

### SEMINAL ENTROPY: THE PARADOX OF MODERN ART

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Duchamp and Newman malign the aesthetic by separating it from the work of art and the process of making art. They do not see it as an aesthetic process and experience, but, in Duchamp's case, an irrational psychodynamic process, and in Newman's case, a primal creative process. There is nothing that requires the psychic process and experience to be embodied and expressed in art. It has its own inherent validity, independent of art. It can be expressed, but it remains inexpressible and needs no legitimation by cultural externalization. Every cultural embodiment of it falsifies and misrepresents its narcissistic import. Sensuous presence and pleasure, so essential to the epiphany called the aesthetic, are beside the point of the work of art, which is a kind of memento mori of supposedly deeper processes. There is nothing fundamental about sensuous experience, however pure and intense, for Duchamp and Newman. It is in fact a distraction from psycho-creative fundamentals, inevitable – for sensing cannot be suspended, and the work of art presents itself to the senses – but deplorable, for, in their ideal world, the work of art would only present itself to the mind. Implicit to their thinking is the old idea that sensing is deceptive and misleading, a view that can be traced back to Plato, who, in the epistemological metaphor of the divided line in the *Republic*, located art in the realm of sensuous illusion, along with shadow. A stick seems

to bend in a glass of water but we know it doesn't. Art, like that water, is the medium of illusion. It is a natural lie, as it were, which reason can see through.

The division between reason and sense haunts modern art, a split that undermines it from within, eventually destroying it – pulling it apart into factions, each of which proliferate uncontrollably without the check of the other – however initially stimulating it is to creativity, so much so that it leads to great originality, ultimately issuing in an art of seemingly pure reason (so-called conceptual or idea art) and pure sensuousness (what Greenberg called postpainterly abstraction). In other words, this unbalanced situation, which is evident in modern art from the beginning – from Manet, who for all his effort to render a reasonable representation of reality often used unreasonable sensuous means of doing so – is as entropic as it is creative. (We see the same thing in early Chardin, where, up close, the painting is an intricate mass of sensuous details, while from a distance it looks like a completely reasonable, coherent, and convincing representation of reality.) I want to argue that in the history of modern art the entropic becomes dominant, to the extent that modern art increasingly seems like a failure of creative nerve, or rather, more pointedly, creative imagination and creative intuition – imaginative intuition, one might say – come to be beside its point. Creative imagination, eloquently analyzed by Baudelaire and Coleridge, is replaced by pandering to everyday social interests, usually stripped of their affective resonance and existential implications – their human dimension. Art becomes a way of getting an ideological message across (to refer to Lucy Lippard's feminist "Get the Message?") much the way, for Plato, myth was a way of making the truth comprehensible to the simple-minded masses, or at least putting it in a hyperbolic narrative form that turned it into a spectacle that would hypnotize them into believing they in fact were in possession of it.

But post-aesthetic art's ideological message does not come with any mythopoetic sugarcoating. And it is topical and newsworthy, not

necessarily the whole truth and nothing but the disinterested truth. It must be swallowed raw – in post-aesthetic art the idea is raw and intellectually and emotionally undigested, and there is little or no art. Nuance and subtlety are expendable; the message is all, and it is ultimately a self-righteous one, calling for a new conformity and simplicity in its conception of the social truth. Indeed, the simpler the message the better, for a simple message is easier to communicate to the masses than a dialectically complex one. Ideas become slogans – banner headlines – in ideological art, if it can still be called art. For it seems more like a poor cousin of the mass media, lacking both their slickness and outreach. Indeed, the point is to be as “artless” as possible, for art, after all, is a distracting illusion appealing to the senses not the revolutionary-minded.

The imaginative transformation of socially objective reality to bring out its subjective significance all but disappears, along with a sense of the complexity of the subject, however much subjects continue to be presented as case histories and specimens, as in the video performances of Tony Oursler. In their quasi-clinical if comic detachment, they are a long way from Géricault’s portraits of the insane, which convey their humanity as well as their suffering – the tragedy of their lives. In other words, the collapse of the sense of what it is to be human, more pointedly, of all feeling for what it is like to be inside another human being – an empathic, humanistic goal of modern art since romanticism (Goethe, echoing Terence, and echoed by Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, famously declared “Nihil humani a me alienum puto” [nothing human is alien to me]) – goes hand in hand with the collapse of creative imagination. If the aesthetic reconciles reason and sense (form and subject matter or message) – in the material work of art, as Pater, Greenberg, and Hegel argue – then modern art is an aesthetic failure, for the split between an art of reason and an art of sense grows greater and greater, each finally purifying itself in complete indifference to the other.



11. Tony Oursler, *Creeping Numbers*, 2001. SONY DPL CS2 projector, DVD player, DVD, glass, fiberglass sphere. Performance by Casson Demmon.  $30\frac{1}{2}'' \times 16'' \times 13''$ . Courtesy of Metro Pictures.

Duchamp announced the entropic split – the end of aesthetically integrated art, that is, so-called fine or high art (dialectical rather than one-dimensional art) – when he sharply distinguished between “intellectual expression” and “animal expression.”<sup>41</sup> He elevated the former at the expense of the latter – which he misrepresented and slandered. In the nineteenth century “the more sensual appeal a painting provided – the more animal it became – the more highly it was regarded.”

Before then, "all painting had been literary or religious: it had all been at the service of the mind,"<sup>43</sup> as though there was nothing sensual about it – as though sense and reason were not integrated in the best literary or religious painting. But of course such integration, which is the achievement of the aesthetic, is beside the intellectual point for Duchamp. Clearly he has a rather one-sided view of painting. He also neglects to face the fact that nineteenth century sensual painting, which he acknowledges is a unique development in the history of art – and aesthetically unique – is a greater creative innovation than any literary or religious painting, however imaginatively such a painting may recreate literary or religious themes, arriving at aesthetic perfection in the process of doing so.

"His disdain for sensual painting" was irrational, as Robert Motherwell implies.<sup>43</sup> However much it was informed by "the despair of the aesthetic"<sup>44</sup> – the lack of any reason to prefer one "retinal" sensation, as Duchamp called it, over another, using it in a painting in which all seem pleasurable (this was Duchamp's basic critique of Fauvism) – his hatred of sensual painting clearly had to do with Picasso and Matisse, its masters. They achieved fame when Duchamp was still trying to find his artistic footing. Thus, they had to be annihilated, and the best way to do so was to devalue their medium – deny the significance of painting, which Duchamp repudiates as *passé*, that is, not modern. He went so far as to declare, in final nihilistic indifference – what rage did his indifference mask? – that painting has been "dead . . . for a good fifty or a hundred years,"<sup>45</sup> which effectively trivializes and demolishes Picasso and Matisse (whose Fauvism he initially emulated, however crudely) as well as Cézanne. Duchamp preferred the more scientific – mock scientific, I would say, like Duchamp himself – Seurat. Fiercely competitive and vengeful, Duchamp established an outsider position for himself, becoming "the asp in the basket of fruit," as Motherwell said. I would add that he spoiled all the fruit and upset the basket of art itself, punching holes in it so that it could no longer hold any fresh

sensual fruit. Duchamp was an envious spoiler, spoiling whatever he touched out of envy – it scoops the goodness out of life, as Melanie Klein said, coveting what it cannot create (the Devil's envy of God is the cardinal sin, and the reason Shakespeare calls envy the green-eyed monster) – especially the innovative art that the father figures of twentieth century painting created. In a sense Duchamp wanted to out-innovate them, but the only way he could do so was to destroy the aesthetic ground on which their art was built, spoiling the spectator's pleasure. Perhaps his greatest achievement is the discrediting and undermining of the aesthetic. It is a triumph of destructiveness that has corrupted twentieth century creativity.

Ironically democratic, no particular painting was better than any other for Duchamp – what matters is the idea it conveys not the sensuous form it gives the idea – apart from the general superiority of intellectual art to animal art. He is grateful "for the beauty . . . provided" by Matisse's work, but "it created a new wave of physical painting in this century or at least fostered the tradition we inherited from the XIXth century masters."<sup>46</sup> It is as though sensual physical painting – beauty itself – was an eccentric deviation in the history of art, which Duchamp was going to put back on the right intellectual track. The old hierarchical way of thinking informs his seemingly novel idea: the sensual is demeaned as animal – conceived as something repulsive – and the intellectual is regarded as uniquely human. His art is an attempt to negate the animal with the intellectual. Using the intellectual destructively, he never discovers any constructive purpose in it.

In 1956, a decade after making his famous – and conventional – distinction, Duchamp declared: "I am interested in the intellectual side, although I don't like the word 'intellect.' For me 'intellect' is too dry a word, too inexpressive. I like the word 'belief.' I think in general that when people say 'I know,' they don't know, they believe. I believe that art is the only form of activity in which man as man shows himself to be a true individual. Only in art is he capable of going beyond the

animal state, because art is an outlet toward regions which are not ruled by time and space."<sup>47</sup> Are these the same regions conceived by religion? It seems so, as the word "belief" suggests. Is Duchamp being ironical, as he usually is? Perhaps they are the hellish regions of the unconscious rather than the heaven of salvation. Whichever, and however probably the former, Duchamp is for once not being ironical: he's revealing his Achilles heel – the animal state. He doesn't realize that what you repress will return with a vengeance, and in fact was never really absent and lost. It always has an unconscious influence on what one consciously creates. For Duchamp woman represents the animal state, and woman is the recurrent theme of his art, implicitly and explicitly. It is an old idea, which Mondrian also believed – as he wrote, he turned to the rational straight line in rebellion against the irrational feminine animal/natural curve (which he also thought of as tragic, in contrast to what he regarded as the *joie de vivre* of his color-controlling grids) – traceable back to the nineteenth century decadent poets, who preferred artificiality to nature (and their own animal functions), symbolized by woman, and before that, to the Bible. This idea is alive and well in many societies.

