

talks of the artist's "constant terror that [his] product will be revealed as shit," his narcissistic fear that "the artistic product is put forth as self-created faeces," and as such lacks life.¹³¹

What the artist always fears has become reality in the social phenomenon called postmodern postart. It is the end of art as it has existed from the prehistoric caves to the Rothko Chapel. It certainly no longer exists in sacred space, but on the street, and there's nothing sacred about it because it's made for the street crowd. Of course, postart can be enjoyed in the museum, but the museum has become an entertainment center, which is why there is no longer anything sacred about it, except by critical default. At best it is an elegant boulevard made for leisurely strolling, which is why, in many cities, high art has been put on the street, turning it into postart, and showing that, after all, it belongs to the crowd. The street has become the museum of last resort, showing how readily the profane is confused with the sacred in postmodernity.

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MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE
WORLDLY WALL, WHY IS ART
NO LONGER THE TRUEST
RELIGION OF ALL?: THE GOD
THAT LOST FAITH IN ITSELF

“Whatever may be said of the art world, it is not rotten,” Vincent van Gogh wrote in the early 1880s.¹³² “Painting is a faith,” he declared. It is “not created by hands alone, but by something which wells up from a deeper source in our souls . . . with regard to adroitness and technical skill in art I see something that reminds me of what in religion may be called self-righteousness.” A painting is a sermon: “I never heard a good sermon on resignation, nor can I imagine a good one, except that picture by Mauve and the work of Millet. . . . The sermon becomes black by comparison, even when the sermon is good in itself.”

Thus, the religion of art replaces ordinary religion and the painting becomes a confession of faith, at once anguished and elated. In a novel version of the *imitatio Christi* – not only does the artist become Christ but Christ becomes an artist – van Gogh announced that Christ was “a greater artist than all other artists, despising marble and clay as well as color, working in living flesh.” Could paint be living flesh? van Gogh tried to prove that it could be, hoping to show that to be a

painter was the next best thing to being Christ. He seemed to think he was in fact Christ when he empathically portrayed the wrecked flesh of the coal miners of the Borinage and that of his mistress, Sien, both “marked by fear and poverty” and socially “despised,” as he himself felt he was. He identified with these outcasts and felt that the artist in general was an outcast – which made Christ the most outcast of all artists – but he felt that art could redeem their lives and show their humanity, just as he felt being an artist could redeem his life and show his humanity. To make art was not humiliating, but a way of recovering from the humiliations of life – the same humiliations that were inflicted on Christ, who was treated as though he was less than human rather than more than human, which he was, even as he was all too human. Indeed, van Gogh wanted to show the humanity of art, which saved it from self-righteousness, from the hollow pride of craft and the arrogance of self-sufficiency.

It is as though by working with their living flesh, which seemed close to death – life was a burden for the miners, as such images as *Bearers of the Burden*, 1881, and *Miner's Wives*, 1882, suggest, and pure suffering for his mistress, whose misery seemed engraved on her flesh, as *Sorrow*, 1882 and *Sien Suckling Her Child*, 1883, indicate – van Gogh believed he could save their souls, thus showing that art could perform miracles. It is as though van Gogh thought he could raise the miners and his mistress from the living dead by re-creating their flesh in and through art. It was an act of faith in the power of art, however powerless he may have felt as a person. He endowed art with human purpose to the extent he felt he was not respected as a human being. He privileged art to the extent he felt life had denied him any privileges, which is why he identified with the underprivileged.

Christ also was underprivileged, coming from a humble working class family. He also believed that lowly workers and social outcasts were the chosen of God, for their suffering had prepared them to receive him. Christ also associated with those society devalued, finding

the highest human values – faith, hope, charity – in their lives. Poverty and suffering are social disadvantages, but they are also an opportunity to live spiritually. Society deplored poverty and suffering – even though it hypocritically permitted them, doing next to nothing to eliminate them – but they emotionally prepared one for the spiritual life. This is why art was associated with them for van Gogh, and why he associated his poverty and suffering with that of the miners and his mistress. To be an artist was to take a vow of poverty and to suffer, which is why van Gogh was ready to share his life with people whom society seemed to have destined for poverty and suffering from the beginning of their lives. However vulnerable he may have felt, van Gogh – like Christ – had the ego strength and insight necessary to turn emotional and economic deprivation into religious renunciation. They became the self-sacrifice necessary to gain a higher self – a more authentic self than the social self. Poverty and suffering were the asceticism necessary for his religious vision of art. Van Gogh never thought of himself as a genius, but rather as someone humbly doing the Lord's hard work. Yet clearly he was a religious genius, even though he found his religion in art. But for him art was premised on poverty and suffering, not on social glory.

