

CONTEMPORARY ART: ART CONTEMPORARY WITH ITSELF

By Jean Baudrillard / Translated by Chris Turner

The adventure of modern art is over. Contemporary art is contemporary only with itself. It no longer knows any transcendence either towards past or future; its only reality is that of its operation in real time and its confusion with that reality. Nothing now distinguishes it from the technical, promotional, media, digital operation. There is no transcendence, no divergence any more, nothing of another scene: merely a specular play with the contemporary world as it takes place. It is in this that contemporary art is worthless: between it and the world, there is a zero-sum equation. Quite apart from that shameful complicity in which creators and consumers commune wordlessly in the examination of strange, inexplicable objects that refer only to themselves and to the idea of art, the true conspiracy lies in this complicity that art forges with itself, its collusion with the real, through which it becomes complicit in that Integral Reality, of which it is now merely the image-feedback. There is no longer any differential of art. There is only the integral calculus of reality. Art is now merely an idea prostituted in its realization.

Modernity was the golden age of a deconstruction of reality into its simple elements, of a detailed analytics, first of impressionism, then of abstraction, experimentally open to all the aspects of perception, of sensibility, of the structure of the object and the dismemberment of forms. The paradox of abstraction is that, by "liberating" the object from the constraints of the figural to yield it up to the pure play of form, it shackled it to an idea of a hidden structure, of an objectivity more rigorous and radical than that of resemblance. It sought to set aside the mask of resemblance and of the figure in order to accede to the analytic truth of the object. Under the banner of abstraction, we moved paradoxically towards more reality, towards an unveiling of the "elementary structures" of objectality, that is to say, towards something more real than the real. Conversely, under the banner of a general aestheticization, art invaded the whole field of reality.

The end of this history saw the banality of art merge with the banality of the real world -- Duchamp's act, with its automatic transference of the object, being the inaugural (and ironic) gesture in this process. The transference of all reality into aesthetics, which has become one of the dimensions of generalized exchange... All this under the banner of a simultaneous liberation of art and the real world. This "liberation" has in fact consisted in indexing the two to each other -- a chiasmus lethal to both. The transference of art, become a useless function, into a reality that is now integral, since it has absorbed everything that denied, exceeded or transfigured it. The impossible exchange of this Integral Reality for anything else whatever. Given this, it can only exchange itself for itself or, in other words, repeat itself *ad infinitum*.

What could miraculously reassure us today about the essence of art? Art is

quite simply what is at issue in the world of art, in that desperately self-obsessed artistic community. The "creative" act doubles up on itself and is now nothing more than a sign of its own operation -- the painter's true subject is no longer what he paints but the very fact that he paints. He paints the fact that he paints. At least in that way the idea of art remains intact.

This is merely one of the sides of the conspiracy. The other side is that of the spectator who, for want of understanding anything whatever most of the time, consumes his own culture at one remove. He literally consumes the fact that he understands nothing and that there is no necessity in all this except the imperative of culture, of being a part of the integrated circuit of culture. But culture is itself merely an epiphenomenon of global circulation. The idea of art has become rarefied and minimal, leading ultimately to conceptual art, where it ends in the non-exhibition of non-works in non-galleries -- the apotheosis of art as a non-event. As a corollary, the consumer circulates in all this in order to experience his non-enjoyment of the works.

At the extreme point of a conceptual, minimalist logic, art ought quite simply to fade away. At that point, it would doubtless become what it is: a false problem, and every aesthetic theory would be a false solution. And yet it is the case that there is all the more need to speak about it because there is nothing to say. The movement of the democratization of art has paradoxically merely strengthened the privileged status of the *idea* of art, culminating in this banal tautology of "art is art", it being possible for everything to find its place in this circular definition. As Marshall McLuhan has it, "We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art".¹

The revolutionary idea of contemporary art was that any object, any detail or fragment of the material world, could exert the same strange attraction and pose the same insoluble questions as were reserved in the past for a few rare aristocratic forms known as works of art. That is where true democracy lay: not in the accession of everyone to aesthetic enjoyment, but in the transaesthetic advent of a world in which every object would, without distinction, have its fifteen minutes of fame (particularly objects without distinction). All objects are equivalent, everything is a work of genius. With, as a corollary, the transformation of art and of the work itself into an object, without illusion or transcendence, a purely conceptual acting-out, generative of deconstructed objects which deconstruct us in their turn. No longer any face, any gaze, any human countenance or body in all this -- organs without bodies, flows, molecules, the fractal. The relation to the "artwork" is of the order of contamination, of contagion: you hook up to it, absorb or immerse yourself in it, exactly as in flows and networks. Metonymic sequence, chain reaction. No longer any real object in all this: in the ready-made it is no longer the object that's there, but the idea of the object, and we no longer find pleasure here in art, but in the idea of art. We are wholly in ideology. And, ultimately, the twofold curse of modern and contemporary art is summed up in the "ready-made": the curse of an immersion in the real and banality, and that

of a conceptual absorption in the idea of art.

"... that absurd sculpture by Picasso, with its stalks and leaves of metal; neither wings, nor victory, just a testimony, a vestige -- the idea, nothing more, of a work of art. Very similar to the other ideas and vestiges that inspire our existence -- not apples, but the idea, the reconstruction by the pomologist of what apples used to be -- not ice-cream, but the idea, the memory of something delicious, made from substitutes, from starch, glucose and other chemicals -- not sex, but the idea or evocation of sex -- the same with love, belief, thought and the rest..."²

Art, in its form, signifies nothing. It is merely a sign pointing towards absence. But what becomes of this perspective of emptiness and absence in a contemporary universe that is already totally emptied of its meaning and reality? Art can now only align itself with the general insignificance and indifference. It no longer has any privileged status. It no longer has any other final destination than this fluid universe of communication, the networks and interaction. Transmitter and receiver merging in the same loop: all transmitters, all receivers. Each subject interacting with itself, doomed to express itself without any longer having time to listen to the other. The Net and the networks clearly increase this possibility of transmitting for oneself in a closed circuit, everyone going at it with their virtual performances and contributing to the general asphyxia.