Duchamp's major pieces, the Large Glass and *Étants Donnés*, dwell on woman with a contempt and hatred that no amount of irony can conceal. She is mocked and abused in both works, her body maligned and humbled into a mechanical object, a kind of grotesque erotic machine (Motherwell's phrase) in the former work and a ruined mannequin in the latter. In the Large Glass Duchamp attacks and distorts her body, in *Étants Donnés* he attacks and uproots her genitals, the site of her sexuality – a perverse, destructive step further, suggesting the castration of the phallic woman. Woman is the scapegoat of his desire. He resists sexual temptation by destroying its object. Where faith in God helped St. Jerome overcome his sexual temptations, faith in ironical intellectuality helped St. Duchamp do so. Faith in something higher and presumably more dignified than the animal helped them

overcome the gross sexual animal in themselves. Duchamp subsumed and sublimated it into an art of ironical reason, that is, intellectual activity in artistic disguise. Jerome also subsumed and sublimated his sexual drive into intellectual activity, as his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, and numerous theological writings, indicate.

Does their intellectuality help them escape their sexuality? I don't know in the case of Jerome, but in Duchamp's case it seems clear that he remains obsessed with sexuality. He was not too successful repressing it, except, perhaps, when he was playing chess. He didn't have to worry about the unexpected return of repressed sexuality, for its artistic repression (mechanical treatment) took the excitement out of it, but it was unable to exterminate the body in which it existed – the female body that, however injured, continued to have a sexual identity, indeed, to emanate sexuality even in death. It is worth noting that chess, however intellectually demanding, is sexual in import, however ironically. The queen's job is to protect the king. She is able to do so because she is more powerful than he is – indeed, the most powerful piece in the game. King and queen can make the same moves, and thus resemble each other, but he is allowed to move only one square at a time, while she can move over as many squares as she wants – a crucial difference between them. Nominally the ruler, he remains impotent and passive relative to her. Duchamp, who officially became a chess master, implicitly identified with the queen, even as he used her to protect the king in himself.

The "checkmate" that concludes the game also suggests its perverse sexual character. Chess is an ironical "mating" game; Duchamp probably took to it, like a duck to water, because to mate in chess means the opposite of what it does in life – not sexual fulfillment and intimacy, in which each partner erotically and emotionally wins, but the frustrating end of the game, that is, the checking and defeat of the king that has been mated. One or the other player becomes a frustrated loser in chess. Mating is destructive rather than humanly constructive



in chess. If perversion is the erotic form of hatred, as Robert Stoller argues, then the game of chess is profoundly perverse – a perverse battle in which the players are antagonists rather than lovers. They relate only by being at odds, a dubious intimacy achieved by positioning their pieces – each implicitly a body part, militarized into a weapon – in perverse relationship to one another. Heat may be generated – hatred can be as passionate as love – but there is a tactical coldness to the whole game, which no doubt appealed to Duchamp. Cold detachment rather than warm attachment – although Duchamp could be ironically cordial, misleadingly inviting – is the way to win the game. Sexual mating always incorporates aggressivity (it looks like violence to a child), as Freud reminds us, but checkmating is pure aggression – the murderous climax of a long, patient battle.

Sometimes the relationship ends in a “stalemate,” a wonderful term that epitomizes Duchamp’s idea of the work of art as well as the ideal relationship with a woman. Both are brilliantly exemplified in the *Large Glass*. *Étants Donnés* shows that stalemate has become intolerable: Duchamp resorts to violence to win the battle of the sexes, showing that he is deadly serious, and never loses. His works are not simply war games – glorified chess games – but a fight to the finish with woman. For Duchamp a game of chess with the enemy – fully dressed, he perversely played one with a rather voluptuous female nude at the opening of his retrospective in Pasadena – was the perfect antidote to emotional intimacy with her, all the more so because chess is pseudo-sexual (substitute perverse sex). Does Duchamp finally murder the queen in *Étants Donnés*, asserting that he, the artist, is the only royalty allowed in the game of sexual chess? Clearly in turning to chess he gave up neither art nor sex.

Has Duchamp understood the sensual animal? He simplifies it – sensuality is a compound of sensing and feeling, not simply a matter of sensing. (Duchamp spoke of “the ‘antisense’” character of the *Large Glass*.<sup>48</sup>) Sensual woman has always been associated with feeling

rather than reason – as operating on the basis of her irrational feelings rather than her rational mind. In fact, she has often been regarded as too feeble-minded to do any serious thinking. This is an old cliché, and Duchamp has fallen for it – certainly a serious failure of critical consciousness for a self-proclaimed intellectual. He has the same conflict about woman that many men do, and the same emotional need to devalue her, which goes hand in hand with devaluation of his sexuality. He may identify with woman, as his manifestation as *Rose Sélavy* indicates, but it is an ironical identification, in which he shows himself as a dowdy, unsensual woman, in effect projecting his rejection of sensuality into his ironical self-representation. The conflict is not only between reason and sense, but also between reason and feeling, sense being the avenue to feeling, which is, conventionally, woman’s domain. Duchamp seems blind to the fact that there is no thinking without feeling and sensing, which suggests that woman may be a better thinker than man, for she is not alienated from her own feelings and senses. Feeling is the ultimate enemy for Duchamp, not sensing, and his works seemed imbued with flat affect – feeling deadened.

Matisse’s painting is famous for its *joie de vivre*; Duchamp’s art is joyless. If, as Robert Lebel said, that, with *Fresh Widow*, 1920 – a French window with “the little panes covered with black leather” [suggesting sadistic fetishism] that “would have to be shined every morning like a pair of shoes in order to shine like real panes,” with the word “fresh” meaning “smart” (and thus a merry widow, according to Lebel, that is, a woman promiscuously dancing on the coffin of her husband) – Duchamp “reached the limit of the unaesthetic, the useless, and the unjustifiable,”<sup>49</sup> then the unaesthetic is joyless, anhedonic, altogether feelingless. Duchamp’s ultimate prophylactic goal was to feel nothing, which, unexpectedly turned mind into a joke – although he didn’t realize it – for without feeling mind is purposeless play, cleverly competing with and outsmarting other minds, as in chess. Erotic feeling may be

disguised by this mental play, as Duchamp suggested, "not . . . out of shame," as he correctly said, but out of hatred, as he failed to recognize. If, as Freud said, Eros and Thanatos are the forces that polarize life, and if Eros brings people temporarily together and Thanatos separates them forever, then Duchamp comes down squarely for Thanatos however much he is haunted by Eros. His art and attitude epitomize the paradox of modern art – the death drive or entropy that informs its creativity, making it ironically alive and exciting, even when it is inwardly dead, that is, nothing but pure mind. It is what eventually disintegrates the work of art as art, destroying its aesthetic potential by turning it completely toward everyday life without offering any imaginative insights into it, that is, actualizing it as an extension of everyday thinking without offering any new in-depth thinking about its character and effect on the people who live it. Such commitment to banality, with its predatory curiosity and uncritical dependence on everydayness, and sometimes ironical manipulation of it – a perversity which in Duchamp passed for art making – is the kiss of aesthetic death, and artistic death, for it makes art just another everyday phenomenon.

The undertow of entropy in modern art, which is what makes it seem perverse and problematic, as well as paradoxical, and gives its remarkable innovations and wide-ranging creativity a look of desperate futility, a kind of whistling in the dark – Duchamp's harping on the ineffectiveness and irrelevance of the aesthetic says as much – has been brilliantly described by Rudolf Arnheim.

Disintegration and excessive tension reduction must be attributed to the absence or impotence of articulate structure. It is a pathological condition, on whose causes I can hardly speculate here. Are we dealing with the sort of exhaustion of vital energy that prophets and poets proclaimed and decried in the last century? Is the modern world socially, cognitively, perceptually devoid of the kind of high order needed to

generate similarly organized form in the minds of artists? Or is the order of our world so pernicious as to prevent the artist from responding to it? Whatever the causes, these products [modern works of art], although often substandard artistically, reveal strong positive objectives: an almost desperate need to wrest order from a chaotic environment, even at the most elementary level; and the frank exhibition of bankruptcy and sterility wrought by that same environment.<sup>50</sup>

Arnheim observes "that the increase of entropy is due to two quite different orders of effect; on the one hand, a striving toward simplicity, which will promote orderliness and the lowering of the level of order, and on the other disorderly destruction."<sup>51</sup> The former leads to "the emptiness of homogeneity," exemplified by seriality, especially the seriality of the grid, which often seems an end in itself in modern art. The latter leads to the "disintegration" of "organized structure . . . either by corrosion and friction or by the mere incapacity to hold together,"<sup>52</sup> evident, Arnheim argues, in Pollock's paintings and abstract expressionistic paintings in general, which look like the shapeless residue of an explosion, and in "the shapelessness of accidental materials, happenings, or sound" presented as art. (One recalls John Cage's remark that beauty is underfoot, in every chance sound and passing appearance, which is why one doesn't have to look for it in museums.)

