

## HOW TO INHABIT GLOBAL CULTURE (AESTHETICS AFTER MP3)

### THE ARTWORK AS A SURFACE FOR DATA STORAGE

From Pop art to Minimalist and Conceptual art, the art of the sixties corresponds to the apex of the pair formed by industrial production and mass consumption. The materials used in Minimalist sculpture (anodized aluminum, steel, galvanized iron, Plexiglas, neon, and so on) reference industrial technology and particularly the architecture of giant factories and warehouses. The iconography of Pop art, meanwhile, refers to the era of consumption and particularly the appearance of the supermarket and the new forms of marketing linked to it: visual frontality, seriality, abundance.

The contractual and administrative aesthetic of Conceptual art marked the beginning of the service economy. It is important to note that Conceptual art was contemporary to the decisive advance of computer research in the early seventies: while the microcomputer appeared in 1975 and Apple II in 1977, the first microprocessor dates from 1971. That same year, Stanley Brouwn exhibited metal boxes containing cards that documented and retraced his itineraries (*40 Steps and 1000 Steps*), and Art & Language produced *Index 01*, a set of card files presented in the form of a Minimalist sculpture. On Kawara had already established his system of notation in files (his encounters, trips, and reading materials), and in 1971 he produced *One Million Years*, ten files that kept an account that went well beyond human bounds, and thus came closer to the colossal amounts of processing required by computers.

These works introduced data storage – the aridity of index card classification and the notion of the filing cabinet itself – into artistic practice: Conceptual art used computer protocol, still at its beginnings (the products in question would not truly make their public appearance until the following decade). In the late sixties, IBM emerged as a precursor in the field of immaterialization: controlling seventy percent of the computer market, International Business Machine

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rechristened itself IBM World Trade Corporation and developed the first deliberately multinational strategy adapted to the global civilization to come. A runaway enterprise, its productive apparatus was literally unlocalizable, like a conceptual work whose physical appearance hardly matters and can be materialized anywhere. Doesn't a work by Lawrence Weiner, which may be produced or not produced by anyone, imitate the mode of production of a bottle of Coca-Cola? All that matters is the formula, not the place in which it is made or the identity of the person who makes it.

The configuration of knowledge that IBM ushered in was embodied in Tony Smith's *Black Box* (1963–65): an opaque block meant to process a social reality transformed into bits, through inputs and outputs. In his presentation folder, he pointed out that the IBM 3750, a silicon Big Brother, allows branches of a company in the same region to centralize all information indicating who has entered or exited which of the company's buildings, through what door, and at what hour ...

#### THE AUTHOR, THIS LEGAL ENTITY

Shareware does not have an author but a proper name. The musical practice of sampling has also contributed to destroying the figure of the Author, in a practical way that goes beyond theoretical deconstruction (the famous "death of the author" according to Barthes and Foucault). "I'm still pretty skeptical about the concept of the author," says Douglas Gordon, "and I'm happy to remain in the background of a piece like *24 Hour Psycho* where Hitchcock is the dominant figure. Likewise, I share responsibility for *Feature Film* equally with the conductor James Conlon and the musician Bernard Herrmann. ... In appropriating extracts from films and music, we could say, actually, that we are creating time readymades, no longer out of daily objects but out of objects that are a part of our culture."<sup>61</sup> The world of music has made the explosion of the protocol of authorship banal, particularly with "white labels," the 45s typical of DJ culture, made in

limited editions and distributed in anonymous record jackets, thus escaping industry control. The musician-programmer realizes the ideal of the collective intellectual by switching names for each of his or her projects, as most DJs have multiple names. More than a physical person, a name now designates a mode of appearance or production, a line, a fiction. This logic is also that of multinationals, which present product lines as if they emanated from autonomous firms: based on the nature of his products, a musician such as Roni Size will call himself "Breakbeat Era" or "Reprazent," just as Coca-Cola or Vivendi Universal owns a dozen or so distinct brands which the public does not think to connect.

