

The End of the Artworld

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"Introduction"

Around 1992, I started moving away from the logical chain reaction to the vanguard developments of the late sixties and seventies, including the various reactions to those reactions, and began looking at art from a more personal point of view. I was less interested in the kind of art that had become a "discourse"—art that was presumably dependent on trendy ideas—and more involved with works by individual artists who expressed their views of structure and disjuncture through a heightened intuition and imagination. Concurrently, I became less engaged with spectacles that were being produced under the auspices of theory and administered by fashionable art centers, museums, galleries, magazines, art departments in American universities, and collectors in the Hamptons.

I began writing and lecturing more frequently and found myself questioning certain assumptions behind such once-fashionable terms as "multiculturalism" and "postmodernism." As a critical antidote I began using phrases like "institutionalized marginality" and "the post-Warholian nightmare," as if to suggest that art had somehow lost a sense of necessity and, in doing so, had forfeited any notion of the need for qualitative standards.

What had replaced these standards was a politicized rhetoric encased in a hardened academic language. It was not so much that I was rejecting the work of the conceptual artists that I had over the years worked so hard to champion in numerous essays, reviews, lectures, catalogs, and books. Rather, it was about expanding the parameters of art in order to make it more inclusive of forms that were being too easily dismissed. Yet it seemed at the time that if a critic became identified with conceptually oriented work, there was the immediate assumption that he or she had to be against what was called formally oriented art or, for that matter, art that conveyed a profound emotional content response through visual imagery.

By the nineties, the art world had become a matter of taking sides. If you were reading the "literature"—first, poststructuralism and deconstruction, and, more recently, the litany of books under the rubric of "visual culture"—then you were expected to think a certain way and to do a certain kind of work. The work usually dealt with issues of "identity" framed in relation to an exegesis on "the body," "abjection," "alterity," or "subjectivity"—terms that have been more or less proselytized through various tomes on critical theory. On the other hand, if you were an artist exploring issues in abstract painting or working to reinvent a language of symbolism through interactive media or exploring content through new materials or asserting a position of intimacy as opposed to that of spectacle, you were considered out of the picture; that is, out of the art world picture.

This is to suggest that there has developed a distinction—an important and profound difference—between art as a significant creative mode of cultural expression and the kind of institutionalized marketing and publicity that exists in relation to it. The latter, though not clearly understood, is commonly referred to as the "art world." It is a microcosm that is generally understood as the social, economic, and political basis by which new art and emerging artists find support. It is also a world that reflects the cultural condition as a whole. This cultural condition is only tangentially related to art yet is overwhelmingly

connected to the art world.

At one time, before the late seventies, the art world existed as a community of support; that is, artists were central to the art world. It was a community that was generally perceived to be outside the domain of the corporate mentality. In the eighties, the art world began to rapidly accelerate into a detached though intensely busy network; thus matching the software contingent with the times. With this acceleration of a business network came a proliferation of social and political concerns ranging from gay activism to multiethnicity to cultural feminism. While these concerns were necessary and important as timely vehicles for change within the culture, they were accompanied by an unfortunate fragmentation within the art world. In spite of the fact that a large majority of artists were fundamentally empathetic to these issues, there developed a profound mistrust—in extreme cases, paranoia—among the various constituents of the art world that culminated in what came to be known in the theoretical jargon of the nineties as "oppositonality."

However legitimate at the outset, these cultural issues were inevitably co-opted by the market. As the marketplace adopted a new line of slogans (ready-made promotion), criticism—that is, art criticism—was diminished and given the position of advocacy. The policy toward critical advocacy in the early nineties offered a twofold purpose: It slowly began to revive the art market by reviving the lost avant-garde (posing as "political art"). It further proclaimed an ideological piety—at the time called "political correctness," a rather ambiguous epithet passionately shared by both conservatives and liberals—a piety not so mysteriously removed from qualitative judgment.

As a "critic," you either agreed with the issues unequivocally and with the work of the artists who represented them—a type of corporate nonsensibility—or your position was viewed as modernist and therefore hopelessly out of touch. By offering a legitimate critical voice to this mindless advocacy, a critic might be given the overdetermined label of "conservative" —a term that was bandied about after the highly politicized Whitney Biennial of 1993 to combat criticism that did not accept the premise of the show. In this sound-bite era, few readers will take the time to see the difference or even to analyze the important gray areas that lay between conservatives and liberals. When the art world became politicized, as it did in the nineties, critical analysis no longer mattered. Only slogans were important, and slogans became the governing force in art as in big business.