This is why, where art is concerned, the most interesting thing would be to infiltrate the spongiform encephalon of the modern spectator. For this is where the mystery lies today: in the brain of the receiver, at the nerve centre of this servility before "works of art". What is the secret of it? In the complicity between the mortification "creative artists" inflict on objects and themselves, and the mortification consumers inflict on themselves and their mental faculties. Tolerance for the worst of things has clearly increased considerably as a function of this general state of complicity.

Interface and performance -- these are the two current leitmotifs. In performance, all the forms of expression merge -- the plastic arts, photography, video, installation, the interactive screen. This vertical and horizontal, aesthetic and commercial diversification is henceforth part of the work, the original core of which cannot be located. A (non-)event like *The Matrix* illustrates this perfectly: this is the very archetype of the global installation, of the total global fact: not just the film, which is, in a way, the alibi, but the spin-offs, the simultaneous projection at all points of the globe and the millions of spectators themselves who are inextricably part of it. We are all, from a global, interactive point of view, the actors in this global total fact.

Photography has the selfsame problem when we undertake to multi-mediatize it by adding to it all the resources of montage, collage, the digital and CGI, etc. This opening-up to the infinite, this deregulation, is, literally, the death of

photography by its elevation to the stage of performance. In this universal mix, each register loses its specificity -- just as each individual loses his sovereignty in interaction and the networks -- just as the real and the image, art and reality lose their respective energy by ceasing to be differential poles.

Since the nineteenth century, it has been art's claim that it is useless. It has prided itself on this (which was not the case in classical art, where, in a world that was not yet either real or objective, the question of usefulness did not even arise). Extending this principle, it is enough to elevate any object to uselessness to turn it into a work of art. This is precisely what the "ready-made" does, when it simply withdraws an object from its function, without changing it in any way, and thereby turns it into a gallery piece. It is enough to turn the real itself into a useless function to make it an art object, prey to the devouring aesthetic of banality. Similarly, old objects, being obsolete and hence useless, automatically acquire an aesthetic aura. Their being distant from us in time is the equivalent of Duchamp's artistic act; they too become "ready-mades", nostalgic vestiges resuscitated in our museum universe. We might extrapolate this aesthetic transfiguration to the whole of material production. As soon as it reaches a threshold where it is no longer exchanged in terms of social wealth, it becomes something like a giant Surrealist object, in the grip of a devouring aesthetic, and everywhere takes its place in a kind of virtual museum. And so we have the museumification, like a "ready-made", of the whole technical environment in the form of industrial wasteland.

The logic of uselessness could not but lead contemporary art to a predilection for waste, which is itself useless by definition. Through waste, the figuration of waste, the obsession with waste, art fiercely proclaims its uselessness. It demonstrates its non-use-value, its non-exchange-value at the same time as selling itself very dear. There is a misconception here. *Uselessness has no value in itself.* It is a secondary symptom and, by sacrificing its aims to this negative quality, art goes completely off track, into a gratuitousness that is itself useless. It is the same scenario, more or less, as that of nullity, of the claim to non-meaning, insignificance and banality, which attests to a redoubled aesthetic pretension. Anti-art strives, in all its forms, to escape the aesthetic dimension. But since the "ready-made" has annexed banality itself, all that is finished. The innocence of non-meaning, of the non-figurative, of abjection and dissidence, is finished. All these things, which contemporary art would like to be, or return to, merely reinforce the inexorably aesthetic character of this anti-art.

Art has always denied itself. But once it did so through excess, thrilling to the play of its disappearance. Today it denies itself by default -- worse, it denies its own death. It immerses itself in reality, instead of being the agent of the symbolic murder of that same reality, instead of being the magical operator of its disappearance. And the paradox is that the closer it gets to this phenomenal confusion, this nullity as art, the greater credit and value it is accorded, to the extent that, to paraphrase Canetti, we have reached a point where nothing is beautiful or ugly any more; we passed that point without

realizing it and, since we cannot get back to that blind spot, we can only persevere in the current destruction of art.

Lastly, what purpose does this useless function serve? From what, by its very uselessness, does it deliver us? Like politicians, who deliver us from the wearisome responsibility of power, contemporary art, by its incoherent artifice, delivers us from the ascendancy of meaning by providing us with the spectacle of non-sense. This explains its proliferation: independently of any aesthetic value, it is assured of prospering by dint of its very insignificance and emptiness. Just as the politician endures in the absence of any representativeness or credibility.

So art and the art market flourish precisely in proportion to their decay: they are the modern charnel-houses of culture and the simulacrum.

It is absurd, then, to say that contemporary art is worthless and that there's no point to it, since that is its vital function: to illustrate our uselessness and absurdity. Or, more accurately, to make that decay its stock in trade, while exorcizing it as spectacle.

If, as some have proposed, the function of art was to make life more interesting than art, then we have to give up that illusion. One gets the impression that a large part of current art participates in an enterprise of deterrence, a work of mourning for the image and the imaginary, a -- mostly failed -- work of aesthetic mourning that leads to a general melancholia of the artistic sphere, which seems to survive its own demise by recycling its history and its relics.

But neither art nor aesthetics is alone in being doomed to this melancholy destiny of living not beyond their means, but beyond their ends.

¹ In English in the original.

² This passage is cited from an unidentified work by Saul Bellow, and I have not been able to trace the original. As a result, I can only offer here a retranslation of the French