The art of the eighties criticized notions of authorship and signature, without however abolishing them. If buying is an art, the signature of the artist-broker who carried out the transactions retained all its value, indeed guaranteed a successful and profitable exchange. The presentation of consumer products was organized in stylized configurations: Jeff Koons's *Hoovers* were immediately distinguishable from Haim Steinbach's shelves, the way two boutiques that sell similar products distinguish themselves by their art of display.

Among the artists directly questioning the notion of the signature are Mike Bidlo, Elaine Sturtevant, and Sherrie Levine, whose works rely on a common method of reproducing works of the past, but via very different strategies. When he exhibited an exact copy of a Warhol painting, Bidlo entitled it *Not Duchamp (Bicycle Wheel, 1913)*. When Sturtevant exhibited a copy of a Warhol painting, she kept the original title: *Duchamp, coin de chasteté*, 1967. Levine, meanwhile, got rid of the title in favor of a reference to a temporal shift in the series "Untitled (After Marcel Duchamp)." For these three artists, the issue

01 DOUGLAS GORDON, "A NEW GENERATION OF READYMADES," INTERVIEW BY CHRISTINE VAN ASSCHIE, ART PRESS, NO. 255, MARCH 2000, PP. 27-32.

is not to make use of these works but to re-exhibit them, to arrange them according to personal principles, each creating a "new idea" for the objects they reproduce, based on the Duchampian principle of the reciprocal readymade. Bidlo constructs an ideal museum, Sturtevant constructs a narrative by reproducing works showing radical moments in history, while Levine's copyist work, inspired by Roland Barthes, asserts that culture is an infinite palimpsest. Considering each book to consist of "multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into protest," Barthes accords the writer the status of scriptor, an intertextual operator: the only place where this multiplicity of sources converges is in the brain of the reader-postproducer.<sup>02</sup> In the early twentieth century, Paul Valéry thought that one might be able to write "a history of the mind as it produces or consumes literature ... without ever uttering the name of a writer."<sup>03</sup> Since we write while reading, and produce art-work as viewers, the receiver becomes the central figure of culture to the detriment of the cult of the author.

In the sixties, the notion of the "open work" (Umberto Eco) opposed the classic schema of communication that supposed a transmitter and a passive receiver. Nevertheless, while the open work (such as an interactive or participatory Happening by Allan Kaprow) offers the receiver a certain latitude, it only allows him or her to react to the initial impulse provided by the transmitter: to participate is to complete the proposed schema. In other words, "the participation of the spectator" consists of initialing the aesthetic contract which the artist reserves the right to sign. That is why the open work, for Pierre Lévy, "still remains caught in the hermeneutic paradigm," since the receiver is only invited "to fill in the blanks, to choose between possible meanings."

02 ROLAND BARTHES, "THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR" IN *THE RUSTLE OF LANGUAGE*, TRANS. RICHARD HOWARD (NEW YORK: HILL AND WANG, 1986), P. 54.

03 PAUL VALÉRY, *CAHIERS*, VOL. 1 (PARIS: BIBLIOTHÈQUE DE LA FLÉIADE, ÉDITIONS GALLIMARD, 1973).

Lévy contrasts this "soft" conception of interactivity with the enormous possibilities that cyberspace now offers: "the emerging technocultural environment encourages the development of new types of art that ignore the separation between transmission and reception, composition and interpretation."<sup>04</sup>

#### ECLECTICISM AND POSTPRODUCTION

The Western world – through its museum system and its historical apparatus as well as its need for new products and new atmospheres – has ended up recognizing traditions thought doomed to disappearance in the advance of industrial modernism as cultures in themselves, accepting as art what was once only perceived as folklore or savagery. Remember that for a citizen at the start of the century, the history of sculpture went from Ancient Greece to the Renaissance and was restricted to European names. Global culture today is a giant anamnesis, an enormous mixture whose principles of selection are very difficult to identify.