I propose that instead of understanding modern art in terms of movements – a telling modern term, aligning modern art with the many social and political movements that help give the modern period its unique dynamic character, that convey the modern sense of always being on the move, always going somewhere (if not always knowing where) – one understand it in terms of the dialectic of entropy and creativity, or, to use Arnheim's terms, the morbid catabolic and healthy anabolic forces that make it self-contradictory. This cuts across



12. Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral*, 1947. Enamel and aluminum paint on canvas. H 71 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  W: 35 $\frac{1}{16}$ ". Dallas Museum of Art; © 2004 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

stylistic and conceptual differences and honors the fact that virtually all modern movements are short-lived "breakthroughs." They appear abruptly, and they disappear almost as abruptly. They seem to die as soon as they are born, their flowers quickly fading and pressed

between the pages of history, losing their perfume and flavor to become intellectual and cultural artifacts. They may be exciting experiments, as has been said – in recognition of the knowledge gained from scientific experiments (where art once paid homage to religion and its beliefs, much of it now pays homage to science and its methods) – but they are experiments with often inconclusive results. It is not clear that they give us knowledge, at least not knowledge of the same order as scientific knowledge. This is why new artistic experiments are always being made – why modern art has remained in an "experimental" state, according to some thinkers, for example, E. H. Gombrich. (Picasso said he was interested in results not experiments, but he never stopped experimenting, suggesting that he was dissatisfied with the results – not certain of their significance.)

In no time at all, as Leo Steinberg argues – in three to five years at most – an avant-garde enfant terrible becomes an academic elder statesman, his moment of creative glory over and socially assimilated and institutionally categorized almost as soon as it happens. The imminent and perpetual threat of entropy in the modern world – it always seems on the verge of catastrophic disintegration, and in fact readily deteriorates into homogeneity (standardization) and violence (sadistic indifference) – motivates modern creativity. Indeed, the death drive, however immanent in existence, seems to hover above the surface of modern life, which often seems like an updated Triumph of Death. More and more outbursts of life-giving innovation and avant-garde affirmation, each with less and less shelf life – the more pyrotechnical and spectacular the better (and they become more and more attention-grabbing as modern art "progresses," as though to combat the short attention span of the modern spectator, suggesting that entropy has also infected his consciousness, which is even more short-lived and has fewer breakthroughs than avant-garde art) – are necessary to keep the death drive at bay. Perhaps nowhere is the restless

impatience of modern consciousness, growing ever more jaded and bored with every breakthrough, more visible than in art. People may be baffled by scientific and technological breakthroughs, but they never disappoint, and never seem pointless or clever for the sake of cleverness.

The spectator defends himself against novelty with a sense of *déjà vu* – why, after all, should he struggle to keep up with all the breakthroughs, particularly when they seem to feed off each other, losing their critical edge, and suggesting that they have no larger purpose, while the artist imagines he keeps himself from becoming *passé* by making his art more and more of a spectacle, which of course is self-defeating, for only what is *passé* finds its definitive place in the wax-works of public spectacle. (Art about art is prevalent in postmodernism, signalling the narcissistic bankruptcy of art, all the more so because art about art offers no new insights into art, but reproduces old art, with whatever ironical twist, which destroys its import. It becomes a designer look in an encyclopedia of art looks, losing its unfamiliarity by become a familiar visual cliché. So-called decontextualizing appropriation and recontextualizing restoration – the relocation of stale old art to a new artistic site, where it is juxtaposed with other oldies but goodies in the hope that the friction created by the difference between them will generate a sufficiently large sense of meaning that will hide the fact that they both have become experientially meaningless historical artifacts – is the basic method of postmodern art. Philip Johnson's A T& T Building and David Salle's paintings – they're both masters of appropriation – are among the more sophisticated examples. Sherrie Levine's mechanical reproductions of old modern masterworks is a more simplistic example.)

Ironically, the sophisticated feeling of *déjà vu* and the tragic feeling of being *passé* – both are variations of indifference (without the irony) – are perversely entropic in import: they signal the exhaustion of creativity, the abandonment of critical consciousness, the replacement

of the "sensation of the new" (Baudelaire) with what might be called fatigue with the new, bringing with it a sense of the purposelessness of art. The sense that one is watching the eternal return of the same, involving ironic apathy – the viewing of every new breakthrough and experiment as the latest coy fashion in the wardrobe of the emperor's new clothes – is the symptom par excellence of postmodern entropy. If modern art was energized by a sense of breakthrough and experiment – if the modern artist thought of his studio as a laboratory, as both Picasso and Duchamp said – postmodern art represents the exhausted aftermath.

The public street has become the studio – not only implicitly, but often explicitly – for many postmodern artists. Indeed, Allan Kaprow's happenings, pitched to the crowd, took place on what might be called a simulated street rather than in the private studio. The artist was no longer centered in the studio, where he was the master of all he surveyed, but decentered in the street, another marginal figure in a social space in which everyone is marginal, for the street has no center. No one can be centered in himself in a crowd, for there is no model of a center in it, which is why it is inherently shapeless, however much it may now and then be ordered according to a certain belief. Like Nicolas Cusanus's universe, the crowd is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is infinite, which means that it is nowhere and that no one in it is anywhere. Everyone in a crowd is homogeneously marginal, as it were, and thus in principle the same. (This is why panic subliminally pervades the crowd, looking for an occasion to explode and disrupt it, as though the explosion will restore the personal autonomy and precarious individuality lost to the crowd. When men joined the army in the first world war, which was initially welcomed as a cleansing purge, they happily relinquished their individuality for the crowd's higher cause. But they suddenly realized they were individuals when they found themselves facing death in the trenches. This is why many of them, including such major modern artists as Beckmann and



Kirchner, had breakdowns. They lost their sense of self out of fear of death, which the unempathic military did nothing to mitigate – after all, they were dispensable – and their breakdown ironically restored them to selfhood. They experienced their existential reality only when their existence became meaningless. The effect of this was undoubtedly traumatic, but the trauma woke them up to the reality of their lives. For the artists art became *the way* of acknowledging the existential trauma and recovering a sense of self in the process of doing so. This is particularly evident in the case of Beckmann, whose many self-portraits show him in different social situations – all reminiscent of war zones in their emotional difficulty – as though he could endure them all and still be himself.)

Unlike modern artists, postmodern artists are not interested in alchemical experimentation, however uncertain the result – they are too disillusioned to believe that works of art can be alchemical miracles – but in having an audience that will make them popular, giving them the celebrity and charisma they believe they are entitled to as artists. But they lost their *raison d'être* the moment they thought of themselves as entertainers representing a mass audience's everyday wishes to itself (which is one definition of entertainment) – thus becoming celebrities by celebrating with the crowd – rather than reclusive alchemists struggling to purify the dross of everyday reality into the gold of high art. The moment they gave up the inner solitude – the real, secret studio – necessary for serious creativity, they became publicists for an anonymous, random audience. They became as conformist and banal as their audience. They received their identity from the crowd, rather than earned it by their nonconformist creativity. The postmodern point is to become a media artist, not an avant-garde artist – which today would mean an artist in advance of the media, which very quickly catches up with him, mediaizing him into a transiently topical social phenomenon. The postmodern media artist repeats, in hackneyed, slick form, the alchemical experiments of modern art, turning it into a

caricature of itself by making it seem everyday. This gives his work the touch of magic necessary to transfix the crowd without giving it a new perspective on existence and a new vision of reality – which is what the best modern art does – that would threaten and unsettle the crowd, so that it could never again feel comfortable with and trust itself. Indeed, no one in a crowd can ever again feel at ease in it once his vision of internal and external reality have been shaken by modern art. But the postmodern artist doesn't want to disturb the crowd, but rather affirm it by mirroring it, thus justifying its belief in itself and its everyday view of reality and life, as though it were the only one possible. No artistic earthquakes for him. Instead he fills in the abysses modern art opened, landscaping the terrain of the modern world as though there were no more faults in it.

Postmodern artists are caricatures of artists, for they make the artist part of the crowd, an everyday person with an everyday job to do like everybody else. They do not create panic by making everything familiar seem unfamiliar, as the best modern artists did – suggesting that there is no firm ground for life as well as art – but offer the crowd a brief reprieve, a facile moment of uplift, as it were, from their normal unhappiness, as Freud called it. Thus, postmodern artists ironically realize the therapeutic intention of modern artists, trivializing it in the act of doing so. Disillusioned about art, they still have illusions about themselves – about what art can do for them (not what they can do for art), namely, make them rich and famous, or at least newsworthy if not exactly noteworthy. With them, art becomes socially redundant – proliferates pointlessly, as Trilling suggests, becoming a lame duck repetition of the "already read, seen, done, experienced," as Roland Barthes says. It inhabits social space without becoming personal space. It becomes fatalistically historicist, or at best Alexandrian – "the imitating of imitating" – as Greenberg said.

Arnheim's distinction between the two orders of entropic effect is tailor-made for modern art: geometrically oriented art tends to empty,

energyless homogeneity, gesturally oriented art to explosive disintegration, in which energy is extravagantly dissipated, resulting in a sense of chaotic disorder, subliminally or overtly. (Both kinds of modern art ironically re-create – one might say sublimate – the entropic conditions that prevail in the crowd.) All modern art, whether abstract or representational, is oriented, formally and expressively, toward the geometrical and the gestural – Cézanne implicitly made this point when he struggled to create a Poussinesque Impressionism, as he suggested – and often tries to combine them, which is what occurs in the work the gesturalist Kandinsky made in the 1920s, when he was at the geometrically oriented Bauhaus, and the work that Paul Klee made throughout his career. Mondrian and Sol LeWitt are the leading exemplars of geometrical abstraction – they are the alpha and omega of its development – and Pollock and Willem de Kooning are the grand climax of gestural abstraction, Pollock's all-over paintings showing it at its purest, de Kooning's paintings conveying its existential import. De Kooning shows the entropy that makes the human body seductive in modern times. It is the death in de Kooning's women that attracts us, not their sexuality, which he mangles. The death drive is as strong in them as sexual libido, and eventually triumphs over it. De Kooning offers us a modern vision of Death and the Maiden. But it is in modern representational art that the entropic character of modern emotions become self-evident. There is nothing like Pop art, with its deadpan rendering of social stereotypes – its stereotyping of success – to convey emotional shallowness, hollowness, and homogeneity. Max Beckmann's allegorical triptychs, which alchemically blend psychosocial images in a more emotionally explosive way than Surrealism, convey with climactic intensity and insight the underlying insanity – emotional decadence, one might say – of the modern world in a way unequaled before or since.