At the present moment it is inconceivable that any realistic dialogue based on some form of internal critique could happen within the art world without the subtle intervention of publicity, management, and marketing strategies. Everything in art today is seen through the shroud of the market. By using the word "shroud," I am suggesting a type of religiosity, a piety about the market structure, an acquiescence to the sale of indulgences, which is uncomfortably close to what the art world has become. As the commonplace expression goes (at least in the television industry): you can't offend the advertisers.

Throughout the history of modernism, critics and artists have dealt with the end of art or even the end of criticism. I'm not going to repeat those claims or offer any new argument in relation to the end of art. If anything, I want to defend art, not as a philosophy, but as the material embodiment of an emotional structure within an era of globalization. What concerns me is the dissolution of art into a cyberspatial notion that exists on the same latitude as any other form of visual culture, whether it be a sitcom on TV, a Web site, a digital photograph, a multimedia display, a special-effects thriller, or a fashion show. This is less a conservative position than a radical reevaluation of the kind of sensory cognition that occurs through the intuitive, intellectual, and emotional components that become art. It is a position that embraces the intimacy of time and space—in contrast to the imposition of space over time as seen in countless gallery and museum spectacles.

Anyone who is aware of the progression of the art world as a social and economic force over the past three or four decades, either through lived experience or significant research, understands that art is now subjected to the same economic totalism as any other enterprise. Since the late seventies, art has become increasingly identified with its commodity status. Art and consequently artists have become increasingly acquiescent to publicity and media exposure. Just as the stock market depends to a large extent on media manipulation in order to keep investments afloat, so the art market depends on principle vehicles of exposure in order to keep the prices on a steady incline. In spite of what critics have to say, it is the exposure of the art that counts.

For example, if an artist who once showed promise is suddenly at a stalemate in terms of market activity, an influential dealer in the right position can work in the artist's behalf to regain the market. It does not matter whether the new work by that artist is significant or even good. What is important is that the dealer, like any responsible broker, ensures the status of the collectors' investments by maintaining the price structure. Just as the commodity market depends on trade magazines to give the inside story of what is happening with certain investments, the art world has magazines that function in a similar way. These kinds of strategies are, of course, well known by major collectors. This kind of art journalism is easily assimilated, if not assumed, in doing business.

Over and over again, trendy journals, dealers, collectors, curators, and critics at trendy symposia have cited the discussion of aesthetics in relation to works of art as irrelevant. In our overly pragmatic—and puritanical—society, there is virtually no thought of a synthesis between aesthetics and ideas. The critic is expected to represent one cause or the other. If an artist's work is fraught with intentions of one kind or another, then the work is not supposed to be understood in aesthetic terms. However erroneous this sound-bite mentality might appear, aesthetics generally refers to modernism, while ideas refer to postmodernism or beyond.

Therefore, if you do not agree with the significance of the ideas or the institutions that support them, you obviously do not "understand" the work. Ideas isolated from aesthetics engender a discursive response to art. The discourse becomes the institution, and the institution administers a consensual elitism bereft of any aesthetic criteria. Without such criteria, there is no critical judgment, only "mob rule." The mob wants their spectacles and their diversions. They want to be ruled by the mediated chain reaction of programmed "sensations." Is there any doubt that the Saatchi-sponsored *Sensation* exhibition (1998) has revived the art market in London?

One can see this happening time and again in relation to art foundations and museums that espouse a certain line, a specific modus operandi, that functions according to the bottom line—that is, the investments applied to the spectacle. In recent years, artists have become so conditioned to the presence of the art market as a governing force in what they do and in what they read that they may fail to see the degree to which they are pressured into believing that all the mediocre art put forth in elegant catalogues and expensive magazines must signify something important—something that is just beyond the reach of most artists who are struggling to find their own place within a fickle system where ruthless mayhem is shielded by concealed privilege. This is no different from the corporate world. There is the supreme illusion—veritable real-life trompe l'oeil effect—that "art" is open to everybody. Just as industry needs a workforce, so the art world needs the projected illusions of artists.

To test the ground in this regard, it would be an interesting challenge to find a truly open-minded discussion within a significant institution where curators, critics, and artists of divergent points of view, who may fundamentally disagree on an issue related to the collection, discuss the aesthetic worth of an object or an exhibition.

Few artists want to say what they really feel lest it fall upon the wrong ears and ultimately damage their careers. Fear in the art world has become pervasive, so pervasive that aesthetic discussions have been utterly usurped by "information exchange" on the Web. These "chats" are concerned with such trivialities as the names of galleries that are closing or what directors from established galleries are starting their own galleries or who is moving to West Chelsea or the future of the "meat market" south of Fourteenth Street. This kind of talk has been so infectious that finally no one cares or wants to listen. The result is usually ending up at an after-opening party in some glitzy disco, sponsored by a prestigious gallery, where one sits with Perrier in hand, with music so deafening that no one can listen to anyone—a blessing that wards off the most ardent hustlers, the hangers-on, who become permanent fixtures at these affairs.