Van Gogh deeply identified with Christ the artist, fusing his identity with Christ's, to the extent of attacking “the Pharisees of art” the way Christ attacked the Pharisees who academicized religion, turning it into authoritarian dogma and lifeless ritual: “The old academic school, often detestable, tyrannical, the accumulation of horrors, men who wear as a cuirass a steel armor of prejudices and conventions.” Unlike the academicians, van Gogh wanted “to accomplish something with heart and love in it.” His art preached universal empathy rather than blind obedience to aesthetic law. It was informed by the spirit not the letter of religion; a painting was a spontaneous sermon rather than a theological lesson in correct religious thinking. A convert to the living religion of art, and perhaps its greatest exemplar, van Gogh

believed art could bring religion to a doomed and damned world, saving it from itself. Similarly, he felt he was doomed and damned to failure in life, but he could triumph in art, which would give him eternal life, saving him from his own wretched life. In his new kind of religious art, he was no longer the victim of life and society, but a secular saint. Victimization, a cruel fact of life, was turned into martyrdom for the sacred cause of art – the greatest cause. Van Gogh quoted Christ's "mysterious words, 'Whosoever shall lose his life shall find it'," then subtly changed them: "Whosoever will save his life will lose it, but whosoever will lose life for something more lofty shall find it." That something more lofty – that something for which van Gogh expected to be crucified by the academicians, for which he was ready to give his life – is art. To find art was to find true religion for van Gogh – a lonely, ecstatic religion superior to that of his father, a sober career minister in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Which artist thinks this way today? Which artist commits himself as completely to art as van Gogh did? Which artist experiences art as sacred? Which artist believes that making art is an act of faith? Which artist regards art as the hope at the bottom of the Pandora's box of emotional evils that is life? Which artist believes that art is more lofty than life and worth dying for? Which artist regards it as an act of empathic charity to other human beings? Which artist thinks it can make a hellish world seem like emotional heaven? Certainly no postartist, who sacrifices himself for neither art nor life, suggesting, by the triviality of his response to both, that neither is worth the trouble, which is why he blurs the boundaries between them, devaluing both in countercultural nihilism. Socially critical artists preach to the world at large, cursing it for its evils, but their aesthetics and criticality have become academic clichés, and even then remain secondary to the artist's self-righteousness. Socially critical art has fallen on hard times since the days of Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and George Grosz. They believed in the critical power of art even as they realized that it had no power

to change society. They were stoic realists, revealing human tragedy in social action. They may have advocated social revolution, but they knew that tragedy was inescapable in life, and they revealed the tragedy of modern life and the tragic results of social upheaval. They believed in art as much as van Gogh did – they also thought it was a lofty calling (rather than the cynical career it seems to have become) – but were even more despairing of life.

Who is naive enough today – more than a century after van Gogh's death – to think that the art world is not rotten, at least in part? Van Gogh himself, despite his assertion that it wasn't, realized that it was. He doesn't quite believe what he says, as his ambivalence suggests. "Whatever may be said of the art world" – what might be said of it? – undercuts his conviction that "it is not rotten," revealing his doubt. His faith in the art world is negated by the skeptical remark that introduces it. It is a wish not a statement of fact. Something is seriously and conspicuously wrong with the art world, as he complains. "The exhibitions, the picture stores, everything, everything, are in the clutches of fellows who intercept all the money. . . . There are real, serious connoisseurs, yes, but it is perhaps one-tenth of all the business that is transacted that is really done out of belief in art." That is the belief that he had. His uncles were art dealers who had become wealthy selling art, and he himself had been an apprentice art dealer, but he "would rather live from hand to mouth . . . than fall into the hands of Messrs. van Gogh."

