

ART & SPECTACLE

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The montage of reality, the predominance of apparatus over conscience, the aestheticization of politics and the end of art have been prevailing discourses in the aesthetic theory of the 20th century. The impoverishment of experience, the rationalization of behavior and the mobilization of the human mass trace a sociological horizon subsequent to the anti-aesthetic associated with the design and architecture of functionalism or with the extension of the montage to the communications industry. Their by-products and corollaries should not be forgotten: derision of the masses, the triumph of repetition, and an age of uniformity have accompanied the expansion of the industrial cultures from Disneyland to CNN. This project, both aesthetic and civilizing, that was previously announced by Marinetti, and took shape in the totalitarian utopias of Goebbels and McLuhan, has been fulfilled in the corporate networks of global communication and is crowned today with an anguished vision about mankind's future. The pentagons of technological and military power that started with the nuclear and biological warfare, the worldwide atomic super state and the successive sociological or literary foreshadowing of a new electronic totalitarianism on a planetary scale close this historic horizon. Is the work of art possible under this historic or post historic constellation? How is the aesthetic experience defined in the age of electronic montage of reality on a global scale? What does art mean in the era of spectacle?

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Answers to these questions are within reach. The end of art, anti-aesthetic and post-art have been repeatedly categorized *ad nauseum* starting with the aesthetic lessons of Hegel and the programs of revolutionary socialism of the 19th century, up through Dada and the academically administrated postmodern performances. The theoretical perspectives and the cultural projections of these redoubled negations of the possibility of art in the modern world are diverse. For the philosophies of progress of the 19th century as for the futurism of McLuhan, this end of art was tied to a new perception of modern history. To be more exact, it was tied to the mythification of the industrial technologies, from the locomotive to Sputnik, as its true driving force. The Dadaists had already provocatively proclaimed their principle and not without ambiguous meanings: Art is dead! Long live machine art! The instrumental reason that runs through the aesthetic theories of neoplasticism of Mondrian and Oud, Le Corbusier's *Le Modulor*, the Soviet suprematists or the International Style, and not the ideal significance of art as taught by the European Classicism and Romanticism from Schinkel to Schopenhauer, signaled the new destiny of humanity. The long-winded speech by the poet Alexander Blok to the revolutionary multitude to celebrate the death of poetry and its fulfillment in the social order of the Soviets closes this voyage of the end of art under the triumphant sign of the march of the spirit of the history.

Nevertheless, this death of art does not only mean its resignation before a superior power that governs the destinies of humanity, be it the synthesis of Christian redemption and technoscientific progress, or the rationality of the corporate market and its omnipresent products in the culture of the spectacle. On the contrary, the challenge to the work of art, its programmatic negation and its reflexive redefinition have been, and are, above all else, a poetic experience, or a human experience *tout court*. The interpretations of abstraction dominant today, institutionally dependent on the structuralist and post-structuralist formalism, have tenaciously ignored that its birth is not due solely to that will of the modern artists to "offer the vision of his own divinity" and conquering the world like its true "masters", that Apollinaire declared as password of modernity in his famous cubist manifest, and that other artists of the so-called avant-garde, like Marinett or Vertov, likewise programmatically formulated.¹ It is

¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters* (Berkeley, LA: University of California P, 2004), p. 8 and 6.