The trick of making entropy seminal, thus sidestepping it while admitting to it, is to make geometry "off," so that it seems absurd and



13. Willem de Kooning, *Woman and Bicycle*, 1952–53. Oil on canvas, 76 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  49". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © 2004 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

uncanny, which makes the transcendental seem immediate, and to imply that gestures form an enigmatic order, which also makes them uncanny – not simply mindless markings but fraught with unconscious meaning. What Meyer Schapiro calls Mondrian's asymmetry – the occult balance he establishes between his planes, which have

different colors and sizes, and are thus not stillborn and inert – counteract the homogeneity of the grid, thus neutralizing its entropic effect. By opening his squares – I am referring to his tour de force arrangements of all the variations of a square – LeWitt does the same. He also uses color to enliven his later geometrical structures, for all his yea-saying of their conceptual or intellectual character. In other works black and white gives them a perceptual edge, creating an expressive effect that counteracts their homogeneity. LeWitt carefully sites his works architecturally, whether they are two-dimensional drawings or three-dimensional structures (the interplay of two and three dimensionality is an essential part of his work). They are in effect architecture within architecture, the interplay between the architecture of the site and that of the square preventing both from settling into geometrical complacency. Thus, LeWitt's squares – which clearly owe something to Malevich's Suprematist square – resonate in physical as well as mental space, their dialectical oscillation keeping them from deteriorating into bland, one-dimensional abstractions. In LeWitt's work static geometry becomes perceptually dynamic, losing its conceptually entropic character.

Pollock's gestures seem to be rhythmic, however elusive the rhythm, suggesting a mysterious, inarticulate order beyond the ken of ordinary eyes. Thus, the artist maintains his privileged "insight," even as his work disintegrates into chaos, suggesting his inner chaos, barely controlled and contained by the rhythm of his gestures, which in the end remain desperately "informal" and erratic if not altogether formless. By his own testimony, Pollock began his all-over paintings by drawing a series of schematic, ghostly figures on the canvas – they become manifest in *Blue Poles*, 1952 – which are then vigorously painted over, in effect eradicating them. But the sense of latent figuration remains, and we expect to experience it, on the basis of Pollock's earlier gestural figuration. The point is that the invocation of some familiar subject matter, however distorted and bizarre – so that it seems mysterious



14. Max Beckmann, *Blind Man's Buff*, 1945. Oil on canvas,  $81\frac{1}{4}'' \times 173''$  (overall). Left panel: H  $73\frac{1}{2}'' \times$  W  $40''$ . Center panel: H  $81\frac{1}{2}'' \times$  W  $91\frac{1}{2}''$ . Right panel: H  $73\frac{3}{8}'' \times$  W  $41\frac{1}{4}''$ . The Minneapolis Institute of Art: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Winston. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

and intimidating – keeps entropy at bay. This is the unconscious purpose of de Kooning's use of the female figure, however disintegrated it eventually becomes, so much so that it finally becomes a spiritless, spineless, virtually sexless body – a lamed, leftover landscape, as he himself suggests. In line with his appreciation of the death in life, symbolized by woman, her body eventually loses both its epic and lyric characters, becoming a level playing field of sterile gestures. Where the geometrical artists introduce a disruptive note of non-identity in self-identical geometrical forms, the gestural artists introduce disruptive, unconsciously provocative subject matter, in whatever illusory form, in their abstract paintings. They create a rich sense of emotional latency within the surface of their manifest paint. The result of the contradiction – the dialectic, however awkward and unresolved – is the same: the entropic generates creativity.

But it loses its creative potential when modern art turns to everyday life to revitalize itself, for everyday life – life in the crowd – is

insidiously entropic. It tends to the extremes of homogeneity and explosiveness, as noted. Each seems necessary to counteract the stultifying effects of the other, but they in fact work synergistically together, to devastating psychosocial effect. When modern art openly embraces and identifies with everydayness, it embraces and identifies with the enemy of art, in effect committing suicide. It becomes, at best, Nominal Art – a crowd phenomenon with the honorific identity of art, but without its transcendental ambition and aesthetic substance. It is in effect everyday life in dubious artistic disguise. Thus, the attempt to enliven art with everydayness is self-defeating, although no doubt superficially vitalizing. “Blurring art and life,” in Allan Kaprow’s telling phrase, is to confirm that both have become entropic. Kaprow doesn’t see the irony in the blurring: he doesn’t realize that instead of cross-fertilizing to new creative effect, both come to seem meaningless – the major symptom of psychic entropy. Meaninglessness is the mental disease of the age, as Viktor Frankl writes – a sign of the insidious entropy that underlies it – and both art and life have become meaningless in postmodernity.

For Kaprow, art and life are in competition. Art once seemed superior to life, but in modernity it seems inferior to life. Life has clearly won the competition, which is why art joins it – or rather is colonized by it. Art becomes humble and full of self-doubt as a result of its capitulation. The point seems to be that if you can’t beat everyday reality you might as well become part of it, with whatever manic-depressive results – a Whitmanesque approach that dispenses with poetry without even pretending to be poetry, or to see the poetry in prosaic life, as Whitman did. (Kaprow’s ideas have in fact been said to derive from Whitman and John Dewey’s idea of “art as experience.”) Here are some quotations that make the point. In “The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I” – or “postartist,” as I prefer to call the new social personage – Kaprow writes, without irony, or with just enough to add a sardonic lilt to his remarks, which compare modern art unfavorably to modern technology and the modern environment in general:

Sophistication of consciousness in the arts today (1969) is so great that it is hard not to assert as matters of fact;

that the LM mooncraft is patently superior to all contemporary sculptural efforts;

that the broadcast verbal exchange between Houston’s Manned Spacecraft Center and the Apollo 11 astronauts was better than contemporary poetry;

that with their sound distortions, beeps, static, and communication breaks, such exchanges also surpassed the electronic music of the concert halls;

that certain remote-control videotapes of the lives of ghetto families recorded (with their permission) by anthropologists are more fascinating than the celebrated slice-of-life underground films;

that not a few of those brightly lit plastic and stainless steel gas stations of, say, Las Vegas, are the most extraordinary architecture to date;

that the random trancelike movements of shoppers in supermarket are richer than anything done in modern dance;

that lint under beds and the debris of industrial dumps are more engaging than the recent rash of exhibitions of scattered waste master;

that the vapor trails left by rocket tests – motionless, rainbow-colored, sky-filling scribbles – are unequaled by artists exploring gaseous media;

that the Southeast Asia theater of war in Vietnam, or the trial of the “Chicago Eight,” while indefensible, is better theater than any play;

that . . . etc., etc., . . . nonart is more art than Art art.<sup>12</sup>



Kaprow seems to be mocking Ad Reinhardt's quasi-mystical art of art-as-art (and nothing else), that is, his belief that pure art is beside the point of life, indeed, transcends it in sublime indifference (which is what Reinhardt's famous black paintings seem to embody). But Kaprow goes further, dismissing all as-if artists – particularly conceptual artists – as self-aggrandizing, socially ingratiating farces, all theory and little or no practice.

Those wishing to be called artists, in order to have some or all of their acts and ideas considered art, only have to drop an artistic thought around them, announce the fact and persuade others to believe it. That's advertising. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, "Art is what you can get away with."<sup>53</sup>

Declaring, in a quiet crescendo, that "critics will be as irrelevant as artists"<sup>54</sup> in the future – which is in the endless technological now of software and television, as Kaprow suggests (he has a prescient fantasy of a woman making "electronic love to a particular man she saw on a monitor" in a TV Arcade "open to the public twenty-four hours a day, like any washerette," and surveyed by "automatically moving cameras . . . prominently displayed"<sup>55</sup>) – Kaprow declares:

During the recent "age of analysis" when human activity was seen as a symbolic smoke screen that had to be dispelled, explanations and interpretations were in order. But nowadays the modern arts themselves have become commentaries and may forecast the postartistic age. They comment on their respective pasts, in which, for instance, the medium of television comments on the film; a live sound played alongside its taped version comments on which is

"real"; one artist comments on another's latest moves; some artists comment on the state of their health or the world; others comment on not commenting (while critics comment on all commentaries as I'm commenting here).<sup>56</sup>

Concluding, Kaprow argues that art will disappear, particularly art as a spectator sport. "The actual, probably global, environment will engage us in an increasingly participational way. . . . we'll act in response to the given natural and urban environments such as the sky, the ocean floor, winter resorts, motels, the movements of cars, public services, and the communication media."<sup>57</sup> Our participatory responses will not be art, and in fact anything "sponsored by art galleries" will instantly become passé. It will not be art "because it will be available to too many people,"<sup>58</sup> while art depends on exclusiveness, difficulty, and contemplation – all of which make it seductive – for its cachet. But they will no longer give cachet, but be a disadvantage, for they preclude global participation and everyday responsiveness, which needs no seductive foreplay to occur. Art is no longer for the happy few, eager for something new to sharpen their perceptions and change their conceptions, but for the unhappy many, who no matter how unhappy are happy with technology, which alone they allow to change their lives, for it doesn't change the emotional status quo. (Is it the case that Kaprow's electronic sex is the ultimate participatory art (or rather non-art), because it is completely simulated, entirely in the mind, and available to all? If art entertainment, like all entertainment, offers instant vicarious gratification of ostensibly forbidden wishes – dares express in safe make-believe form what has become forbidden and tantalizing by reason of its social and self-repression – then electronic sex is the most entertaining conceptual art of all.)

