

Art... Contemporary of Itself

The adventure of modern art is over. Contemporary art is only contemporary of itself. It no longer transcends itself into the past or the future. Its only reality is its operation in real time and its confusion with this reality.

Nothing differentiates it from technical, advertising, media and digital operations. There is no more transcendence, no more divergence, nothing from another scene: it is a reflective game with the contemporary world as it happens. This is why contemporary art is null and void: it and the world form a zero sum equation.

There is a shameful complicity shared by creators and consumers in a silent communion as they consider strange, inexplicable objects that only refer to themselves and to the idea of art. The real conspiracy, however, lies in art's complicity with itself, its collusion with reality, becoming complicit as the mere return-image of this Integral Reality.

There is no longer any possible difference in art. Only the integral calculation of reality remains. Art now is only an idea prostituted in its production.

Modernity was the golden age of the deconstruction of reality into its component parts, a minute analysis starting with Impressionism

and followed by Abstraction. It was experimentally open on all aspects of perception, sensibility, the structure of the object, and the dismemberment of forms.

The paradox of Abstraction is that by “liberating” the object from the constraints of figure to return it to the pure play of form, it chained the object down to a hidden structure, a stricter, more radical objectivity than the objectivity of resemblance. It strove to tear off the mask of resemblance and figure in order to reach the analytical truth of the object. Under the auspices of Abstraction, we paradoxically moved towards even more reality, towards an unveiling of the “elementary structures” of objectality, in other words towards something more real than real.

Reciprocally, art has invested the entire realm of reality under the auspices of a general aesthetization.

At the end of this history, the banality of art is mixed up with the banality of the real world—Duchamp’s gesture, with the automatic transfer of the object, was the inaugural (and ironic) act. The transfer of all reality into aesthetics has become one of the dimensions of general exchange...

All of this in the name of a simultaneous liberation of art and the real world.

In fact, this “liberation” consisted in indexing one on the other—a deadly chiasmus for both art and the real world.

The transfer of art has become a useless function in the now integral reality because reality has absorbed everything that negated, transcended or transfigured it. Impossible exchange of this Integral Reality for anything else—it can only be exchanged with itself, repeating itself to infinity.

What could miraculously reassure us about the essence of art today? Art is simply what is discussed in the art world, in the artistic community that frantically stares at itself. Even the “creative” act replicates itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation—the true subject of a painter is no longer what he or she paints but the very fact that he or she paints. The painter paints the fact that he or she paints. In that way, at least, the idea of art is saved.

This is only one aspect of the conspiracy.

The other aspect is the viewer who, most of the time, does not understand anything, and consumes his or her own culture twice removed. The viewer literally consumes the fact that he or she does not understand it and that it has no necessity to it other than the cultural imperative of belonging to the integrated circuit of culture. But culture itself is only an epiphenomenon of global circulation.

The idea of art has become rarified and minimal even in conceptual art, where art ends in the non-exhibition of non-works in non-galleries—the apotheosis of art as a non-event. Reciprocally, the consumer moves through it all to test his or her non-enjoyment of the works.

Taking this conceptual and minimalist logic to the extreme, art could do no better than to disappear without any further discussion. At that point, it would no doubt become what it is: a false problem; every aesthetic theory would be a false solution.

Yes, but here is the point: it is all the more necessary to talk about art now that there is nothing to say about it. Paradoxically, the movement to democratize art only reinforced the privilege of

the idea of art, culminating in the banal tautology "art is art." Everything can supposedly be summed up in this circular definition.

Marshall McLuhan: "We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art."

The revolutionary idea of contemporary art was that any object, any detail or fragment of the material world could exercise the same strange attraction and ask the same insoluble questions as those formerly reserved for a few rare aristocratic forms called art works.

That was its true democracy, not in allowing everyone access to aesthetic pleasure but in the transaesthetic advent of a world in which each object without distinction would have its fifteen minutes of fame (especially objects without distinction). Everyone is equal, everything is great. The upshot came in the transformation of art and the work itself into an object, without illusion or transcendence, a purely conceptual *acting out*, generating deconstructed objects that deconstruct us in turn.

No more faces, no glances, no human figures or bodies there—organs without bodies, flows, molecules, fractals. The relationship to the "work" is on the level of contamination or contagion: you plug in, become, absorb, immerse yourself just like in flows or networks. Metonymical linkage, chain reactions.

No more real objects at all: with readymades, the object is no longer there, only the *idea of the object*. And we no longer take pleasure in art, only in the idea of art. We are deep in ideology.

The readymade holds the double curse of modern and contemporary art: the curse of immersion in reality and banality along with the curse of conceptual absorption in the idea of art.

Saul Bellow on Picasso: "That absurd sculpture by Picasso, with its metal branches and leaves—no wings, no victory, a mere testimony, a vestige—the idea of a work of art, nothing more. Very similar to the other ideas and other vestiges that inspire our lives—no more apples, but the idea, the reconstruction by the appleologist of what an apple once was—no ice cream, but the idea, the memory of a delicious thing now made of substitutes, starch, glucose and other chemical products—no more sex, but the idea or suggestion of sex—the same for love, belief, thought and everything else...."

Art, in its form, signifies nothing. It is only a sign of absence.

Yes, but what becomes of this perspective of emptiness and absence in a contemporary universe that has already been totally emptied of meaning and reality?

Art can only ally itself with general insignificance and indifference. It no longer has any privileges. It has no final destination other than the fluid universe of communication, networks and interaction.

