

Jean Baudrillard and Art
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French theorist Jean Baudrillard is one of the foremost contemporary critics of society and culture who is often seen as the guru of French postmodern theory. A prolific author who has written over twenty books, reflections on art and aesthetics are an important, if not central, aspect of his work. Although his writings exhibit many twists, turns, and surprising developments as he moved from synthesizing Marxism and semiotics to a prototypical postmodern theory, interest in art remains a constant of his theoretical investigations and literary experiments.

A professor of Sociology at the University of Nanterre from 1966-1987, Baudrillard has paid attention to art as an important and distinctive mode of objects since the beginning of his work in the 1960s. In his early studies of The System of Objects and The Consumer Society, 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 which 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)" (The Consumer Society, 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 volatized 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 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, 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 (Critique, 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 artist's studios and because today art is supposed to be the "authentic" product of an individual creator as part of her or his oeuvre.

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}" (Critique, 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 almost 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" (Critique, p. 106). In other words, precisely the seemingly peculiar gestures of repeating almost identical works in series in Pop artists 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 believes, 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 (Critique, 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" (Critique, p. 110).

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 (1983) and Simulations and Simulacra (1994), came to influence new 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, his 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 Hally 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.

As he turned to metaphysics in the 1980s, Baudrillard soured a bit 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 claims 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.

Baudrillard continued his speculations on the end of art in The Transparency of Evil (1994), where he projected a vision of the end of art somewhat different from traditional theories which 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 has been realized. Yet, in Baudrillard's vision, with the 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 condition where there are no more criteria of value, of judgement, 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" (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 judgement or of pleasure" (p. 14). For Baudrillard, contemporary individuals are indifferent toward taste and manifest only distaste: "tastes are determinate no longer" (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" (p. 16).

In the postmodern media and consumer society, everything becomes an image, a sign, a spectacle, a transaesthetic object -- just as everything also becomes trans-economic, -political, and -sexual. 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" [p. 19]).

And so Baudrillard emerges as a prophet of the end of art, whose Gallic world-weariness and pessimism, his obsessive repetition of previous ideas, and his nihilistic evacuation of value ends up disabling critical thought and inquiry. Consequently, I would argue that although art and aesthetics are definitely changing in response to the mass media, new technologies, and innovative cultural forms, it is precisely these changes which require fresh theories and analyses. From this perspective, Baudrillard's dismissal of art and aesthetics blocks the necessary work that needs to be done. While his analyses are certainly a provocation to new thinking and practice, one must go beyond Baudrillard to make his insights productive for aesthetic theory and practice today.

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