the model for Riegl's idea of the specific truth that serious art-historical inquiry must undertake to reveal*. Schopenhauer's claim that writing about music is a form of philosophical inquiry may have provided Riegl with a bridge between the revelation possible through art of the most profound and exalted kind and the understanding to be sought in the most ambitious and rigorous science of art.

Schopenhauer's emphasis on immateriality stands behind Riegl's rejection of 'materialist' art history, already evident in *Problems of Style*. Anti-materialism was widespread, but that Schopenhauer, specifically, was understood as having reconciled anti-materialism with scientific method is strikingly indicated in an essay by the Parisian Symbolist poet Gustav Kahn, published in 1886: relying on the researches of Charles Henry, Kahn believed that his artistic convictions were justified by 'scientific theories established by induction' and experimentally confirmed, and that these theories permit one to 'spurn all reality of matter' and to admit 'the existence of the world only as a representation'.³⁴ Kandinsky, whose thought about music was deeply indebted to Wagner, but who also likened his exploration of color to scientific inquiry, believed that abstraction liberated painting from materialism.

Riegl's emphasis on the immaterial was partly motivated by a desire to displace attention from the individual work of art onto the relations between works of art in space and time, and thus onto the dynamics of historical development. This point is made most succinctly and emphatically in the essay 'A New Art History', published in 1901, in which Riegl traced the history of modern art-historical scholarship and described its most recent phase – a reaction against materialistic

³²Reynolds, (n. 3) 270.

³³Zerner (n. 3) 181-2: suggests that the very elusiveness of the term is what makes Riegl's approach scientific, and adduces a puzzling passage in the essay 'Naturwerk und Kunstwerk I' (*Gesammelte Aufsätze*, n. 3, 59-60) in which *Kunstwollen* is described as 'the one certain datum remaining' (*das einzig sicher Gegebene übrig*) when all factors susceptible to analysis by cause and effect are set aside. The passage is also discussed by Reichenberger (n. 3) 95-9, and Gubser (n. 3) 156-7.

³⁴G. Kahn 'Response of the Symbolists', excerpt in *Art in Theory, 1815-1900*, C. Harrison, et al., eds., Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 1017.

approaches that had been characterized by a preoccupation with individual objects – as an effort to achieve more comprehensive understanding:

One began again to seek behind the individual works of art and their specific geographical and chronological origins a higher essence, one which they might share with other works of art and the knowledge of which might enable us to take them up in our awareness in a completely different way than in terms of the simple knowledge of their external historical context. One conceived anew the need for a unifying, common principle, for only such a thing really teaches us to understand the individual works, and helps us to explain not just individual periods but the whole history of art in its uninterrupted continuity. What is that one thing in the midst of change, and what causes its apparent change? That is the modern question of art history.

. . .³⁵

Though he does not use the term in this context, *Kunstwollen* was clearly Riegl's answer to this most urgent question. The object of art-historical inquiry is not the individual work of art but the relation between works of art, particularly their relation in time. Yet this relation is not a matter of 'external historical context'; it is determined by a 'higher essence', something that structures individual works *from within*, even as it extends beyond them to others. Indeed, *only* such a principle makes a real – that is, properly scientific – understanding of individual works possible. And only the reduction to a single principle enables us to organize an account of 'the

³⁵'Eine neue Kunstgeschichte', *Gesammelte Schriften* (n. 3), 46:

Man begann wiederum hinter den einzelnen Kunstwerken mit ihrer bestimmten örtlichen un zeitlichen Entstehung auch ein höheres Wesentliches zu suchen, das sie mit anderen Kunstwerken teilten und dessen Erkenntnis uns in ganz anderer Weise befähigte, diese Kunstwerke in unser Bewusstsein aufzunehmen, als die blosses Kenntnis ihrer äusseren historischen Stellung. Man empfand aufs neue das Bedürfnis nach einem Vereinheitlichenden, Gemeinsamen, weil nur ein solches uns die einzelnen Kunstwerke wirklich verstehen lehrt, und zwar sollte es nun nicht mehr allein einzelnene Perioden, sondern die ganze Kunstgeschichte in ihrem ununterbrochenen Verlaufe erklären helfen. Was ist das Eine im Wandel, und wodurch ist sein scheinbarer Wandel bedingt? Das ist die moderne Frage der Kunstgeschichte. . .