Speakers and receivers are all combined in the same mix: everyone a speaker, everyone a receiver. Each subject interacts with him—or herself, destined to express him—or herself without having the time to listen to others.

The Net and networks obviously increase this possibility of utterances for oneself, in a closed circuit, with each person engaging in his or her virtual performance and contributing to the general suffocation.

That is why the most interesting thing in terms of art would be to infiltrate the spongy encephalon of the modern viewer. Because the

mystery now resides there: in the receiver's brain, in the nerve center of this servility to "works of art." What is its secret?

In the complicity between the mortification that "creators" inflict on objects and themselves and the mortification consumers inflict on themselves and their mental abilities.

The tolerance for the worst has obviously worsened considerably in proportion with this general complicity.

Interface and performance: the two leitmotifs of today.

In performance, all forms of expression are combined: the plastic arts, photography, videos, installations, interactive screens. This vertical and horizontal, aesthetic and commercial diversification is now part of the work, and the work's original core is beyond repair.

A (non-) event like *The Matrix* serves as a perfect example: it is the very model of a global installation, of a total world event. Not only the film, which is only an excuse to some extent, but the spin-off products, 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 and interactive point of view, actors in this total world event.

Photography has the same problem when we decide to make it multimedia by adding to it all the resources of montage, collage, digital effects, computer generated imagery, etc. This opening onto the infinite, this deregulation leads precisely to the death of photography by raising it to the level of performance.

In this universal mixture, each register loses its specificity—just as every individual loses his or her sovereignty in networks and interaction—like reality and image, art and reality lose their respective force when they cease to be differential poles.

Ever since the 19th century, art has wanted to be useless. It turned this uselessness into a reason for praise (which was not true of classical art where, in a world that was not yet real or objective, usefulness was not even considered).

By extension of this principle, making any object useless would be enough to make it a work of art. This is precisely what the readymade does when it merely divests an object of its function, without changing anything about it, to turn it into a museum piece. It is sufficient to make reality itself a useless function to turn it into an art object, prey to the all-consuming aesthetic of banality.

By the same token, older things, coming from the past and therefore useless, automatically acquire an aesthetic aura. Their displacement in time is the equivalent of Duchamp's gesture; they become readymades as well, nostalgic vestiges resuscitated in our museum universe.

One could extrapolate this aesthetic transformation to material production as a whole. As soon as it reaches a level where it can no longer be exchanged in terms of social wealth, it becomes a giant surrealist object, seized by an all-consuming aesthetic and is included everywhere in a sort of virtual museum. Like for the readymade, an in-situ museification in the form of dormant industry for every technical waste land.

The logic of uselessness could only lead contemporary art to a predilection for waste—that which is useless by definition. Through refuse, the figuration of refuse, the obsession with refuse, art strives to display its own uselessness. It presents its non-use value, its non-exchange value—while still being sold at very high prices.

There is a contradiction here. *Uselessness has no value in itself*. It is a secondary symptom. And by sacrificing its implications to this negative quality, art goes astray in a useless gratuitousness. The scenario is similar for nullity, the claim of nonsense, insignificance, banality, all a sign of elevated aesthetic pretense.

Anti-art in all its forms attempts to escape the aesthetic dimension. But ever since the readymade annexed banality, all that is finished. The innocence of nonsense, of the non-figurative, abjection and dissidence is over.

Everything that contemporary art would like to be or become again only reinforces the inevitably aesthetic character of this anti-art.

Art has always denied itself. But it did it before out of excess, exalting in the play of its disappearance. Today, it denies itself by default—worse yet, it denies its own death.

Art immerses itself in reality instead of becoming the agent symbolically assassinating reality, instead of being the magical agent of its disappearance.

The paradox is that the closer it comes to this phenomenal confusion, to this nullity as art, the more it is overvalued and credited. To such an extent that, to paraphrase Elias Canetti, we have reached the point where nothing is beautiful or ugly, we have crossed this point without realizing it, and if we are unable to find this blind spot again, we will continue to pursue the current destruction of art.

What is this useless function good for in the end?

What does it deliver us from with its very uselessness?

Like politicians, who relieve us of the bothersome responsibility of power, contemporary art, with its incoherent artifice, relieves us of the grasp of meaning through the spectacle of nonsense. This explains its proliferation: independent of any aesthetic value, it is ensured of

prospering in function of its insignificance and vanity. Just as politicians persist despite the absence of any representation or credibility. Art and the art market therefore flourish to the extent that they decay: they are the modern charnel houses of culture and simulacra.

It is therefore absurd to say that contemporary art is null and that all of this is worthless since that is its vital function: to illustrate our uselessness and our absurdity. Or even better: to use this decay as its capital while at the same time exorcising it as a spectacle.

If, as some propose, the function of art was to make life more interesting than art, then we must lose this illusion. I have the impression that a good portion of art today is conspiring in a process of deterrence, a work of mourning the image and the imaginary, a work of aesthetic mourning. This work usually fails, leading to the general melancholy of the artistic sphere, which seems to survive by recycling its history and its vestiges.

Yet art and aesthetics are not the only ones doomed to this melancholy destiny of living, not above their means, but beyond their ends.

Our capacity for degradation is infinite, and until we have acted out all of the potential crimes that lie within in us, our journey will never be over.

— Guido Ceronetti

If man must fulfill all his possibilities, then he must also accomplish his self-destruction. For that possibility is neither the least nor the least glorious.

— Saul Bellow