

## "Baudrillard and the Art Conspiracy"<sup>1</sup>

Douglas Kellner, UCLA

Reflections on art and aesthetics have been an important, if not central, aspect of Baudrillard's work since the 1960s. Although his writings exhibit many twists, turns, and surprising developments as he moved from synthesizing Marxism and semiotics to developing highly idiosyncratic forms of writing and theory, interest in art remains a constant of his theoretical investigations and cultural reflections, and generated artistic experiments in writing and photography of his own. I will engage Baudrillard's recent work on the "conspiracy of art," situating it within his earlier work on art and aesthetics, and will appraise the importance of art for Baudrillard's work as a whole.

I begin with some reflections on literature and literary analysis in Baudrillard's work and later focus on his analyses of visual art, that are at the center of The Conspiracy of Art collection (2005). However, it is important not to forget his literary beginnings and the literary dimensions of his work. While Baudrillard was trained as a Germanist and translated German literary works, including ones by Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss, he has not really engaged in literary criticism or theorized literature as a

specific cultural form, although in Seduction, he discusses writers like Kafka, Kierkegaard, and Borges, and there are literary references and asides throughout his work.

Moreover, much of Baudrillard's own work is highly literary and especially since the 1980s he has produced an increasingly literary and philosophical mode of thought and writing. Throughout his work, Georges Bataille was a privileged source, although in his earlier stages Baudrillard appeared to be more influenced by Bataille's theoretical writings than his literary ones. During the period of his intense focus on simulations, simulacra, and hyperreality, which I take as his postmodern period (Kellner 1989, 1994), there were frequent references to Juan Luis Borges, J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, and science fiction (SF) as a genre. For Baudrillard, the world was becoming increasingly fictionalized and the great SF writers anticipated the radical changes brought about by science and technology. Borges, in particular, developed a genre of creating alternative literary worlds that Baudrillard adapted to present the alterity and novelty of the contemporary world.

As many have argued, Alfred Jarry and pataphysics have long influenced Baudrillard.<sup>2</sup> Like the universe in Jarry's Ubu Roi, The Gestures and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, and

other literary texts -- as well as in Jarry's more theoretical explications of pataphysics -- Baudrillard's is an often absurd universe where objects rule in mysterious ways, and people and events are governed by obscure and ultimately unknowable interconnections and predestination. (The French playwright Eugene Ionesco is another good source of entry to this universe). Like Jarry's pataphysics, Baudrillard's post-1980s universe is ruled by fatality, contingency, chance, reversal, obscenity, and a desire to shock and outrage.

Baudrillard's concept of obscenity is different than the standard notion applied to Jarry, and it is interesting that in The Conspiracy of Art there is an article on pataphysics where Baudrillard sharply criticizes the church of pataphysics and what it had become (2005, pp. 213ff). In addition, there is an interview with Sylvere Lotringer (pp. 217ff.) where Baudrillard indicates he was part of a pataphysics group in the late '40s, but broke because of various problematic tendencies within the group -- a typical French tendency to group and splinter that we find in surrealism, situationism, and a number of other circles that Baudrillard was influenced by.

This episode suggests a pattern of Baudrillard's involvement in avant-garde art groups, parting, and going his

own way, an Einzelganger, or Lone Ranger, blazing his own pathways. Yet in retrospect, there are three key references for Baudrillard as writer, and they are Bataille, although perhaps more his theoretical works than literary ones, Borges and SF inventors of imaginary worlds like J.G. Ballard, and Jarry and pataphysics. In conclusion, I'll also note some key visual artists who deeply influenced his reflections on art, aesthetic practices, and theoretical positions.

In his increasingly literary and philosophical writings from the 1980s to the present, Baudrillard has developed what he terms "theory fiction," or what he also calls "simulation theory" and "anticipatory theory." Such "theory" intends to simulate, grasp, and anticipate historical events that he believes are continually outstripping all contemporary theory. The current situation, he claims, is more fantastic than the most fanciful science fiction or theoretical projections of a futurist society. Thus, theory can only attempt to grasp the present on the run and try to anticipate the future. As I've often argued (Kellner 1989, 1995), Baudrillard's later work can thus be read as science fiction that anticipates the future by exaggerating present tendencies, and provides early warnings about what might happen if present trends continue.