While elated by the new open system that replaces the closed system of art – Kaprow makes frequent references to systems theory –

Kaprow is also depressed. In "Manifesto" (1966), he writes:

Once, the task of the artist was to make good art; now it is to avoid making art of any kind. Once, the public and critics had to be shown; now they are full of authority and the artists are full of doubt.

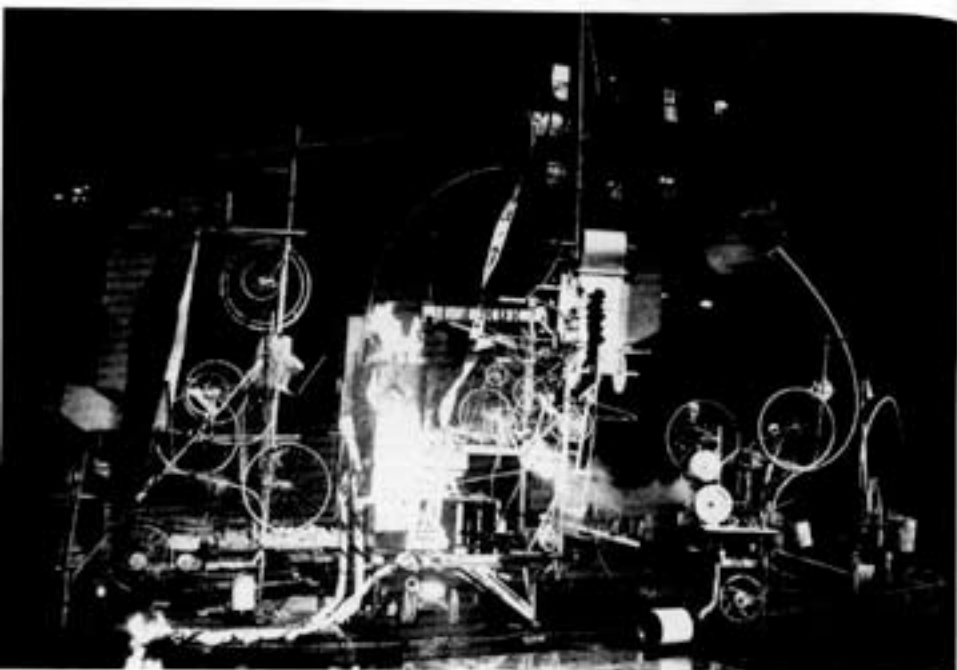
The history of art and esthetics is all on bookshelves. To its pluralism of values, add the current blurring of boundaries dividing the arts, and dividing art from life, and it is clear that the old questions of definition and standards of excellence are not only futile but naive. Even yesterday's distinctions between art, antiart, and nonart are pseudo-distinctions that simply waste our time: the side of an old building recalls Clyfford Still's canvases, the guts of a washing machine double as Duchamp's *Bottle Rack*, the voices in a train station are Jackson MacLow's poems, the sounds of eating in a luncheonette are by John Cage, and all may be part of a Happening. Moreover, as the "found object" implies the found word, noise, or action, it also demands the the found environment. Not only does art become life, but life refuses to be itself. . . .

This makes identifying oneself as an artist ironic, an attestation not to talent for a specialized skill, but to a philosophical stance before elusive alternatives of not-quite-art and not-quite-life. *Artist* refers to a person willfully enmeshed in the dilemma of categories who performs as if none of them existed. If there is no clear difference between an Assemblage with sound and a "noise" concert with sights, then there is no clear difference between an artist and a junkyard dealer.<sup>39</sup>

If only the issue was so eloquently philosophical – a Gordian knot of irony which grows intellectually tighter whenever one tries to loosen

it. How about saying that when there is no clear difference between an artist and a junkyard dealer it doesn't matter which one is because both have become equally meaningless and valueless? How about saying that both art and life have become meaningless and valueless because both have become essentially the same? Let's go further: how about saying that art has become meaningless and valueless because life has become the source and measure of art? Art may develop "a hyperconsciousness about itself and its everyday surroundings,"<sup>60</sup> but it is the everyday surroundings that decide whether it is art or not, if they bother doing so. "The technological pursuits of today's nonartists and un-artists . . . provide [the] resources" for future art,<sup>61</sup> which means they have more meaning and value than it does. They are more psychosocially expressive and engaging than it can ever be. Art depends completely on them, transforming them – if it can be called that – to little effect, especially since the artistic re-working and re-thinking of them – if it goes as far as that (which is doubtful) – has no aesthetic effect.

Jean Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, 1960, a self-destructing machine – hardly a technological wonder and obviously with no constructive value – is about as far as such technology-dependent art goes toward "aesthetic" excitement. Tinguely has said that "the machine allows me, above anything, to reach poetry," but the poetry he reaches is entirely destructive if it is poetry, whether the poetry of the machine or of art or of destructiveness, and if destructiveness can be regarded as poetic, even ironically. Does Tinguely mean what he says, or is he just putting together two terms that are conventionally regarded as incommensurate – machine and poetry (and thus emulating Duchamp and Picabia, who supposedly saw the poetry in the machine) – to provocative effect? But is there still an ounce of provocation and incongruity in what, after a half century, has become a prosaic idea, not to say boring cliché? Does evoking it still give a work of art credibility and significance? Destruction seems more widespread than constructive



15. Jean Tinguely, *Homage to New York*, 1960. Self-destructing installation in the garden of The Museum of Modern Art. Photograph copyright David Gaht. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

innovation in the modern world – so much technological innovation serves the death drive, barely keeping up with it – and Tinguely's piece can be said to be an homage to twentieth century destructiveness, even a suicidal version of a destructive war machine, and as such ironical and perverse in the best modern tradition. Tinguely's self-annihilating machine certainly takes what Duchamp called the nihilism of Dada – which first declared the meaninglessness and valuelessness of art in the modern world – to a new extreme. Tinguely's machine is a very uncomic relief in a tragic – however technologically advanced – age. (Richard Huelsenbeck, the author of *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, gave up Dadaism to become a psychoanalyst, and the other Dadaists drifted away into indifference, while Dadaists such as Max Ernst and Jean Arp,

who became professional artists, saw Dadaism as the latest experiment – a way out of Cubism – indicating that they never viewed it nihilistically as the end of art, but rather as another method for making art.)

But most postart isn't as technologically clever as Tinguely's machine, as Lucy Lippard's chronology of conceptual art – the premier postart – shows. It takes its triviality far too seriously to be self-subversive. It suggests that the conceptual postartist is the most banal entertainer of all, for he "performs" completely banal ideas. (He doesn't have to make them; he finds them – everywhere.) LeWitt has famously said, in his "Sentences on Conceptual Art," that "Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution" (sentence 32),<sup>62</sup> but the conceptual postartist is incapable of beautiful execution. He has absolutely no interest in aesthetics and lacks the craft necessary to create beauty. (LeWitt lets the physical execution of his ideas be carried out by others. Sentence 35 states that "When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art." LeWitt doesn't have to worry about that problem.) Sentence 33 states that "It is difficult to bungle a good idea," but for the conceptual postartist every banal idea is "good" just because it is banal, which is why the thought that it needs rescuing by good craft and beauty never occurs to him.

Here are some samples of postart that seem to revel in banality. William Wegman's *3 Speeds, 3 Temperatures*, which involved "three faucets running progressively warmer and harder," was performed in the faculty men's room at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in May 1970.<sup>63</sup> Were any faculty present to confirm that it was performed? It doesn't matter – it's just an idea, credible because it is banal. That same year (clearly a banner one for conceptual postart), beginning on October 1, Billy Apple performed *Vacuuming*, which consisted of vacuum cleaning the second floor front and rear space, landing, stairs, and entrance at 161 West 23rd Street in New York City. The work was still in progress as of December 11.<sup>64</sup> The vacuum bags discarded after each cleaning are proof of its significance. In April 1971, for ten days,



16. Mary Beth Edelson, *Some Living American Women Artists (1972)*. *Last Supper* Poster. Courtesy of the artist.

Hamish Fulton took a 165 mile walk from Winchester Cathedral to Canterbury Cathedral. *The Pilgrim's Way* traveled was "the main prehistoric thoroughfare in South-East England."<sup>65</sup> Was Fulton reclaiming it from Christianity or was he in search of a conversion experience, suggesting that he was a modern saint (or a martyr to postart, as his slow motion marathon suggests)? (But St. Paul didn't go out of his way to convert on the way to Damascus. It just happened – the first happening?) Less courageously, but much more banally – which may make it the better work of postart – Adrian Piper presented a "proportional enlargement of one mapped block of New York City... in booklet form."<sup>66</sup> Has it become a collector's item? Does it make sense to speak of connoisseurs of postart? Among the more notorious postart pieces was Claes Oldenburg's response to an invitation "to participate in a city outdoor sculpture show; he (1) suggests calling Manhattan a work of art, (2) proposes a scream monument wherein a piercing scream is broadcast throughout the streets at 2 a.m., and (3) finally has a 6' x 6' x 3' trench dug behind the Metropolitan Museum by



17. Leonardo da Vinci, *Last Supper*, 1495–97/98. Fresco. Refectory, Sta. Maria delle Grazie, Milan.

union gravediggers, under his supervision, and then filled up again."<sup>67</sup> Douglas Huebler famously said: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more."<sup>68</sup> But it is also full of ideas and activities, more or less interesting. Why add to them?