true that the Cartesian abstraction and ascetic purity that come from Mondrian and Malevich's theosophical aesthetic were the result of an adaptation and identification with the industrial mechanization, the industrial city, the industrial power and the cosmos of industrialism as a universal project of mankind's salvation. But the aesthetic revolution of the modern abstraction likewise came from a desperate experience of anguish before a worldwide cataclysm that the same "age of mechanization" provoked in Europe. The impoverishment of the daily life experience in the modern metropolis (Simmel), the political corruption and the social degradation (Brecht), and the industrially configured totalitarianism (Adorno and Horkheimer) have been some of its crude *leitmotiv*. Tristan Tzara was one of the witnesses of the skepticism that accompanied the triumphant birth of the machinist modernity of the 20th century: "No matter where we look we find falsehood," he wrote in one of his first manifestos. Hugo von Hoffmannstahl's words vanished on his tongue like rotten mushrooms. And the painter Felix Meidner saw the new industrial cities as a framework of forces and masses collapsing into an infernal chaos of conflicting lines and masses and chromatic disharmonies. The categories of the new abstract composition of Kandinsky or Franz Marc stem from an apocalyptic vision of humanity. The industrial city and the industrial war forced them to see things with new eyes, to construct and reconstruct the world under a new form and to define the principles of a new reality. The end of art, understood not only in the sense of a radical rupture with the formal languages of the 19th century, but rather with the concept of representation itself, and the subsequent constitution of an abstract linguistic reality that simultaneously transcends the contingent reality of a world in disruption and the work of art as an open window to the landscape of ruins, was and is inseparable from this negative epochal experience. I do not believe anybody has formulated this historic crisis, this linguistic crisis and this metaphysical crisis of the order of the representation more clearly than Paul Klee in his diaries: "The more disgusting the world (such as it is today), the more abstract the art... In the great sepulchral pit of form the ruins that we still depend upon are found. They provide the material of abstraction".²

² Paul Klee, *Tagebücher* (Köln: Verlag M. Dumont Schaubweg, 1957), p. 323.

In his critique of Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's programmatic book *The International Style*, Lewis Mumford already spoke of this as a "reduced canon of modernity", a "new academism" and a "very limited" formal repertoire.³ And from a political and cultural perspective, Diego Rivera likewise underlined the colonizing significance of the reductive and repetitive redefinition of this uniformed modernity.⁴ It certainly dealt with a scholastic canonization of the modern semiotics that predated an era of global banalization of all aspects of human life, from the bedroom to the worldwide political stages. But the new linguistic perspective meant something more than a scholastic and formalist reductionism. Under the sign of its political and financial expansionism, the slogan of the death of art changed its meaning as critique of a negative reality, as evident in the grotesque expressionism of Georg Grosz as in the poetics of absence of Paul Celan, to an affirmative negation or a positivist nihilism. The outstanding expression of such a reversal were the empty paintings of Ad Reinhardt which did not question the value of the artwork according to a critique of the bad reality that it represented, but rather legitimated this negative reality to the same extent as it declined its artistic transformation. The negation of a negative reality, as present in the anti-aesthetic exasperation of the Dadaist collages as in the definition of new tonal harmonies in Kandinsky and Schoenberg, was reduced to a simple affirmation of nothingness. But by the same token in which it surrendered the possibility of an aesthetic experience and of the artistic creation this anti-aesthetic of the neo-posts of the end of the century only ratified the same negative reality that sponsored it both academically and museographicaly. Its political significance is not, structurally speaking, conservative in the sense of legitimizing a neo-liberal status quo. It is rather reactionary because it sabotages its negation in the name of a hypostatized emptiness of experience, and precludes the will of real transformation. Its final expression has been the programmatic degradation of the artistic experience starting with a principle of reproduction and mechanical repetition elevated to infinity, the chromatic experi-

³ Lewis Mumford, *The Human Prospect* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956), p. 205.

⁴ Rafael López Rangel, *Diego Rivera y la arquitectura mexicana* (México, DF: Dirección General de Publicaciones y Medios, 1986), p. 109 and following.

ence reduced to a radically limited number of flat and uniform colors, the elimination of textures and the triumphant identification of an aesthetic vision freed from all expressive or cognitive elements with the publicity consumerism that the works of Wesselmann, Warhol or Lichtenstein emblematically represent.