Show me the contemporary artist who would prefer to live from hand to mouth rather than fall into the hands of an art dealer. It seems impossible to be a martyr to the cause of art in an art world that has become all business – ruthless business. It is impossible to avoid the temptation of money, because art itself has become money. Capitalism transformed the *prima materia* of time into the *ultima materia* of money. It has now performed a greater alchemical miracle, for in transforming art into money it preempted art's role as the representative on

earth of that *ultima materia* called eternity. Until our unapologetically materialistic times art was the closest thing to eternity on earth, which is why it has sometimes been called “the eternal present.” However much art was of its times, it always had something timeless about it. But today art seems completely of its times – Pop art was the moment when this truth became self-evident. Eschewing even the suggestion of timelessness, that is, the allusion to eternity, which is beyond time (but can be represented in time), art has lost its idealism, and with that its empathy. For art’s ability to eternalize human beings who live and die in time – to eternalize the sensation of life, as Umberto Boccioni put it – thus creating the illusion that they are immortal, that is, endure in the present in the form of art, is an extension and expression of its empathy for humanity. One immortalized the mortal out of poignant love for it.

The success of the transformation of art into money became explicit in 1975, when Warhol nonchalantly declared, with deceptive cleverness:

Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist. After I did the thing called “art” or whatever it’s called, I went into business art. I wanted to be an Art Businessman or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. During the hippie era people put down the idea of business – they’d say “Money is bad,” and “Working is bad,” but making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art.¹³³

The interchangeability of art and money – the completeness of their correlation – suggests that there is something rotten about both. This has nothing to do with whether art is good and money is bad, but with the fact that they belong to radically different realms. Or at least they

did until Warhol confused them by forcing them together. Giving each the value of the other he devalued both, however much he meant to use each to increase the value of the other. What looks like a dialectic is not really one. Art and money do not share common existential ground; they have no essential connection. Claiming – or pretending – that they do is nihilistic. (Just as Duchamp’s “theoretical” conflating of art and non-art – Warhol’s conflating of art and money is the “practical” American version of it – is nihilistic.) In a genuine evolutionary dialectic, the opposites organically inform each other, forming a unified whole that is greater than the sum of both. Growing together on common ground, they synergistically interrelate, creating an unexpected revolution in consciousness. Each signifies an old consciousness of self and world, but their dynamic integration revolutionizes our consciousness of both. A new perspective on the lifeworld emerges from their synthesis – achieved by hard emotional and cognitive work – affording uncommon insights into what had hitherto seemed commonplace. A world and self that seemed stale, finished, and familiar suddenly seems fresh, full of possibilities, and unfamiliar. Even as the old sense of world and self is brought into question, both acquire a new sense of purpose, and with that new value.

But in Warhol’s pseudo-dialectic the facile conjunction of art and money disillusion rather than enlightens us about both. It is a social association, and as such unessential – it may make sense in money-mad American society, but it is meaningless in the tribal cultures that produced so-called primitive art – rather than a necessary evolutionary synthesis. Art and money do not synergistically reinforce each other, bringing us to a new consciousness of both. Nor does their relationship give rise to a consciousness that transcends both by seeing them in a larger perspective. Instead, each compromises the other – not exactly a true reconciliation. Instead of making money more important and meaningful by associating it with art, and art more important and meaningful by associating it with money, both become meaningless

and unimportant. Warhol's remark about "the thing called 'art' or whatever it's called" suggests as much. It is no longer clear what art is, or what it means, or why it is important. But it is quite clear what money means for Warhol. Art may be indeterminate, but money has the power to determine what is art. For Warhol all art is commercial, which says more about the power of commerce than it does about the power of art. It took little more than half a century to undo Kandinsky's idea that art was the last bastion of spirituality against materialism. It seems no accident that it was an American artist who elevated commercial art – art that is a means to a commercial end, that is, art that exists to make money – over high art, that is, art which remains an aesthetic and existential end in itself, however much money may appropriate it.