Defamatory banalization of great traditional art has become more or less pro forma in postart, particularly feminist postart. Mary Beth Edelson's "revision" of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, in which photographs of the heads of trendy feminist artists replace those of the apostles, is the classic example. In a similar vein, but without feminist intention and much more nihilistically, if with the same heavy-handed irony, Vik Muniz re-does masterpieces – Caravaggio's *Medusa* and Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* among them (suggesting that Muniz has a problem with the phallic woman as well as with high art) – in chocolate or spaghetti.





18. Vik Muniz, *Raft of the Medusa (Pictures of Chocolate)*, 1999. Cibachrome. 2 Parts: 70 × 100" overall. © Vik Muniz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, NYC.

among other everyday edible materials. He democratizes the masterpieces by turning them into cheap junk food, high caloric but with little nutritional value, and very tasty, literally. But the subtle tastefulness of the masterpieces has completely disappeared. Updating Rodin's *The Thinker*, Keith Tyson, an engineer-cum-artist, designed a hexagonal structure that hums electronically. Presumably it is thinking. (Or is it humming some simple computer melody – the humming never varies, confirming its banality – to itself?) We have clearly become high-tech machines – forget about the body, inseparable from mind for Rodin.

Crudely copying several of Rubens's paintings of women, a craftless feminist postpainter added male hands around their voluptuous bodies, suggesting Rubens's lechery. This is explained in an accompanying text, which hypes the paintings as a telling revelation of Rubens's all too male psyche. The long-winded text is a telling example of the pseudo-profound theorizing that has become *de rigueur* in postart.



19. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819. Oil on canvas, 16' × 1' × 23' 6". Louvre, Paris, France. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

Indeed, such texts – which are usually less interesting than the objects they pretend to enlighten us about (if there is any reason to choose between their banality) – have become essential weapons in the armory of ideological didacticism that supports postart. But Annie Sprinkle's exhibitionistic grid of *Sluts and Goddesses*, 1990, doesn't seem to get the feminist point, for her femme fatales, most naked and some in S-M attire, are frankly inviting and voluptuous. Sprinkle seems to be an old-fashioned feminist, using the female body to mock male desire, for the body is out of reach in a pornographic photograph, and thus more seductive than satisfying – a broken sexual promise. But Rachel Lachowicz's *Femme Fatale*, 1991–92, an installation of female body parts on meat hooks, restores us to our feminist senses, for it suggests male use and abuse of the female body. Men are so sexually infantile they can't help but dismember it into fetishized part objects – so many pieces of (white) meat in a morbid museum.

Perhaps the most consummate work of postart is the shortlived installation by Damien Hirst referred to earlier – or rather the events surrounding the installation. The cleaning man who cleared up the “mess,” as he called it, was the perfect participant observer, for he responded to it as life rather than art – unoriginal garbage or anonymous waste rather than “an original Damien Hirst,” as the gallery manager said it was – confirming that it was indeed postart and as such meaningless and valueless (he certainly wouldn’t have paid the hundreds of thousands of dollars asked for it, if he had the money). Hirst was thrilled by the junking of his junk work – the dirty litter of his studio – for, being mistaken as life, it confirmed that “his art is all about the relationship between art and the everyday.” Which is? That everyday life is more interesting than art, and art is only interesting when it is mistaken for everyday life, even if that means it loses its identity as art, which it only had because it was exhibited in a place called an art gallery, and thus on its way to being institutionalized as art. The cleaning man was clearly the right critic.

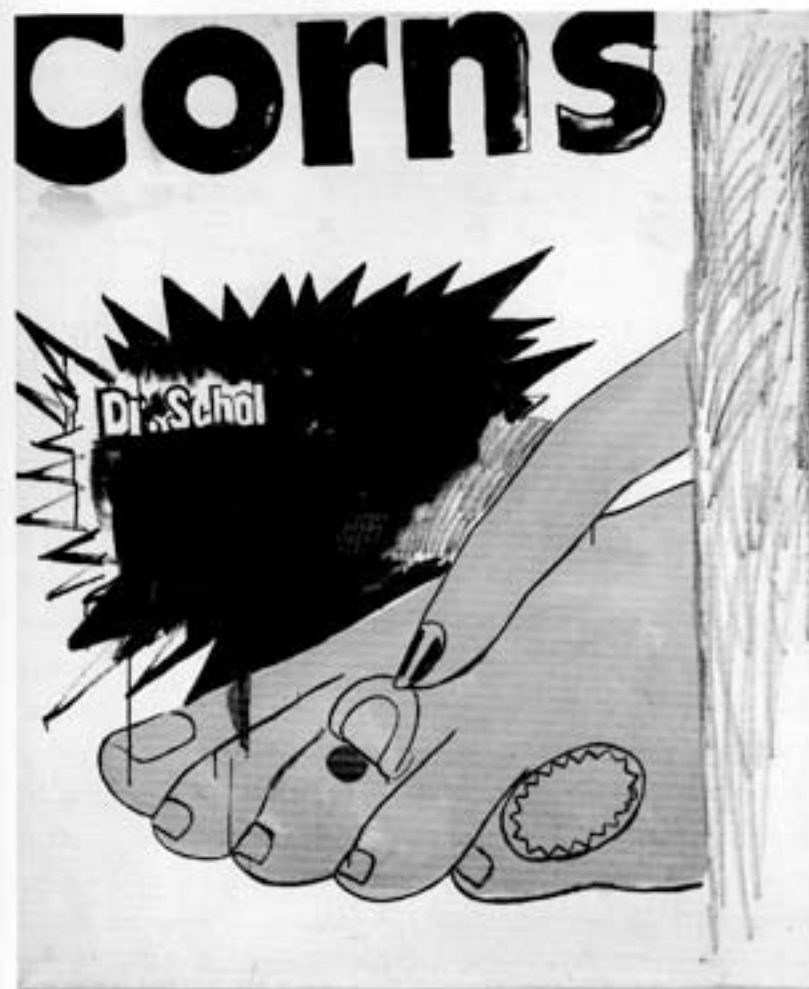
Hirst’s work, which includes the fate that unexpectedly befell it and completed it, the way breaking the Large Glass completed it for Duchamp, is the example par excellence of what Kaprow called “work . . . located in activities and contexts that don’t suggest art in any way.”<sup>69</sup> (“Brushing my teeth . . . in the morning when I’m barely awake” was Kaprow’s example of such an activity. It’s clearly banal enough to be mistaken for postart.) For Kaprow, “the practice of such an art, which isn’t perceived as art, is not so much a contradiction as a paradox.”<sup>70</sup> I want to suggest it’s neither a contradiction nor a paradox, but a negation of both art and life, and as such a type of black humor, like Dadaism. Or perhaps humorless blackness or nihilism, which is what Martin Creed’s exhibition of a light bulb, turning off and on in an empty room – the so-called installation received the Turner Prize for 2001 – seems to be. The blackness of the humor is confirmed when what presents itself as a work of art – an advanced one, no less – is

mistaken for a slice of life, which is what Hirst’s cleaning man did. The humor becomes even more black – or is it that the nihilism becomes more humorous? (at least to the skeptical) – when, after it is removed from the art situation, it can no longer be seen as art – no longer holds its own as art. Making art has become a case of putting on the emperor’s new clothing and getting away with it – calling raw life interesting art and convincing people that it is, which suggests just how much postart must be taken on faith, indicating that it is a minor cult.

If “themes, materials, actions, and the associations they evoke are to be gotten from anywhere except the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu,”<sup>71</sup> then once they are seen for what they are – once it is realized that they have nothing to do with the arts – they can never again be viewed as art. The mistake of doing so in the first place – of buying into them as art (“buying” is the key word here, for to spend six figures on a Damien Hirst is clearly an act of faith in him, his originality, postart, the whole milieu that calls itself art, with its high rollers and holy rollers) – has been rectified. The moment of revelation occurs not when art and life are blurred, but when one becomes clear-eyed – like Hirst’s cleaning man – and realizes that what presents itself as art is just a leftover piece of life. One has awakened from a bad dream. In Hirst’s installation experimental art has become entropic – a decadent farce. For all of Kaprow’s efforts to keep “the line between the Happening and daily life as fluid and perhaps indistinct as possible”<sup>72</sup> – which is what Hirst’s happening successfully does, as the cleaning man’s response to it indicates – the fact of the matter is that there is no line between them, whether fluid and indistinct or fixed and distinctive (as in high art), but rather the naive belief that there is one. This belief is instantly shattered the moment the postart happening is understood to be just another daily event, and exists to turn non-art milieus into art ones, giving one the sense that daily life is something special. Postart encourages us to see it that way, and we had better do so, because daily life is the only kind we can have in a postart world. What used to be

called high art becomes just another daily event in the everyday world, losing whatever uncommon qualities made it far from daily, indeed, helped it undo and transcend dailiness, putting dailiness back in its common place. The postartist's role is to convince us that no other experience is possible than daily experience. High art and original artists are superfluous, as Kaprow suggests. The postartist is much more popular, which is why everyone wants to be one – and everyone who has a daily life is, whether he knows it or not.