But this completely administered culture has not only put abstraction at the service of the instrumental organization of space and time, and of the organized stupidity of the collective experience of the real. Nor are its functions limited to the induction of the human or post-human behavior. But at the same time, it has acquired the complementary relevance of the structural linguistics that constitutes the hyper-reality of the spectacle. That distinction between scientific, rationalist and organizing cubism, and an Orphic cubism related to the irrational and unconscious, foreseen by Apollinaire and radicalized by surrealism, has come together in the industrial culture of the second half of the 20th century in two complementary paradigms: on the one hand, an International Style under which cities and industrial centers have been designed in accordance with the strict principles of a technocentric rationality formalistically emptied of all social experience and all cultural memory; and on the other, Pop Art as an irrational and consumable expression of mercantile fetishism that feeds that same industrial rationality.

Seen from this historical viewpoint, the end of the century post-modernism represented a synthesis of functionalist and neosurrealist technocentrism: the sum of the formal logic that governs the industrial conception of the minimum dwelling cells and the militarily planned suburbs of the industrial megalopolis on the one hand, and the irrational production of simulacra for an excremental and autodestructive consumption on the other. Add to that the aggravating circumstances that the postmodern liberated the functionalist anti-aesthetic of the ethical and social dimensions established by its pioneers, be it Walter Gropius in Weimar or Louis Sullivan in Chicago, and complementarily cleaned the surrealist aesthetic of any other dimensions that transcend the rigorously degraded consumerism announced by Dalí in his 1929 manifestos. The postmodern has actually integrated the one-dimensional formalism of the International Style into the monumentality, without human scale, of corporate totalitarianism, and into the irrationalist aestheticism of simulacra and simulations associated with the utopias of the communicative action and the corresponding implosion of global marketplaces.

The negation of art was, in the first place, a negation of nothingness, like in the hateful fascists that Grosz painted, in the silences of Celan's poetry and the emptiness of Liebeskind's architecture. It was the negation of that nihilism represented by the industrial genocides of the 20th century. In Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, in the rationalism of International Style or in the paranoid aesthetics of Dalí's simulacra this same negative principle was the departing point of its redefinition as production of a second nature both in its functional or machinistic sense, and in an irrationalist and consumerist sense. Art died sacrificially on the scatological altars of Mondrian and Malevich in order to be reborn as a technocratic organization of society. In Duchamp's work, its death acquired the ascetic dimensions of a mystic refusal of form and an archaic initiation to the reign of absolute nothingness. His bicycle wheels and famous urinal celebrate a sacrificial denial of the work of art. Such suppression of the work of art did not mean the rejection of its emptiness, but rather its conversion into taboo: the antiaesthetic prohibition. The suppression of both the work of art and of the aesthetic experience is the prerequisite of the miraculous transformation of the most ridiculous industrial product, an aluminum comb for example, to the category of primitive totem. Later, in the series of erotic machines that Duchamp designed in the 20s, this nihilism gave a decisive step in the sense of its negated negation: a restitution of the emotional worlds of the imagination, the memory and the phantasy previously eliminated by the Dadaist antiaesthetics and the functionalist rationalism, which by the same token empowered the machine and the mechanical reproduction to the role of new artistic subject.

This technocentric overcoming of art, common to the programs of El Lissitzky and Duchamp, becomes its opposite at the end of World War II. Joseph Beuys also introduced ready-mades in his exhibits. But his works were waste and wreckages from a destroyed and fractured world. The sublime dimensions that the poetics of Hugo Ball or Duchamp's *machines célibataires* embraced so enthusiastically, now adopt, in those object-testimonies of Beuys, the explicit character of the sinister. With it, post war European art resumed a critical expression absent in the Duchampian hermetism. In the administered postmodern culture, this negative negation of art disguised itself with a positive sense. The antiaesthetics of the neo-posts denied the experience and the aesthetic theory precisely at the point where both challenged their forced integration into the order of the

spectacle. It was exactly the opposite situation which defined the Dadaists anti-art of Zurich or Berlin, under whose previously trivialized gestures this postmodernism found legitimacy. Under this third figure of the antiaesthetics of the last century, art is dead, precisely because the markets and bureaucracies that feed off its corpse are in very good health.