How can we prevent this telescoping of cultures and styles from ending up in kitsch eclecticism, a cool Hellenism excluding all critical judgment? We generally describe taste as "eclectic" when it is uncertain or lacks criteria, a spiritless intellectual process, a set of choices that establishes no coherent vision. By considering the adjective "eclectic" pejorative, common parlance accredits the idea that one must lay claim to a certain type of art, literature, or music, or else be lost in kitsch, having failed to assert a sufficiently strong – or, quite simply, locatable – personal identity. This shameful quality of eclecticism is inseparable from the idea that the individual is socially assimilated to his or her cultural choices: I am supposed to be what I read, what I listen to, what I look at. We are identified by our personal

04 PIERRE LÉVY, *L'INTELLIGENCE COLLECTIVE. POUR UNE ANTHROPOLOGIE DU CYBERSPACE* (PARIS: LA DÉCOUVERTE, 1994), P. 123.

strategy of sign consumption, and kitsch represents outside taste, a sort of diffuse and impersonal opinion substituted for individual choice. Our social universe, in which the worst flaw is to be impossible to situate in relation to cultural norms, urges us to reify ourselves. According to this vision of culture, what each person might do with what he or she consumes does not matter; so the artist may very well make use of a terrible soap opera and form a very interesting project.

The anti-eclectic discourse has therefore become a discourse of adherence, the wish for a culture marked out in such a way that all its productions are tidily arranged and clearly identifiable, like badges or rallying signs of a vision of culture. It is linked to the constitution of the modernist discourse as set forth in the theoretical writings of Clement Greenberg, for whom the history of art constitutes a linear, teleological narrative in which each work is defined by its relations to those that precede and those that follow. According to Greenberg, the history of modern art can be read as a gradual "purification" of painting and sculpture and the contraction of their subject to their formal properties. Piet Mondrian thus explained that neo-plasticism was the logical consequence – and suppression – of all art that preceded it. This theory, which envisages the history of art as a duplication of scientific research, has the added effect of excluding non-Western countries, considered "unhistorical" and unscientific. It is this obsession with the "new" (created by this vision of historicist art centered on the West) that one of the protagonists of the Fluxus movement, George Brecht, mocked, explaining that it is much more difficult to be the ninth person to do something than to be the first, because then you have to do it very well.

In Greenberg and in many Western histories of art, culture is linked to this monomania that considers eclecticism (that is, any attempt to exit this purist narrative) a cardinal sin. History must make sense. And this sense must be organized in a linear narrative.

In an essay published in 1987, "Historisation ou intention: le retour d'un vieux débat" (Historicization or Intention: The Return of an Old Debate), Yve-Alain Bois engaged in a critical analysis of postmodern eclecticism such as it was manifested in the works of the European neo-expressionists and painters such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle. Bois summed up these artists' positions as such: Being freed from history, they might have recourse to history as a sort of entertainment, treating it as a space of pure irresponsibility. Everything from now on had the same meaning for them, the same value. In the early eighties, the trans-avant-garde struggled with a logic of bric-a-brac and the flattening of cultural values in a sort of international style that blended Giorgio de Chirico and Joseph Beuys, Jackson Pollock and Alberto Savinio, completely indifferent to the content of their works and their respective historical positions. At around the same time, Achille Bonito Oliva supported the trans-avant-garde artists in the name of a "cynical ideology of the traitor," according to which the artist would be a nomad circulating as he pleased through all periods and styles, like a vagabond digging through a dump in search of something to carry away. This is precisely the problem: under the brush of a Schnabel or an Enzo Cucchi, the history of art is like a giant trash can of hollow forms, cut off from their meaning in favor of a cult of the artist/demiurge/salvager under the tutelary figure of Picasso. In this vast enterprise of the reification of forms, the metamorphosis of the gods finds kinship with the museum without walls. Such an art of citation, practiced by the neo-fauves, reduces history to the value of merchandise. We are then very close to the "equivalence of everything, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the insignificant and the distinctive" which Flaubert made the theme of his last novel, and whose coming he feared in *Scénarios pour Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Jean-François Lyotard could not bear the confusion between the post-modern condition such as he theorized it and the so-called post-modernist art of the eighties: to mix neo- or hyper-realist motifs on

the same surface with abstract, lyrical, or conceptual motifs was to signify that everything was equal because everything could be consumed. He felt that eclecticism solicited the habits of the magazine reader, the needs of the consumer of mass produced images, the mind of the supermarket shopper.<sup>65</sup> According to Yve-Alain Bois, only the historicization of forms can preserve us from cynicism and a leveling of everything. For Lyotard, eclecticism diverts artists from the question of what is "unpresentable," a major concern, since it is the guarantee of a tension between the act of painting and the essence of painting: if artists give in to the eclecticism of consumption, they serve the interests of the techno-scientific and post-industrial world and shirk their critical duties.