In this article, I argue that Baudrillard's post-1980s writings on art can be provocatively read as theory fictions or anticipatory theory that imagine the end of art. First, however, I want to analyze earlier stages of his analyses of art in contemporary society.

### Art, the System of Objects, and Consumer Society

Once he began his academic career in the mid-1960s, Baudrillard paid attention to art as an important and distinctive mode of objects since the beginning of his theoretical work. In his early studies of The System of Objects (1996 [1968]) and The Consumer Society (1998 [1970]) Baudrillard analyzed art objects as important artifacts in the system of objects which constitute everyday life.

For Baudrillard, Pop Art represents the dramatic transformations of art objects in the early 20th century. Whereas previously art was invested with psychological and moral values that endowed its artifacts with a spiritualistic-anthropomorphic aura, by the 20th century art objects "no longer live by proxy in the shadow of man and begin to assume extraordinary importance as independent elements in an analysis of space (cubism, etc)" (1970, p. 33). Soon after the moment of Cubism, art objects exploded to the point of abstraction, were ironically resurrected in Dada and Surrealism, were destructured and volatilized by subsequent

movements toward abstract art, yet today "they are apparently reconciled with their image in New Figuration and Pop Art" (Ibid).

Pop Art is of essential significance for Baudrillard in that it exemplifies the reduction of art to flat, non-signifying image, thus replicating what he sees as the logic of contemporary (postmodern) society: "Whereas all art up to Pop was based on a vision of the world 'in depth', Pop on the contrary claims to be homogeneous with their industrial and serial production and so with the artificial, fabricated character of the whole environment, homogeneous with this immanent order of signs: homogeneous with their industrial and serial production and so with the artificial, fabricated character of the whole environment, homogeneous with the all-over saturation and at the same time with the culturalised abstraction of this new order of things" (Ibid). Pop therefore signifies the end of depth, perspective, evocation, testimony, and the concept of the artist as active creator of meaning and iconoclastic critic.

Pop Art thus constitutes a turning point in the history of art for Baudrillard whereby art becomes quite simply the reproduction of signs of the world and in particular the signs of the consumer society which itself is primarily a system of signs. Pop thus represents for Baudrillard the

triumph of the sign over its referent, the end of representational art, the beginning of a new form of art which he will soon privilege with his term "simulation." From this perspective, art henceforth becomes mere simulation of the images and objects of the contemporary world. Baudrillard thus insists that it is wrong to criticize Pop Art for its naive Americanism, for its crass commercialism, for its flatness and banality, for precisely thereby it reproduces the very logic of contemporary culture.

Developing a more general semiotic perspective on art in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1981), Baudrillard takes the painting as a signed object (signature) and as a gestural object, the product of artistic gestures or practices. In particular, he sees art as exemplary of how objects in the consumer society are organized as a system of signs. The painting for Baudrillard only becomes an art object in today's art world with the signature of the painter, with the sign of its origin which situates it as a "differential value" within the system of signs, the series of works, which is that of the oeuvre of the painter (Baudrillard 1981, p. 102). Baudrillard argues that copies or even forgeries previously were not as denigrated as in the contemporary world in part because art was more the collective product of artists' studios and because today art

is supposed to be the "authentic" product of an individual creator as part of her or his oeuvre, signs in a series of works differentiability hierarchized and valued by the art market (Baudrillard will later reverse this thesis, as we shall see).

For Baudrillard, "modernity" in painting begins when the work of art is not seen as a syntax of fragments of a general tableau of the universe, but as a succession of moments in the painter's career, as part of a series of its works: "We are no longer in space but in time, in the realm of difference and no longer of resemblance, in the series and no longer in the order {i.e. of things}" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 104). It is the act of painting, the collection of the painter's gestures in the individuality of the oeuvre, that is established with the painter's signature which produces the sign value of the work as a differential item in the series whereby the work is inserted into the system of art and receives its place (and value).

Painters like Rauschenberg and Warhol who produce seemingly identical series of works present "something like a truth of modern art: it is no longer the literality of the world, but the literality of the gestural elaboration of creation -- spots, lines, dribbles. At the same time, that which was representation -- redoubling the world in space --



becomes repetition -- an indefinable redoubling of the act in time" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 106). In other words, precisely the seemingly peculiar gestures of repeating almost identical works in series points to the very nature of modern art which establishes itself not as a presentation of the world, but as a series of gestures, as the production of signs in the series of an oeuvre. This practice also reveals the naivete, Baudrillard claims, of believing that the function of art is to (re)grasp the world, to refresh ways of seeing, to provide access to the real, for such art, all art, is merely a set of signs, the product of "the subject in its self-indexing" within a series" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 107).