Thus, if in modernity art is the only genuinely spiritual religion, for it is the only endeavor that is existentially authentic – that is, conveys, in an emotionally comprehensible, personal way, the archetypes and universals that are the mysterious fundament of the human spirit and human values – and money is existentially irrelevant, impersonal, and far from mysterious, then their union is a marriage made in hell. If art is an empathic response to the human condition, and the will to make money – clearly all-consuming in Warhol – is indifferent to the social conditions under which money can be made and to the insidious effect making it has on the human beings who make it in large quantities as well as on those who don't make it in any socially significant quantity, then their union is an unholy alliance. If art has intrinsic value, which makes it priceless – whatever price the world puts on it – and money's value is its exchange value, then their union is perverse. If "the pervert in general . . . sets out, consciously or unconsciously, to make a mockery of the law by turning it 'upside down'," as Chasseguet-Smirgel argues,¹³⁴ then Warhol, consciously or unconsciously, sets out to make a mockery of art by turning it upside down, that is, turning it into money. By identifying art with money, Warhol devalues art while giving it the value of money – which is valueless

unless it can be exchanged for something. Art loses spiritual cachet to gain social and economic cachet – the credibility, influence, and power that only money has in a consumer society.

The artist was once thought of as sacred – he had a spark of God's creativity in him – but Warhol's artist is a businessman, profaning everything sacred and creative by putting a price on it, as Marx said. Warhol is a born salesman; with him art loses its mystery and openly becomes a commodity for sale. It seems to have no other identity than that of a commodity and no other value than the economic value it acquires by being sold. It also has the built-in obsolescence of every commodity. It inevitably loses excitement with time – after the fifteen minutes in which it was famous (and thus exciting), as Warhol said. Again and again we see Warhol replacing an obsolete old celebrity with an exciting new celebrity. None of them have any staying power, nor does his art – insofar as it is art as distinct from money. Warhol's art was in fact as commonplace – and seems as mass produced (Warhol imagined that he was a machine, suggesting that he felt his life as well as art was manufactured) – as any cheap commodity. It depends on the commercially commonplace to make its own commercial point. Warhol made art as consumable as the popular commercial culture it preyed on. The commercial celebrities he portrayed are popular commodities – preconsumed (preowned?), as it were, as their popularity suggests. They are commercial products that Warhol re-packages as commercial art, suggesting that it is just another product.

They are hardly the sacred mysteries he suggests they are. His *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, 1962, turns a commercial icon into an art icon, but she remains the "plastic invention" that Billy Wilder said she was, just as Warhol's icon remains plastic art. His art is ultimately as unsatisfactory as any popular product, for while it satisfies a social need – his imagery caters to envy by gratifying the wish to identify with celebrities, as though they were superior beings (and as though identifying with them will magically give their fans the material and social success they

have) – it does not satisfy existential needs. Warhol's art exploits the aura of glamor that surrounds material and social success, ignoring its existential cost. His art lacks existential depth; it is a social symptom with no existential resonance. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."¹³⁵ This consummate statement of postmodern nihilism suggests the reason that art has lost faith in itself: it has lost emotional and existential depth, and sees no reason to have any. It no longer wishes to plunge into the depth – it doesn't believe there is any depth in life, and wouldn't be able to endure the pressure of its depth if it believed life had any – which is why it has become risk-free postart dependent upon superficial experience of life for its credibility.

There is no existential reality let alone depth to the celebrities Warhol portrays, including himself. They enact existence rather than actually exist. Like them, Warhol is a social illusion – a shallow image, a more or less theatrical surface. Another reason art has lost faith in itself is that it has become part of the entertainment business, in effect capitulating to popular commercial culture, as Warhol makes clear. If, as Ezra Pound said, "the artist is the antenna of the race," then Warhol is an antenna broadcasting the American attitude to art. It is business and entertainment, as American celebrity culture makes clear. Art continues to pay a high price for Warhol's exposure of its real interests. It sells itself to the highest bidder, which suggests uncertainty about what it has to sell. If what it has to sell is valuable only because the people with the most money want to buy it, then it has only the value their money gives it, suggesting that it doesn't believe in its own value. How can it have unique value in a society in which business and entertainment show us that there are no unique values?