Kaprow's example of the popular postartist is Andy Warhol,<sup>73</sup> and Warhol was an expert in what has come to be called experiential marketing. He in fact became a brand name, like Campbell's Soup and Coca Cola, whose products he represented. Indeed, he reproduced them the same mechanical way they were produced. It was a mass reproduction that emulated the mass production and distribution methods of modern marketing. The power of the Warhol brand is shown by the fact that the 1950s cookie jars and Fiesta ware that he owned have been exhibited as autonomous works of art. This occurred in 2002 at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, confirming once again that the most mundane objects can become fashionable art if they are associated with a postartist. It was a superb example of successful experiential marketing, which involves, as Bernd Schmitt writes, "moving away from traditional 'features-and-benefits' marketing" – which would have emphasized the functionality and retro-chic of the objects – "toward creating experiences for . . . customers,"<sup>74</sup> in Warhol's case, art experiences. To use Bernd Schmitt's wonderful term, exhibited in the museum Warhol's mundane possessions became "Strategic Experiential Modules." They became "sensory experiences (SENSE); affective experiences (FEEL); creative cognitive experiences (THINK); physical experiences and entire lifestyles (ACT); and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE)," all in one object. Owning objects that Warhol once owned and thus implicitly identifying with him – owning relics of a secular



20. Andy Warhol, *Dr. Scholl's*, 1960. Oil on canvas. H 40" x W 48". The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Gift of Halston, 1982. © 2004 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York.

art saint and thus sharing in his fame and sacredness (the fame that made him sacred) – one fancies, however unconsciously, that one is part of Warhol's inner circle. One believes that possessing the object gives one the power and license – clearly a magical power and poetic

license – to sense, feel, think, and act like a member of his in-group. The genius of Warhol is that he became a genie inhabiting his own objects – a power that was more significant than any of them.

But of course the postartist has to be a self-deceptive split personality, like Duchamp and Warhol – a personality “haunted by the ambition of high art, even as he trashes it,” which is the way George Segal described Allan Kaprow – to make the change in meaning, value, and status work and remain binding. Warhol’s possessions have become the ultimate unart, for they have been marketed as an experience of Warhol – as a substitute for the postartist himself. To market a personality through the person’s possessions is a major feat of marketing, guaranteeing that the possessions will become charged with the personality’s charisma – for the whole point of experiential marketing is to create charisma, that is, to make a banal piece of property seem charismatic, which means that it satisfies the unconscious emotional needs of the viewer, not simply his conscious material needs<sup>75</sup> – and thus will never revert to unart. Money and museums will keep them from doing so, for they have become important investment properties, rising above the intellectual speculation that made them works of art in the first place. This suggests that the postartist speculates in art in more ways than one – that for him to be an artist is to speculate in the art market as well as to engage in philosophical speculation (conceptual antics?) about the nature of art. Similarly, Duchamp’s *Fountain*, 1917 can no longer be regarded as a urinal, despite the best efforts of certain postartists to return it to its pre-Duchamp condition by urinating in it. However, it seems clear that Nikki de Saint Phalle perfume, at \$350 an ounce – according to *Allure* (May 2002) “It’s a strong scent that has a touch of violet, but it’s not sweet” – is unlikely to survive as either found art or expensive unart, for Saint Phalle does not have the brand name that Duchamp and Warhol have. Her work is interesting, but she doesn’t have the public personality that they do. Perhaps she added her name to a perfume to give herself one, but the gesture was unsuccessful.



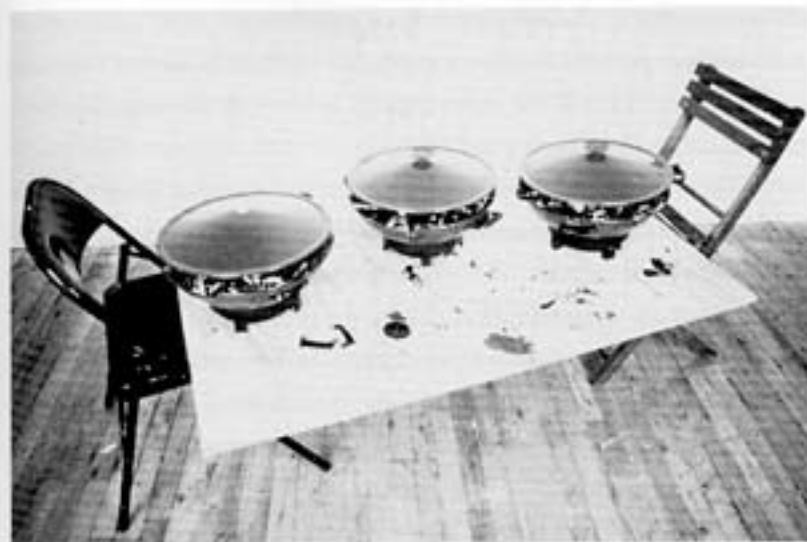
21. Norman Rockwell, *Triple Self-Portrait*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  34 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Agency. Copyright © 1960 the Norman Rockwell Family Entities. The Norman Rockwell Museum.



The product is too select: Duchamp and Warhol added their name to cheap, commonplace, popular products, Hollywood actresses included. In the postartworld the artist's public personality counts more than the objects he presents as art, and in fact whatever he claims to be art will have instant credibility – even exalted significance – because of his public image.

Both Duchamp and Warhol have reached the exalted status of Jacqueline Kennedy, whose gowns have been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, giving them the status of works of art and making them more expensive than they were when she purchased them. Here are remainders that have gone up in value and meaning. The Metropolitan Museum has also exhibited a collection of baseball cards. Their commercial value and emotional appeal can only increase by reason of the art milieu in which they were placed. Thus, people's art easily becomes high art these postart days. Indeed, it seems more charismatic than high art in a democracy of material objects. It is not only the boundary between art and life that has blurred, but between everyday art and high art – popular art, which makes no claim to aesthetic significance (it only wants to be user-friendly), and art that, as the years pass and it loses its social relevance and place, has no other claim to make for itself. Another case in point is the exhibition of Norman Rockwell's works in the Guggenheim Museum, which had previously presented motorcycles as works of art, confirming that paintings and sculptures are low-tech products, relatively uncomplicated compared to the technologically elaborate motorcycles.

Experiential marketing is the secret of postart's success. Postart, in social fact, has perfected experiential marketing, that is, the marketing of daily experience as aesthetic experience, which conflates and falsifies both. The point is to hype everyday objects as aesthetic objects, which makes us overlook their banality, even as it banalizes aesthetics – lowers the threshold, as it were, on what we are willing to call an aesthetic experience. Whether it knows it or not postart owes a great debt to



22. Ritkrit Tiravanija (*Untitled*). *For M. B.*, 1995. Plaster and enamel paint, 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  $\times$  17"  $\times$  17". Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

marketing aesthetics, that is, "the strategic management of brands, identity, and image," as Schmitt and his colleague Alex Simonson say.<sup>76</sup> When the postartist Ritkrit Tiravanija, who has achieved his fifteen minutes of Warholian fame for his food pieces (which he calls process pieces, showing he knows the legitimating and advertising art lingo, an important part of the product) – he served Thai curry at one gallery, "reflecting his dominant biographical and cultural reference," as one postcritic put it, "and at the [Venice] Biennale he evoked Marco Polo's discovery of noodles and their subsequent importation to the West in 1271"<sup>77</sup> – remarked that "a stove that had the brand name *Beauty* written on it in the window of a store on the Bowery" was "the perfect object," and used the money he received from a grant to buy it ("it was actually overpriced" but he "had to get an object which had everything in it that I needed" [was it the need for beauty or the compulsion to cook?])<sup>78</sup> – he testified to the power of marketing aesthetics. The stove – the perfect ironical Duchampian found object, for it was a practical

object branded as ideal Beauty – was a superb example of experiential marketing, especially because it marketed itself as Beauty as well as a useful object. Indeed, the stove seemed to embody the experience of beauty, rather than merely represent it.

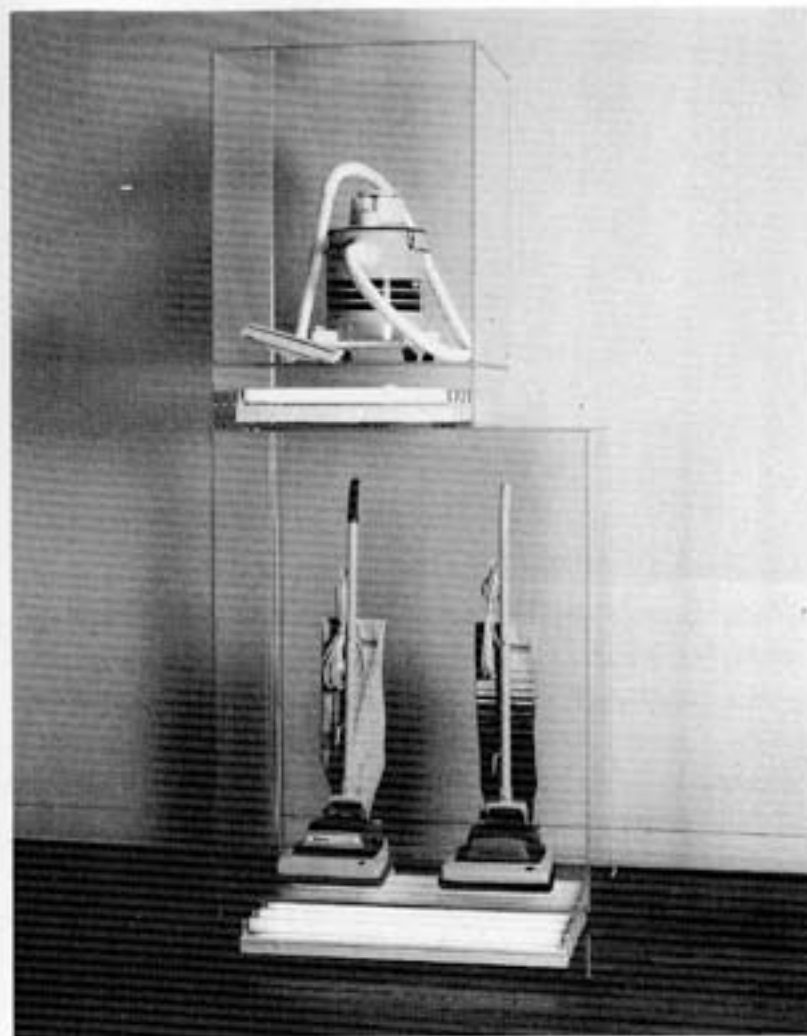
The interplay of language and object in a game of referencing is the postart norm. It is a semiotic venture using everyday means to generate conceptual friction. The goal is to create an aporia not simply an ambiguity – an unresolvable dilemma not simply an uncertain meaning. (Tiranvija's found stove certainly does so better than his cooking, however saturated in references – a sort of intellectual sauce – the food is.) This tends to be combined with ideological marketing – the selling of a political program, or, more simply, politically hot topics. An example is *Solid Sea*, an installation by Multiplicity, an Italian group of postartists, presented at Documenta 11 (2002). It deals with the death of some 200 Asians who drowned when their overcrowded boat sank between Malta and Sicily. They were on their way to a new life in Europe, but never made it because the boat was forced to board by those they had paid to bring them there. In one room video interviews with friends and relatives, Italian authorities, and local fishermen are spliced together in a chorus of lament and anger. The imagery is managed, as it were, to make a dramatic point. Another room shows a video of the sunken ship and a satellite picture of the Mediterranean. Above and below converge, suggesting the cosmic significance of what has become an everyday event in some parts of the world. But it may simply be the usual split screen way of informing us about the event – pinpointing it geographically, as though with scientific rigor – although the juxtaposition of the scales adds a certain quixotic if limited energy to the video. Does the installation tell us anything about the meaning of the unfortunate event, and about the problem of illegal immigration into Europe, which has become a matter of political concern? No. It simply points to the event and problem – the particular event illustrates the larger problem. It is a semiotic signalling, using high-tech tools, familiar