Thus, Baudrillard interprets painting as emblematic of sign culture, of the reduction of culture to a system of signs within which "art" often plays a privileged role. Art is subject to the same rules and system of signification as other commodities and follows as well the codes of fashion, determination of value by the market and commodification, thus subverting its critical vocation. Modern art is thus for Baudrillard an "art of collusion vis-a-vis the contemporary world. It plays with it and is included in the game. It can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it; it never disturbs the order, which is also its own" (Baudrillard 1981, p. 110).

## The Triumph of the Simulacra

Pop art and ultra-realist trompe l'oeil paintings for Baudrillard illustrate the ways that simulacra came to replicate reality and the process whereby it became increasingly difficult to tell the difference between simulacra and reality, in which hyperreal models came to dominate and determine art and social life. These theories of art as simulation and hyperreality developed in studies in the mid-1970s and early 1980s, collected in the volumes on Simulations (1983a) and Simulations and Simulacra (1994b), and came to influence new avant-garde movements in the art world. Consequently, Baudrillard himself was taken as a major theoretical guru in the world of contemporary art, becoming an icon himself increasingly referred to and cited in discussions of the art world.

In addition, Baudrillard's theories of stages of representation and simulacra were applied to art history and his analyses of simulations to art works, providing him a certain currency in avant-garde art scenes and periodicals. In particular, the trend of simulation art seemed to embody his theory of simulations, while hyperrealist art movements illustrated his theory of hyperreality. The hyperrealist, simulationist, or neo-geo, artists such as Jeff Halley do not attempt to represent any objects or social reality, but

simply reproduce hyperreal models or simulations through abstract representations of signs that simulate/pastiche former paintings -- abstract and representational. Or, they attempt to represent scientific paradigms or models, or those of cybernetic languages, or simulate commodity and image production. Baudrillard distanced himself from such movements, but was nonetheless frequently proclaimed as a prophet of such postmodern simulation art.

Speaking later of his appropriation by the American art scene,<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard noted (2005, p. 47-48):

There are those who cultivate the connection to Warhol and those who distance themselves from him because it is too dangerous. They claim that Warhol was a primitive in the art of simulation since they are the 'true simulators.'

This marking of distance culminated in an exhibit at the Whitney in New York, of which I became involved in spite of myself. True, some artists refer to me through my writings and my ideas ideas on simulation. In fact it was a strange trap that forced me to reestablish my bearings. Simulation has been all the rage in the art world in recent years. I see it an an phenomenon totally ancillary of events that preceded it, including Warhol..

At the Whitney event, these artists tried to categorize me as a precursor without engaging in any discussion or debate with me. This has led, among other things, to the 'Neo-Geo' school, a very marginalized and confused group. There is nothing to add to this nullity caused by authors, otherwise oftentimes very intelligent, incapable of putting up with their own nullity. In spite of myself. I served as an alibi and reference, and by taking what I said and wrote literally, they missed simulation.

The embrace and celebration of Baudrillard by sectors of the art world was somewhat ironic, for as he turned to cultural metaphysics in the 1980s, he soured on art, believing that it had exhausted itself and he became associated with the "end of art" theory. In the interview "Game with Vestiges" (1984), Baudrillard claims that in the sphere of art every possible artistic form and every possible function of art has been exhausted. Furthermore, against Benjamin, Adorno and other cultural revolutionaries, Baudrillard argues that art has lost its critical and negative function. Art and theory for Baudrillard became a "playing with the pieces" of the tradition, a "game with vestiges" of the past, through recombining and playing with the forms already produced.

Moving through the 1980s into the 1990s, Baudrillard sharpened his critique of the institution of art and contemporary art. In The Transparency of Evil (1994a), he continued his speculations on the end of art, projecting a vision somewhat different from traditional theories that posit the exhaustion of artistic creativity, or a situation where everything has been done and there is nothing new to do. Baudrillard maintains both of these points, to be sure, but the weight of his argument rests rather on a metaphysical vision of the contemporary era in which art has penetrated all spheres of existence, in which the dreams of the artistic avant-garde for art to inform life have been realized. Yet, in Baudrillard's vision, with the (ironical) realization of art in everyday life, art itself as a separate and transcendent phenomenon has disappeared.