This passage is conceptually more developed than either of two related ones written shortly before: the first in the essay 'Kunstgeschichte als Universalgeschichte' (*Gesammelte Schriften*, 7-8), published in 1898, and discussed by Gubser (n. 3) 129; the second in the introduction to the second version of *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* (J.E. Jung, trans., New York: Zone Books, 2004, 287-91; *Historische Grammatik der bildende Künste*, K.M. Swoboda & O. Pächt, eds., Graz: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachf., 1966, 207-11) written in 1899. The importance of the need to emphasize unifying elements had already been expressed in the introduction to *Problems of Style* (E. Kain, ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 12; *Stilfragen*, Berlin, 1893 [repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975] xvii-xix): 'Bisher Getrenntes und Geschiedenes soll untereinander verbunden, und unter einheitlichem Gesichtspunkte betrachtet werden. In der That liegt die nächste Aufgabe auf dem Gebiete der Ornamentgeschichte darin, den in tausend Stücke zerschnittenen Faden wieder zusammenzuknüpfen'.

whole history of art in its uninterrupted continuity'. By both reducing *and* extending the scope of his inquiry, Riegl sought to give the discipline both perfect rigor and perfect comprehensiveness, reshaping it in a manner that would establish its methodological autonomy as securely as possible.

As this passage also makes clear, Riegl's anti-materialism is a function of his belief that the real object of art-historical inquiry is change, or, to be more exact, that which reveals itself in change, that which change makes visible. His assumption that something essential to what art *is* reveals itself in the way art *changes* over time serves to establish the necessity of an historical approach to the study of art; it suggests that traditional aesthetics is no longer adequate to the real challenge of its object, and should be supplanted by a discipline capable of engaging the historicity of art. Riegl's method might thus be said to disintegrate, if not efface or negate, the individual work of art: in addition to all those liberating innovations with which he is customarily credited – overturning the canonical preference for 'high' to 'low' art, or the preference for 'classical' art to the art of other periods – he aspired to split the atom, as it were, of the individual art object, making its energy available to a new mode of inquiry. The emphasis on change, on history as a dynamic process, and the belief that the essence of things – the thing-in-itself – is dynamic rather than static, has an obvious affinity with late nineteenth-century vitalism.³⁶

Michael Gubser has pointed out the importance of the concept of rhythm (*Rhythmus*) in Riegl's writing, beginning with *Problems of Style*: an organizational principle at work in individual art objects, manifest in formal qualities such as repetition, variation, and interval, rhythm also structures the relation between works of art *in time*, the history of art as a whole.³⁷ But the concept of rhythm, while suggesting a musical source of inspiration, is not sufficient to explain the way in which, for Riegl, the history of art is like music.³⁸ Art reveals a complex process of change, as much like variation and development as rhythm. In fact, Riegl's conception recalls a passage in Hanslick's *On the Musically Beautiful*, in which the definition of the content of music as *tönend bewegte Formen* is clarified with a striking metaphor:

How music is able to produce beautiful forms without a specific feeling as its content is already to some extent illustrated for us by a branch of ornamentation in the visual arts, namely the arabesque. We follow sweeping

³⁶ In his essay on the Vienna School, Schlosser remarks upon the 'neo-vitalism' of Riegl's construction of history (excerpt in *Framing Formalism*, n. 3, 42); see also Sauerländer (n.3) 134-5; Gubser (n. 3) 162-3, 266-7, n. 13.

³⁷ Gubser (n. 3) 188: 'Like artistic form, history had a rhythmic structure that linked art with the world and space with time in a formal continuity that rested upon empirical contiguity'. Riegl's conception of rhythm "inscribed the temporality of viewing into the artwork itself." (192). Gubser also emphasizes the significance of Riegl's references to the writings of St. Augustine, including *De Musica*, in the conclusion of *Late Roman Art Industry* (190-2).