Some interpreters have thought that Warhol was deliberately cynical, or at least ironical, but I think his seductive equation of money and art – not to say pernicious confusion of their terms – was dead

serious and honest. It is ruthlessly cool, in a world where "coolness *is* the aesthetic. . . . Cool is the way to be both indifferent to commerce and commercial at the same time."¹³⁶ This is what Warhol thought he was doing – making art that was indifferent to commerce yet commercial at the same time. It's a wonderful paradox, but Warhol was not as cool as he seemed; money made him hot – hotter than art did. His art was a kind of hot money – counterfeit art that could be exchanged for real money. He began his career as a commercial artist, and never stopped being one, ultimately making upscale commercial art – a deadpan art about commercial celebrities, including himself. Perhaps that made him ultra cool, but it also corrupted art. He assimilated art into money, robbing it of spirituality and integrity. For Warhol, art is not a private religion that promises personal salvation, but a branch office of the religion of money. He subsumes art in the capitalist worship of business and success. What would van Gogh think of Warhol's statement? He would have thought that art has gone to the devil. Warhol, like Duchamp, who was also obsessed with money and also made deadpan art, is what the law calls a "corrupt persuader," not to say panderer, toying with desire the way Duchamp toyed with intellect.

And what would van Gogh think about Chuck Close, a painter who is a trustee of the Whitney Museum of American Art? "It is no surprise," Langdon Thomas Jr. writes, "that the museum's board has so aggressively courted some of the flashier and more unpredictable money in town – like that of Vivendi's Jean-Marie Messier, who is still a board member with [Dennis] Kozlowski, and Veronique Pittman, second wife to AOL Time Warner's Bob."¹³⁷ Vivendi and AOL Time Warner are among the corporations caught up in the scandals that have rocked the capitalist world, ushering in the new millennium with an unprecedented display of corruption, and Kozlowski, chairman of Tyco Corporation, was indicted for evading New York City tax on the expensive art he purchased. Tyco has been said to have "conspicuously

poor standards of boardroom governance."¹³⁸ Can the same be said of the art corporation called the museum? Should we be as suspicious of it as we are of any other capitalist corporation? Will it also show itself to be a fraud and scam? Who's doing its accounting? What account of itself can it give apart from the fact that its collection is worth millions of dollars – at least on paper? Close comments: "You have to be realistic. This is not like putting together a cocktail party. . . . You are looking at the future of the museum. When you are the Avis in town to everyone else's Hertz, you do try harder." That is, try harder to raise money – to be beholden to money. What are such people doing on the Whitney's board in the first place? There are no art historians and art critics on the board, and Close is the only artist. Does that make him particularly knowledgeable about every art? Is he open to all kinds of art, or does he have a sense of what is the right kind of art – the expensive kind? Doesn't he have a vested interest in his own kind of art? He's no doubt more knowledgeable than the corporate tycoons on the Whitney board, who have their own vested interests. It is not so much that the museum has sold out to big money, laundering itself by yea-saying art, but rather that it doesn't fully realize what it has bought into. But then again it wants to be a corporation and govern itself by people who know how to govern corporations, which seems to mean to milk them for all they are worth. Art is simply another investment property – the holdings of an art corporation that happens to call itself a museum.

It is worth noting that Maxwell Anderson, the Whitney's [former] director, whitewashed Kozłowski's purchase of paintings by Monet, Renoir, Beert, and Caillebotte, declaring "he was clearly someone who saw virtue in having them." That is, he scored social points – gained status – by flaunting his wealth in the form of art. A few months earlier, Anderson, defending the then current Whitney Biennial, asserted "that traditions don't fare well in the contemporary art world. The Whitney follows the instincts of artists, rather than the art market."¹³⁹ But it

clearly needs people who speculate in the art market – who know the art business – on its board and who own traditional art. Is this shameless two-facedness or naive hypocrisy? Or is it just the usual "combination of art smarts and money?"

What's true art in a world in which art is money? Who's a real artist, if there is any reality other than commercial reality to art? Van Gogh wanted to rid the temple of art of the moneylenders the way Christ rid the temple of God of the moneylenders. But today they own the temple of art, or at least the mortgage on it. Where for van Gogh art was a way of celebrating God's creation, for the moneylenders it is a Golden Calf. Warhol makes it clear that they have taken over the temple, and that the artist himself has become a kind of moneylender. Today money seems to have become more essential to art than spirituality. Warhol was not on a spiritual mission when he decided making art was a good way to make money. Not van Gogh's poverty and fear for him. A homosexual artist, Warhol proved that homosexuality and art could be "in" in capitalist society. Both were good business – they could sell – which proved they were not social outcasts. It is not clear whether money whitewashed art and self-identity or art whitewashed money and self-identity for Warhol, but both became his commercial way of identifying himself.