Baudrillard calls this situation "transaesthetics" which he relates to similar phenomena of "transpolitics," "transsexuality," and "transeconomics," in which everything becomes political, sexual, and economic, so that these domains, like art, lose their specificity, their boundaries, their distinctness. The result is a confused and imploded condition where there are no more criteria of value, of judgment, of taste, and the function of the normative thus collapses in a morass of indifference and inertia. And so,

although Baudrillard sees art proliferating everywhere, and writes in The Transparency of Evil that "talk about Art is increasing even more rapidly" (1994a, p. 14), the power of art -- of art as adventure, art as negation of reality, art as redeeming illusion, art as another dimension and so on -- has disappeared. Art is everywhere but there "are no more fundamental rules" to differentiate art from other objects and "no more criteria of judgment or of pleasure" (1994a, p. 14). For Baudrillard, contemporary individuals are indifferent toward taste and manifest only distaste: "tastes are determinate no longer" (1994a, p. 72).

And yet as a proliferation of images, of form, of line, of color, of design, art is more fundamental than ever to the contemporary social order: "our society has given rise to a general aestheticization: all forms of culture -- not excluding anti-cultural ones -- are promoted and all models of representation and anti-representation are taken on board" (p. 16). Thus Baudrillard concludes that: "It is often said that the West's great undertaking is the commercialization of the whole world, the hitching of the fate of everything to the fate of the commodity. That great undertaking will turn out rather to have been the aestheticization of the whole world -- its cosmopolitan spectacularization, its

transformation into images, its semiological organization" (1994a, p. 16).

In the postmodern media and consumer society, everything becomes an image, a sign, a spectacle, and a transaesthetic object. This "materialization of aesthetics" is accompanied by a desperate attempt to simulate art, to replicate and mix previous artistic forms and styles, and to produce ever more images and artistic objects. But this "dizzying eclecticism" of forms and pleasures produces a situation in which art is no longer art in classical or modernist senses, but is merely image, artifact, object, simulation, or commodity. Baudrillard is aware of increasingly exorbitant prices for art works, but takes this as evidence that art has become something else in the orbital hyperspace of value, an ecstasy of skyrocketing values in "a kind of space opera" (1994a, p. 19).

### The Art Conspiracy

Perhaps as a result of negative experiences with people exploiting his ideas for their own aesthetic practices and his own increasingly negative views of contemporary art, Baudrillard penned a sharp critique of the art world in an article "The Conspiracy of Art," published in the French journal Liberation (May 20, 1996), which is the center piece of his 2005 book with the same name that collects in

translation his most significant writings on art, and interviews concerning art, from the 1990s to the present, including a couple of early classics.<sup>4</sup>

His radical critique was signaled in a 1987 Whitney Museum lecture (2005: 98ff) where Baudrillard confessed that he was always an "iconoclast" who "has always been wary of art and culture in general," and thus his "relationship with art and aesthetics has always, in a way, remained clandestine, intermittent, ambivalent" (2005: 98).

In the 1996 text, "The Conspiracy of Art," however, he blasts away in his most iconoclastic assault on the entire contemporary art scene. Baudrillard argues just as pornography exhibits the loss of desire in sex, and sexuality becomes "transsexuality" where everything is transparent and exhibited, so too has art "lost the desire for illusion and instead raises everything to aesthetic banality, becoming transaesthetic" (2005, p. 25). Just as pornography "permeates all visual and televisual techniques" (ibid), so too does art appear everywhere and everything can be seen and exhibited as art: "Raising originality, banality and nullity to the level of values or even perverse aesthetic pleasure... Therein lies all the duplicity of contemporary art: asserting nullity, insignificance, meaninglessness, striving for nullity when already null and void" (Baudrillard 2005, p. 27).



Saying that art today is null can mean several things. Nullity describes an absence of value and Baudrillard could argue that because artistic value today is ruled by commercial value art nullifies itself. That is, on one hand, commercial value nullifies aesthetic value by reducing value to the cash nexus, thus aesthetic value is really ruled by the market, and aesthetic values are collapsed into commercial ones.