But can't this eclecticism, this banalizing and consuming eclecticism that preaches cynical indifference toward history and erases the political implications of the avant-gardes, be contrasted with something other than Greenberg's Darwinian vision, or a purely historicizing vision of art? The key to this dilemma is in establishing processes and practices that allow us to pass from a consumer culture to a culture of activity, from a passiveness toward available signs to practices of accountability. Every individual, and particularly every artist, since he or she evolves among signs, must take responsibility for forms and their social functioning: the emergence of a "civic consumption," a collective awareness of inhuman working conditions in the production of athletic shoes, for example, or the ecological ravages occasioned by various sorts of industrial activity is each an integral part of this notion of accountability. Boycotts, *détournement*, and piracy belong to this culture of activity. When Allen Ruppersberg recopied Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* on canvas (1974), he took a literary text and considered himself responsible for it: he rewrote it.

65 SEE JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *THE POST-MODERN EXPLAINED*, TRANS. DON BARRY, ET AL. (MINNEAPOLIS: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1983).

When Louise Lawler exhibited a conventional painting of a horse by Henry Stullmann (lent by the New York Racing Association) and placed it under spotlights, she asserted that the revival of painting, in full swing at the time (1978), was an artificial convention inspired by market interests.

To rewrite modernity is the historical task of this early twenty-first century: not to start at zero or find oneself encumbered by the storehouse of history, but to inventory and select, to use and download.

Fast-forward to 2001: collages by the Danish artist Jakob Kolding rewrite the constructivist works of Dada, El Lissitzky, and John Heartfield while taking contemporary social reality as their starting point. In videos or photographs, Fatimah Tuggar mixes American advertisements from the fifties with scenes from everyday life in Africa, and Gunilla Klingberg reorganizes the logos of Swedish supermarkets into enigmatic mandalas. Nils Norman and Sean Snyder make catalogs of urban signs, rewriting modernity starting with its common usage in architectural language. These practices each affirm the importance of maintaining activity in the face of mass production. All its elements are usable. No public image should benefit from impunity, for whatever reason: a logo belongs to public space, since it exists in the streets and appears on the objects we use. A legal battle is underway that places artists at the forefront: no sign must remain inert, no image must remain untouchable. Art represents a counterpower. Not that the task of artists consists in denouncing, mobilizing, or protesting: all art is engaged, whatever its nature and its goals. Today there is a quarrel over representation that sets art and the official image of reality against each other; it is propagated by advertising discourse, relayed by the media, organized by an ultralight ideology of consumption and social competition. In our daily lives, we come across fictions, representations, and forms that sustain this collective imaginary whose contents are dictated by power. Art puts

us in the presence of counterimages, forms that question social forms. In the face of the economic abstraction that makes daily life unreal, or an absolute weapon of techno-market power, artists reactivate forms by inhabiting them, pirating private property and copyrights, brands and products, museum-bound forms and signatures. If the downloading of forms (these samplings and remakes) represents important concerns today, it is because these forms urge us to consider global culture as a toolbox, an open narrative space rather than a univocal narrative and a product line. Instead of prostrating ourselves before works of the past, we can use them. Like Rirkrit Tiravanija inscribing his work within Philip Johnson's architecture, like Pierre Huyghe refilming Pier Paolo Pasolini, works can propose scenarios and art can be a form of using the world, an endless negotiation between points of view.

It is up to us as beholders of art to bring these relations to light. It is up to us to judge artworks in terms of the relations they produce in the specific contexts they inhabit. Because art is an activity that produces relationships to the world and in one form or another makes its relationships to space and time material.