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The semiotic of communication triumphantly equals the work of art with the commercial advertisement, and the aesthetic experience with the consumption of commercial and political propaganda. The spectacular values that make up the late-modern electronic mass have linguistically, intellectually and emotionally protected it from real experience. From the point of view of the prevailing antiaesthetics of the mass media communication, now the essential thing is not the sensitive perception and the reflective recognition of the real, but its supposed informative values and its real emotional effects in the process of the mobilization of the electronic masses. For its academic brokers, the cultural studies, the aesthetic experience means an affront as improper and offensive as only the literary *bohème* of the cafés of Paris of the 19th century was for a *petite bourgeoisie* of whose moral hypocrisy they are heirs. It is only allowed under its administratively regimented form, or rather, as technical procedures of a “creative writing” under which those cultural studies compensate their aesthetic atrophy without need to question the guarded borders of their pseudosociological categorizations.

Theodor W. Adorno pointed out that the expeditious languages of the culture of the spectacle forced the artistic experience to a new hermetism.⁵ From Joyce to Schoenberg this poetic hermetism does not isolate a language sympathetic with things in a magic or cabalistic sense, as Romanticism wanted, for example in Novalis, or as in a commercially degraded way the Latin American magic realism has put up for sale. Rather it is born from a necessary detachment of the aesthetic experience from the languages of mass media, and of the subsequent reflexive profundization. The semiology of shock, the

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, en: *Gesammelte Schriften*, t. 7 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), pp. 476 and following.

principles of univocal simplicity and of indefinite repetition of the messages, the impoverishment and the homologation of the forms, icons and languages, and the mechanical acceleration that govern the quantitative efficiency of the communication systems isolate both the poetic and philosophical reflection in a closed world. The artistic creation must necessarily begin in this reign of silence. Peter Szondi has exemplarily shown this expressive and hermetic dimension in the poem *Engführung* of Celan.⁶

This obligatory withdrawal of the aesthetic introspection does not make it necessarily inaccessible from a linguistic and social point of view. *I Want to Sing Songs of Joy* was an exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Shin Miyazaki in 2002. This artist's work is a permanent reflection about the most representative experience of the industrial society of the 20th century: the concentration camps and the machineries of human extermination. It is also the expression of an existence reduced to the confinement that the artist suffered as a prisoner of war. He wrote that "The inconsolable feeling of loss and the growing desolation were so insufferable that I immersed myself entirely in painting... I wanted to think of the possibilities and the infinite future of making art."⁷ The absolute negativity of the pain and desperation, in these works by Miyazaki, as in Beuys, are primarily borne by its materials. Jute, burned wood, the broken textures of plaster and the chemical colors deteriorated by use bestow the immediate presence of the industrial wreckage of the military field to his paintings and sculptures. The artist reduces his formal repertoire, the materials, colors and techniques to his most elemental and precarious expression. In this sense, his art deserves the name of primitive under which the great artists of the 20th century have been cast, from Picasso to Villa-Lobos. This precariousness of techniques and media serves their negative significance. More than human representations, his paintings and sculptures make evident the mark of their absence and the expression of his anguish. But it is these same techniques of disfiguration that reveal a human dignification. The extreme alienation forces the poetic expression of Miyazaki to a radically concealed interior. And it is this same negativity that permits its

⁶ Peter Szondi, *Celan Studies* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), pp. 27 and following.

⁷ Miyazaki Shin, *I Want to Sing Songs of Joy* (Yokohama Museum of Art, 2002), p. 12.

opposite to stand out so intensely. The poorness of the materials exalts the expressivity of their textures and the sensuality of their colors by itself, and the contrast between the extreme suffering and the compositional rhythm and harmony reveal a sympathetic solidarity with the human existence and a mimetic link to reality. The truth of the aesthetic experience in an era of electronic derision and human degradation is not its nihilist negation; nor is it its spectacular sublimation. It is its immersion in its broken interior, and the creative struggle of new harmonies in its medium.

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