But Baudrillard also wants to argue that art historically has nullified itself as a transcendent aesthetic object, as something different from everyday life, by becoming part of everyday life whether as found object in a museum, or by being ornamentation, or prestige value, in a home, corporation, or public space. Art could also be null because if aesthetic value is everywhere, it is nowhere, and has leaked out of its own aesthetic realm which, of course, museums, galleries, and the art establishment try to reestablish creating the illusion that art does exist as a separate and especially valuable realm. Thus, for Baudrillard contemporary art does not really create another world, it becomes part of this world, and thus is null in the sense of not producing aesthetic transcendence. In a later text "Art... Contemporary of Itself," Baudrillard writes:

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 (Baudrillard 2005, p. 89).

Baudrillard's critique of the contemporary art world is thus highly radical, asserting that promoters of the art scene today are involved in "insider trading, the shameful and hidden complicity binding the artist who uses his or her aura of derision against the bewildered and doubtful masses" (2005: 26-27). Baudrillard appears especially put off by the discourses of the art world that continue to hype new artists, exhibits, retrospectives, as fundamental events of cultural importance. There is a "conspiracy of art" because at the moment of its disappearance, when art has simply disappeared into the existing world and everyday life, the art establishment conspires to hype it more and more with

spectacular museum and gallery exhibits, record prices for art works at auctions, and a growing apparatus of publicity and discourse. Critics and the art audience are part of this conspiracy, because they play along, exhibiting interest in every new banality, insignificant new work or artist, and repetition of the past, thus participating in the fraud.

Now obviously, to make these claims, Baudrillard is operating with a very extravagant notion of what art should be, and in his very assaults on art collected in The Conspiracy of Art, there are hints concerning his normative ideal of art. Some of his utterances seem to relate his ideal of art to traditional concepts of avant-garde revolutionary art, in which art is supposed to create another world, providing entry to an aesthetic dimension that transcends everyday life, and could even be an event which is a life-altering phenomenon, as in the passage I just cited above from "Art... Contemporary of Itself."

Further, for Baudrillard, exceptional art could be "an initiatory form of Nothingness, or an initiatory form of Evil" (2005: 27). By this, he means that certain works can negate the being of the world, emptying it of illusory meaning and value, and can subvert dominant values of Good, in Nietzschean fashion, enabling individuals to free themselves from conventional views and values and create

anew. But in the contemporary art world, Baudrillard rails against: "the inside traders, the counterfeiters of nullity, the snobs of nullity, of all those who prostitute Nothingness to value, who prostitute Evil for useful ends" (2005: 27). That is, Baudrillard attacks an art world that prostitutes the subversive and emancipatory potential of art for commerce, in which art becomes a mere commodity valorized by its exchange value, or a useful ornament to a debased world. This iconoclastic critique is at the bottom of his rage against the art world.

In a similar fashion, Baudrillard attacks politicians who have debased and turned politics into a game of manipulation, power and politics, attacking alike political and aesthetic elites: "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 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" (2005: 96-97).

Thus Baudrillard's attack on contemporary art as nullity points to his view of the complete nullity of contemporary culture and society. In some interviews collected in The

Conspiracy of Art, Baudrillard presents himself as a "peasant," or "primitive," naively looking from outside at a strange cultural world of art, and claims he is carrying out an "indocile" form of diagnostic, with the "in-docile ... in the original meaning of the word, [as] someone who refuses to be educated, instructed, trapped by signs" (2005: 66). Yet he confesses that as soon as he denounces a system, from whatever position, he is complicit in it (2005: 67), and in fact Baudrillard has strong theoretical positions on art and society, including, as I am suggesting, a normative ideal of art. In a 1996 interview, he points to complex connections between art and form, noting: "I have no illusion, no belief, except in forms -- reversibility, seduction or metamorphosis -- but these forms are indestructible. This is not a vague belief, it is an act of faith, without which I would not do anything myself" (p. 59). For Baudrillard, his notion of form goes beyond Clive Bell and the Bloomsbury notion of significant form -- which encodes aesthetic value, meaning, taste. Rather, for Baudrillard: "Art is a form. A form is something that does not exactly have a history, but a destiny. Art had a destiny but today, art has fallen into value, that can be bought sold, and exchanged. Forms, as forms, cannot be exchanged for something else, they can only be exchanged among themselves" (2005, 63).