³⁸ Mention should also be made of the emphasis Benjamin Binstock gives to the concept of harmony in the *Historical Grammar* (n. 35) 16-7.

lines, here dipping gently, there boldly soaring, approaching and separating, corresponding curves large and small, seemingly incommensurable, yet always well connected together, to every part a counterpart, a collection of small details but yet a whole. Now let us imagine an arabesque not lifeless and inert, but coming into being in a continuous self-formation before our eyes. How the lines, some robust and some delicate, pursue one another! How they ascend from a small curve to great heights and then sink back again, how they expand and contract and forever astonish the eye with their ingenious alternation of tension and repose!³⁹

Riegl's account of the historical development of vegetal motifs in *Problems of Style*, culminating with the arabesque, describes a sequence of just such motivic transformations; it exemplifies the history of art as a kind of music. If the dynamic relation between objects lurks, as it were, within or beneath the surface of their visibility, distinctness, and materiality, then 'that one thing in the midst of change', the object of Riegl's history of art, lurks deeper still, within or beneath that dynamic relation, within or beneath change itself. Art history involves a double negation that allows us to penetrate the world of phenomena *and* the conditional relation of those phenomena; it reconstitutes the unity of the object at a deeper level, in immaterial form, as a dynamic principle, as pure energy.

Riegl's emphasis on immateriality and on the relationship between immateriality and dynamism is also evident in the nature of the historical patterns he detects, whether it be the evolution from 'haptic' to 'optic' sketched out in *Problems of Style* and elaborated in *Late Roman Art Industry*, with its account of the development of representational systems based on isolated motifs to ones in which the network of formal relationships becomes increasingly interconnected, or *The Dutch Group Portrait*, with its account of the transition from 'internal' to 'external' coherence and the shift from an 'objective' to a 'subjective' mode of representation. The content of these patterns is consistent in a way that also finds echoes elsewhere. Wölfflin deliberately evokes Riegl when he relates his idea of an evolution from linear to painterly modes of representation to an evolution from tactile to optical modes of perception,⁴⁰ but Mondrian, writing in the 1930's, characterizes the

³⁹ Hanslick (n. 22) 29 (*Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*, 59-60):

In welcher Weise uns die Musik schöne Formen ohne das Inhalt eines bestimmten Affektes bringen kann, zeigt uns entfernt bereits ein Zweig der Ornamentik in der bildenden Kunst: die Arabeske. Wir erblicken geschwungene Linien, hier sanft sich neigend, dort kühn emporstrebend, sich findend und loslassend, in kleinen und grossen Bogen korrespondierend, scheinbar inkommensurabel, doch immer wohlgegliedert, überall ein Gegen- oder Seitenstück begrüssend, eine Sammlung kleiner Einzelheiten und doch ein Ganzes. Denken wir uns eine Arabeske, nicht tot und ruhend, sondern in fortwährender Selbstbildung vor unsern Augen entstehend. Wie die Starken und feinen Linien einander verfolgen, aus kleiner Biegung zu prächtiger Höhe sich hebe, dann wieder senken, sich erweitern, zusammenziehen und in sinnigem Wechsel von Ruhe und Anspannung das Auge stets neu überraschen!

⁴⁰H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, M.D. Hottinger, trans., New York: Dover Publications, 1950, 229.

development of abstraction in terms that also recall Riegl, even though he makes no reference to him: 'Non-figurative art is created by establishing a *dynamic rhythm of determinate mutual relations which excludes the formation of any particular form*'. That this apparently radical agenda is simply an extension of earlier art is indicated when he adds – in one of the most important assertions in modern art theory – that 'to destroy particular form is only to do more consistently what all art has done'.⁴¹

The concept of inner necessity occurs frequently in Riegl, as in the writings of many modernists in the decades around 1900.⁴² Since it describes both the stylistic consistency of individual works of art and the force that drives artistic development in time, it describes the object of *Kunstwissenschaft* as Riegl conceived it; that is to say, it is an essential characteristic of *Kunstwollen*. The inner necessity of a work of art, that which is documented by the work's having assumed a particular form and no other, is the dynamic quality it acquires by virtue of being an object of properly scientific, art-historical regard, the specifically art-historical energy with which it is charged.