The post-Warholian nightmare is precisely this. Art has become irrelevant to the art world except for the dinners, the parties, and the discos. It is one big, mindless bash where money talks and no one listens, and where even fewer see the art. Perhaps, in the sixties or seventies, Warhol could make such events into a scene and, in turn, enhance his publicity and ultimately his much deserved reputation. But Warhol was an original—and that was part of his allure, an attribute that even the critic Harold Rosenberg understood. But in the current atmosphere at the end of the nineties, at the finale to this century of modernism, the scene surrounding Warhol has become what it always was: a myth. This is something that Andy understood all along. The problem today is that few others seem to understand it.

The myth of the art world—and now, the end of the art world—is reenacted over and over again with the same dull beat, the same quasiritual, either out of inexperience, at best, or masochism, at worst. Human heads cast in blood, dependent on ultrarefrigeration, and sliced-up cows in cast Plexiglas, as recently shown both in London and New York, are fairly accurate signs of the times. But they are signs that belong to the semiotic structure of the social norm, signs that for the moment function in a kind of semiotic vacuum, a kind of hallucinogenic sanctuary, removed from the complexities and conflicts within a burgeoning globalization. Spectacles breed more spectacles, more diversions, and more tabloid news. The hyperreal spectacles in the current art world are like random channels on cable television: they offer the illusion that there is something significant for the spectator. The information is designed to titillate but not fulfill. There is no history, no memory. The ultimate diversion is the Internet, a hypnotic commercial ploy; that is, unless the viewer has the will or the intestinal fortitude to find precisely the information he or she needs. It is always easier to talk about porno paintings in a fashionable gallery or satyrs dancing painfully around a football field than to address the significance of serious painting or cinema. To deal with serious art requires a certain preparation of the mind, a relaxed synthesis whereby the mind comes into contact with the body, where there is a rejuvenation of seeing, and where thought is required to pull the act of seeing into the sensorium of feeling—to formulate ideas that are powerfully felt. It is time to understand the difference between what is symptomatic in such a mediated "culture" as ours and what is truly significant. The distinction is crucial in coming to terms with a new criterion in dealing with the art of the future; yet the signs are often deceiving.

On a more optimistic note, what I have tried to address is twofold: one, a point of view that offers an understanding of the intervention of corporate marketing into our understanding of art; and, two, examples of artists whom I believe exemplify an inner-directed approach to art. The inner-directed artist represents a position at odds with the commercially bent spectacle and the imposed economic fusion with the world of fashion. It is a position that is ultimately sympathetic to artists who perceive what they are doing, not as careerist attempts to find fame and fortune, but as attempts to seriously come to terms with their art.

The position offered here is not one of institutionalized marginality. It is not about the constraint of language or expression. Nor is it about the necessity to sell one's art. This is not a diatribe against economic support for artists. It is a plea to get in touch with serious art again and to offer support where it counts. The implication is that artists are capable of succeeding according to their own terms by focusing attention on their concerns as artists. This is not to imply that artists should become diehard romantics hopelessly out of touch with the present realities of speed, information, and an accelerating market economy. Rather, artists should be challenged to accept and understand these hard-core social and economic realities in relation to their own existential positions in the world and in relation to their intentions in making art. It is a major challenge today for artists to focus on their work and avoid the seduction of the marketplace. Elegance and qualitative thinking in art will eventually be rewarded. The audience for art wants to feel intimacy in human expression in spite of all the indications that the spectacle has taken over. The art world is an abstract entity, an obsolete institution that needs to be transformed through the efforts of artists who maintain a purposeful disinterestedness in their careers without giving in to the mindless seductions that present themselves in every other gallery, magazine, and museum.

Artists with ability who produce significant work, and thereby make a contribution to our cultural lives, deserve to make a living. This requires, as Paul Klee observed in Dessau in 1926, an educated audience—an audience with the patience to come to terms with the art through intelligence and feeling. This is what will help to sustain art as a significant force in the next century. Collecting and supporting art requires more than arrogant strategies of investment; it requires a sensitive reception to new ideas. Chances are that these ideas are not endowed with cynicism and excess. They are not about spectacles that go and come like sports events or fashion shows. New ideas are within the province of art. Artists are still capable of producing them in the most astonishing and subtle ways. As one of these essays suggests, beauty may be what one discovers by paying close attention. The challenge is how to rediscover the act of seeing in this desperate age of speed and information, how to slow down and regain consciousness, and how to enter the world once again with an open mind and a new vision of what the future may hold with the prospect that it may actually benefit our lives. Artists have the power to redefine culture in their own terms—this is the crux of the matter in art today.

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