Indeed, Baudrillard's work on art in the 2005 collection reveals a primacy and mysticism of form, seeing truly life-altering art as: "Something that is beyond value and that I attempt to reach using a sort of emptiness in which the object or the event has a chance to circulate with maximum intensity" (2005: 71). The object or event "in its secret form" (ibid) are also described by him as surprising and unpredictable "singularities, forming an alterity and also serving as what he calls in another interview as a "strange attractor" (Baudrillard 2005, p. 79).

This could explain Baudrillard's attraction to photography where the subject disappears and the object emerges in its strangeness as pure form, at least in Baudrillard's ideal and imaginary of the photo.<sup>5</sup> Yet Baudrillard claims that he is not interested in art as such, but "as an object, from an anthropological point of view: the object, before any promotion of its aesthetic value, and what happens after" (2005, p. 61). This notion of the singularity of the object or event might explain why Baudrillard was so taken with the 9/11 terror attacks on the Twin Towers, since this was obviously a world historical event, but it was also an astounding aesthetic and media spectacle. Yet while Karl-Heinz Stockhausen was vilified by claiming that the 9/11 spectacle of terror was one of the greatest acts of

performance art of modern times, Baudrillard reposted: "why does it have to be a 'work of art'? Why must the sanction for the sublime and the exceptional always come from art? It's a scandalous misconception to attach the same high-class label of 'art' and performance to September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Palais de Tokyo, for example. Let us retain for events the power of the event" (Baudrillard 2006: 34).

I have argued previously that the terror spectacle of 2001 provided an event that shocked Baudrillard out of his world-weariness and cynicism and that has given much of his post-2001 work a compelling immediacy, sharp edge, and originality (Kellner 2005). Yet, quite frankly, the magnitude of the 9/11 event might have been so great that it confirmed his view that theory and art had no possibility of significantly capturing contemporary reality that was now going beyond any expectations, concepts, or representations. As Adorno asked, how can there be poetry after Auschwitz, Baudrillard might ask, how can there be art after 9/11?

### Concluding Comments

The Conspiracy of Art enables us to strive for an overview of Baudrillard's insights on art and what now appears as his anti-aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> In his collection of key essays on art, Baudrillard is more of a critic of art and a cultural metaphysician than an aesthetic theorist. He uses

art to theorize general trends of contemporary society and culture, and to illustrate his metaphysical views and positions on the contemporary world, rather than analyzing art on its own terms or to do aesthetic theory a la Adorno or Marcuse.

While writing this paper I did the final copy-editing of a volume Herbert Marcuse, Art and Liberation, which valorizes the aesthetic dimension (2007), and with Adorno (1984) could be read as the antipode to Baudrillard. I often find it useful to play off opposites against each other to see if I can construct yet another position, or to test who do I really believe and agree with, in this case, concerning the position of art in the contemporary world. In my aesthetic moments, I want to go with Marcuse and Adorno on this one, but in my darker theoretical moments I wonder if Baudrillard is not right, or is at least a needed antidote to excessive aestheticism.

Baudrillard thus emerges in my reading of his writings of the past decade on art as deeply anti-aesthetics, and a powerful critic of the contemporary art scene. Baudrillard is deadly serious, albeit ironic and sometimes playful, in condemning the contemporary art scene, appearing as what Nicholas Zurbrugg termed the "angel of extermination," yet he also appears as Zurbrugg's "angel of annunciation," blessing



the perhaps hopeless attempt to find alternatives in art and theory in a fallen (i.e. imploded) world.<sup>7</sup> While Baudrillard sometimes appears as elitist, rejecting or eviscerating distinctive cultural phenomena of the present age, yet he emerges at the same time as highly radical, criticizing the very roots of contemporary cultural, political and theoretical pretension and malaise. He is at once a strong theorist and an anti-theorist, making reading and interpreting him a challenging enterprise (see Kellner 1989 and 2006).

I would argue that Baudrillard is his contradictions and anyone who tries to pin him down and offer one-sided interpretations fails. While there are, arguably, some threads and themes running through his work (the Object), there are certainly different stages of his work which Baudrillard sometimes lays out himself, but they are often hard to delineate, characterize, pin down, and are always subject to reversal.