The concept of inner necessity, like that of a 'higher essence' relating works of art to one another, tends to scare off the modern reader: distaste for idealism remains a potent force among contemporary cultural historians, no less for post-Marxists and post-structuralists than for Gombrichian neo-positivists. In reconsidering Riegl's achievement and his potential utility for us, we should acknowledge his idealism, but also recognize its dynamic quality: his object is not the 'one in the many' of Plato but the 'one thing in the midst of change'. Schopenhauer had pointedly identified the intermediate objectifications of reality with Platonic ideas; the truth to which music gives access, in contrast, is deeper and more authentic, more intensely negative in the way it effaces the phenomenal world. For Plato, that world is false because it is a realm of ceaseless change; the ideas are true by virtue of their eternal validity, their timelessness. For Schopenhauer the opposite is the case: it is the ultimate reality that is dynamic, only our illusions remain fixed. Schopenhauer's idealism is thus distinctively modern: it might be

⁴¹From the essay 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art', excerpt in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990*, C. Harrison & P. Wood, eds., Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, 372.

⁴²In Kandinsky and Schoenberg, for instance: *Schoenberg and Kandinsky: An Historic Encounter*, K. Boehmer, ed., Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997; *Die innere Notwendigkeit: Gedanken zu Musik, Malerei und Bühne bei Schönberg, Kandinsky und anderen*, B. Reifenscheid, ed., Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2000. The determinism implicit in the idea that history is driven by some kind of inner necessity is what most frequently leads to Riegl being called a Hegelian. Riegl himself characterized his enterprise as 'teleological' in the introduction to *Late Roman Art Industry* (R. Winkes, trans., Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985, 9; *Spätromische Kunstindustrie*, Vienna: Österreichischer Staatsdruckerei, 1927, 9) but various commentators have emphasized the special sense in which that claim must be understood: Binstock (*Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* [n. 35] 24) describes Riegl's approach as 'teleology without telos', Gubser (n. 3) 161, as 'micro-teleology'. Reynolds (n. 3), who is concerned to argue throughout that Riegl was an anti-Hegelian, does not deny the presence of deterministic elements in his work, but insists that they should not be regarded as specifically Hegelian (13, n. 34, 44, n. 51, 100, 215).

described as proto-vitalist or proto-phenomenological, and Riegl's is essentially similar. More recent art historians, in their haste to distance themselves from any form of idealism, but also because of their tendency to fetishize individual works of art, works of art *as objects*, have failed to appreciate the way in which Riegl's idealism made his radicalism possible, and have thus failed to recognize the most fundamental – and most liberating – aspect of his achievement.

The emphasis on the immaterial and the dynamic in the study of art forms that are preponderantly material and static indicates just how powerfully music – the most immaterial and dynamic of the arts – conditioned thinking about the arts in general. It documents an investment in notions of the immaterial and the dynamic in the decades around 1900 – undoubtedly symptomatic of a cultural condition too complex to diagnose here – that was expressed in terms ranging from the scientific to the mystical. Music, by setting the standard for what art at its most profound and powerful can do, offered a challenge that any ambitious *Kunstwissenschaft* would have to confront: if the qualities that make art worth attending to at all are believed to be exemplified in the highest degree by music, then any serious attempt to define a science of art would have to accommodate that possibility in some way. Riegl did not mention either Schopenhauer or Hanslick by name, and explicit references to music are rare in his writing, yet his response to the challenge of music was deeply meditated.

Robert Williams is professor of the History of Art at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of *Art Theory and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, 1997), and *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction* (Blackwell, 2004, 2008). He is editor, with James Elkins, of *Renaissance Theory* (Routledge, 2008).

Robert Williams
Dept. of the History of Art & Architecture
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106

robertw@arthistory.ucsb.edu