to everyone, to communicate the obvious, much the way a television newscast would, probably with more commentary and analysis. No doubt the simultaneity of the videos makes it more arty, simultaneity or multiple perspectives being the “in” thing since Cubism. Does this make it art? No. For the information is not transformed, it is manipulated, in a rather conventional, even simplistic way. There is no insight into the event, no sense of the reason it occurred beyond the fact that it did – what were the motivations of the transporters? – no sense of what motivated the Asians to make such a difficult and dangerous trip (what, exactly, did they think a “better life” was?), no insight into them and their friends and relatives as individuals, no aesthetic subtlety in the relationship between the video mode of presentation and the subject matter. Is the installation a “statement?” No. It's undigested information about a social situation. And it's old information – information that has lost its topicality, however topical the issue it raises remains. More pointedly, it's marketing of social information as art. And even more pointedly, it's the marketing of other people's suffering as art. All this makes it postart not art – managed imagery with no aesthetic relevance, that is, with no transcendental import that would turn it into tragic art. Only such sensitive transformation would have made it a great experience not simply the marketable record of an event.

Whatever their intentions, the Multiplicity postartists reflect the marketing orientation of the modern world, which has been openly embraced by so-called art. Jeff Koons, who exhibits everyday products such as vacuum cleaners – they look very clean because they are new and unused – as works of postart, may be the prime example of an art-marketing personality. Haim Steinbach, who cleverly displays smaller products on modernist shelves, looks like a close second, although it's not a foto-finish; Koons is clearly the leader of the art-marketing pack. It is worth noting that Koons was a stockbroker before he became a postartist, indicating that he knew where the real money was, and knew something about marketing. Certainly the unregulated art market

is preferable to the regulated stock market. The vacuum cleaner obsession of Apple and Koons suggests that there is a new group of anally obsessed artists in our midst, confirmed by the fact that Odd Nerdmum and Kiki Smith have depicted clean women defecating, and Gilbert and George have displayed giant feces cookies. Clearly anything can be marketed in the postartworld, which is something that Piero Manzoni, who signed cans supposedly containing his excrement, realized long ago, in recognition of the charismatic alliance of excrement and art in the postart world. Their synergistic association is a superb example of experiential marketing. Excrement and art already have a certain charismatic appeal – excrement has negative charisma; art, positive charisma. When each is accorded the status of the other, that is, when found excrement becomes readymade art – a standard Duchampian act – the charisma of both increases exponentially. Both begin to smell to high heaven as it were; that is, their charisma becomes cosmic: their association is the salvation of both. Of course, charisma compounded is also charisma debunked. Dali noted that “during the course of the Second World War” Duchamp expressed “a new interest in the preparation of shit, of which the small excretions from the navel are the ‘de luxe’ editions.”<sup>79</sup> Anything – the more excrement-like or junky the better – can be sold as a work of postart, so long as it is signed by the right postartist. It’s all in the mystique of the name, or rather in the mystique created by the marketing of the name.

As Erich Fromm has written, “the marketing orientation [is] the dominant one . . . in the modern era.”<sup>80</sup> It influences our attitudes and character. “The market concept of value, the emphasis on exchange value rather than on use value, has led to a similar concept of value with regard to people and particularly to oneself. The character orientation which is rooted in the experience of oneself as a commodity and of one’s value as exchange value I call the marketing orientation.”<sup>81</sup> As Fromm notes, a new market has developed – the “‘personality market’ . . . . The principle of evaluation is the same on both the personality



23. Jeff Koons, *New Hoover Convertibles, New Shelton Wet/Dry Displaced Double Decker*, 1981–87. Plexiglass, vacuum cleaners, fluorescent lights,  $98\frac{7}{16}'' \times 41\frac{1}{8}'' \times 27\frac{1}{4}''$ . Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York.



24. Odd Nerdrum, *Shit Rock*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 76 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  $\times$  71". Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York.



25. Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992. Wax, pigment, papier-mache, 160"  $\times$  23"  $\times$  23". Courtesy Pace Wildenstein Gallery, New York.

and the commodity market: on the one, personalities are offered for sale; on the other, commodities. Value in both cases is their exchange value, for which use value is a necessary but not a sufficient condition... However, if we ask what the respective weight of skill and personality as a condition of success is, we find that only in exceptional cases is success predominantly the result of skill and of certain human qualities like honesty, decency, and integrity. Although the proportion between skill and human qualities on the one hand and 'personality' on the other hand as prerequisites for success varies, the 'personality factor' always plays a decisive role. Success depends largely on how well a person sells himself on the market, how well he gets his personality across, how nice a 'package' he is."<sup>82</sup> He experiences himself "simultaneously as the seller and the commodity to be sold,"<sup>83</sup> sacrificing his value to himself on the altar of exchange value.

There seem to be two preferred personality packages – two highly marketable types of personalities – in the postartworld, which is essentially a personality market. One is represented by Warhol, who markets indifference as receptivity (the next ironical step after Duchamp), and the other is represented by Julian Schnabel, who markets aggressive macho bluster as authenticity (showing his Abstract Expressionist heritage). (Schnabel declared himself "the greatest fucking artist since Picasso" – clearly a selling point, as every gain in notoriety is.) Looking at them, one would think – correctly – that the notion of a person has become bankrupt in consumer society. Entropy has overtaken it: having personality, as defined by the market, replaces being a person, as defined by the human condition. Simply put, having a personality is more important than being a person. Indeed, there's no need to be a person these days – no need to have human values – only a knowledgeable consumer. One only needs to know the exchange value of human beings. Similarly, there is no need to know the human value of art, only its value in the market. Marketing confuses values; we readily mistake inhuman values for human values because the former are so



well packaged, which is the problem with postart. The spectator has become the customer; he has to be confused – morally and intellectually – to invest in postart, emotionally and economically.

If the customer is puzzled about the use value of a product, he may want to exchange it for another one. This keeps the market moving. A work of art that has to wait for the judgment of posterity to decide its value has none. The judgment of posterity is too slow these fast-moving days, which is why it has been replaced by the judgment of the market. Every day is market day in the postart world. The point is quick turnover. The marketed work either quickly accrues economic value or loses all value – artistic, existential, critical. They're old-fashioned in the world of postart. Winning in the market means the work is a good bet not a good product. Commercial recognition and critical recognition have become interchangeable. A high price for a Damien Hirst is more scandalous than a good review. It is more provocative than the work itself. Art is a gamble in the postart world, which is why some of the gambling casinos of Las Vegas have built art museums on their premises, each adding its touch of class and charisma to the other. More than the association of art and excrement, the association of art and money adds to the charisma of both, making each more magical than it would be if it were indifferent to the other. Once again Duchamp, with his usual prescience, was in the socio-art avant-garde: he wanted to manufacture the word "Dada" as a trinket, in silver, gold, and platinum editions, so that every economic class of customer could afford an illustrious piece of art jewelry. It would presumably always be in fashion, for once an art movement becomes part of art history it becomes part of high fashion; that is, it becomes postart.

## THE DECLINE OF THE CULT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS: RUNNING ON EMPTY

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Modern art truly begins with the awareness of the unconscious – with the turn inward, leading to the discovery of the unconscious – which developed during Romanticism. Baudelaire says as much when he writes in "The Salon of 1846": "Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth, but in a mode of feeling. They looked for it outside themselves, but it was only to be found within."<sup>84</sup> He speaks of the "new emotions" that would be experienced,<sup>85</sup> and the "new world" that would be revealed.<sup>86</sup> When, celebrating the imagination, he speaks of "the furthest depths of the soul,"<sup>87</sup> he is speaking of the unconscious. "All accepted behavior has become confused, all established ideas contradicted, . . . the impossible mingles with the real" in the unconscious, suggesting that it involves "faculties or notions of a special order, foreign to our world."<sup>88</sup> He knows that it speaks "the language of the dream" and that it is the enemy of "banality," the "great vice."<sup>89</sup> It is "creative" rather than "correct."<sup>90</sup> Where the traditional artist "can find nothing more beautiful to invent than what he sees" in nature, the modern artist aspires "towards the infinite."<sup>91</sup> He prefers "the deep dreams of the studio and the gaze of the fancy lost in