Baudrillard is a provocateur who often presents radical negations to his readers, as with his end of art and art conspiracy analysis, or his analysis of the disappearance of reality, the perfect crime, to which he alludes to at 2006 Swansea conference in his address "On Disappearance" (2006).

As I've argued, Baudrillard's work on art is especially challenging and provocative, quite original, and hard to sum up. But since reference to Duchamps and Warhol run through the texts of The Conspiracy of Art, and have long been Baudrillardian reference points, I'll conclude by suggesting that Baudrillard is the Duchamps and Warhol of theory, mocking it by emptying it of messy content, deconstructing its problematic aspects by simulating it, putting on the audience by enigmatically repeating previous gestures and positions, but then making new ones that confound the critics. Although Duchamp, Warhol, and Baudrillard can often appear banal and repetitive, yet they often create something original and compelling, often with unpredictable effects. And so I conclude by evoking the triad of Duchamps, Warhol, and Baudrillard as objects, or strange attractors, of profound irony and provocation that continue to challenge our views of art, culture, and reality itself today.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the conference "Engaging Baudrillard" held at Swansea University in September 2006. I would like to thank William Merrin for exceptional hospitality during the conference and its aftermath, and to the organizers and participants for stimulating discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard's literary roots, his immersion in a tradition of French literature, and his connections to pataphysics is signaled in "Pataphysics" and an interview with Sylvère Lotringer "Forget Artaud" in Baudrillard 2005: 213-237.

<sup>3</sup> For a commentary on Baudrillard's relation to the art world and the emergence of his radical critique of contemporary art, see Lotringer 2005; for further radical critique of the contemporary art scene, see Lotringer and Virilio 2005. In an obituary on Baudrillard in the International Journal of Baudrillard Studies, Lotringer concluded, however, that "his brutal attack on The Conspiracy of Art, which didn't shake the art world as much as it should have, actually vindicating his main argument" at

[http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/obituaries\\_slotringer.html](http://www.ubishops.ca/BaudrillardStudies/obituaries_slotringer.html).

<sup>4</sup> After it was first published in Liberation in May 1996, the text appeared the next year as a pamphlet Le Complot de l'Arte (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997). It was collected in Screened Out, which was published in English in 2002, and became the centerpiece and title of Baudrillard's 2005 collection of writings on art.

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<sup>5</sup> On Baudrillard's analyses and practices of photography, which go beyond the parameters of this analysis, see the material in Zurbrugg 1997. Lotringer notes in "The Piracy of Art," his Introduction to Baudrillard's The Conspiracy of Art, that Baudrillard's own photographs and their display confirmed to him the correctness of his view of the nullity of art: "Actually that he, who admittedly had no artistic claim or pedigree, would be invited to exhibit his work, amply proved his point: there was nothing special anymore about art. Groucho Marx once said that he would never join a club that accepted him as a member. Baudrillard did worse: he joined a group whose reasons to exist he publicly denied" (Lotringer 2005: 16).

<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster (1983) titled his collection of writing on postmodern culture, one of the first and most influential in the postmodern debates of the 1980s, as The Anti-Aesthetic. The collection included Baudrillard's "Ecstasy of Communication" (1983b, pp. 126-134), which I always took as signaling a radical postmodern break and rupture in history, signaled by his discourse of "No longer," "no more," "Now, however," evoking throughout "this new state of things." While I would agree with Mike Gane (2000, pp. 31f) that Baudrillard did not want to be seen as a

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postmodern theorist, he was associated with the discourse of the postmodern and analysis of a radical postmodern break in history. In a keynote panel session in a conference celebrating his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in Mannheim, Baudrillard spoke of a "fundamental anthropological rupture," indicating a kinship of his thought with discourses of the "post" and rupture, and in a commentary in this volume "On Disappearance," I read this enigmatic late text as pointing to the rupture that is a key signature of Baudrillard's work from the mid-1970s until his death. On the relation between Baudrillard and postmodern theory and analyses of postmodernity, see Kellner 1989 and Best and Kellner 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See Nicholas Zurbrugg, "INTRODUCTION: 'Just What Is It that Makes Baudrillard's Ideas So Different, So Appealing?'" in *Art and Artefact*, op. cit., pp. 1ff.