When the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes that "people who are attracted to art, at least in our culture, tend to . . . stand outside the normal network of social relations and cultural constraints,"¹⁴⁰ one wonders if he understands anything about the culture of art today and the people who are attracted to it. Are they as "aloof from conventions" as he thinks they are, or is their unconventionality another convention? The outsider stance has become another insiderism, as Andy Warhol's social success and wealth – Roy Lichtenstein's seems to have been greater, suggesting that he was a better businessman (at last estimate his estate was worth \$1,000,000,000 while Warhol's was officially declared to be around \$660,000,000) – makes clear. Clearly,

to be an outsider is a great way of marketing oneself. The artist outsider is well rewarded in our society – so long as he is an insider in art society – and even becomes a business leader. That is, as the sociologist Daniel Bell has noted, he “dominate[s] the audience,” influencing “what is to be desired and bought,” which confirms that the “adversary stance” of “the new and experimental” no longer signifies “the self (in its quest for originality and uniqueness)”¹⁴¹ but rather the self as novel commodity. As Bell suggests, “defying the conventions of society” is no longer “the imago of the free self” but a business strategy – a successful one, as the high price of Damian Hirst’s work suggests.

Examining the contemporary relevance of “the notion that artists are, or at least ought to be, somewhat mad,” which he traces back to Giorgio Vasari’s description of “the Florentine artists he knew as having ‘received from nature a certain element of savagery and madness . . . making them strange and eccentric,’” Csikszentmihalyi notes that “to be original, one must distance oneself from the average, from the normal . . . from commonly accepted thought patterns.” Thus, “to be original, one must to a certain extent be alienated. The danger . . . is that originality might slip into autism or into ‘idiocy,’ the Greek word for being alienated from the community of one’s peers.” But Csikszentmihalyi does not seem to realize that in postmodern business art society madness has become a social stance – role-playing, as Julian Schnabel’s proclaimed pursuit of it indicates. What one might call the stance of the abnormal has become art-normal. Indeed, the stance of originality has become unoriginal. Savagery has become a convention, and eccentric has become a qualifier of abstraction, hopefully enlivening what looks dead, at least to the eyes of the much more socially nimble Pop art. “I am thinking of frankly accepting my role of madman,” van Gogh wrote, but he was a madman, that is, socially alienated and mentally disturbed, whereas Schnabel cannily plays the role of madman, because he knows it gives him credibility as an avant-garde artist. Indeed, to be a savage madman carries a certain social cachet, which is why a movie

has been made about van Gogh rather than Redon, who also looked madness in the eye but remained healthy, and whose art is gentle and delicate rather than harsh and violent. Picasso famously said: “It is not what the artist *does* that counts, but what he *is*.”¹⁴² But today it is what the artist does for his career that counts, not what his art shows that he is despite what he claims to be.

Writing about nineteenth century English landscape painting, John Ruskin asked: “Is English wet weather, indeed, one of the things which we should desire to see Art give perpetuity to?” He answered: “Yes, assuredly.”¹⁴³ Van Gogh wanted to immortalize the Arles landscape, as his association of its autumnal colors to the “heavenly blues and yellows in a Van der Meer [Vermeer] of Delft” suggests.” Just as Ruskin admired “the religious art of the sand-lands,” so van Gogh admired the religious art of nature. How many contemporary artists seriously believe that the goal of art is to immortalize the mortal? Otto Rank, in *Art and Artists*, argues that this has been the age-old task of art. But it seems absurd and old-fashioned in the rapidly changing modern world, in which the artist is concerned to make his mark now rather than wait for the judgment of posterity – which, anyway, is less the matter of considered consensus that Greenberg thought it was than a matter of media manipulation and public relations. It is a consensus of vested interests not of detached judgment. What does immortality – let alone immortal art – mean in such a world? When turnover means more than tradition, mortality means more than immortality. The mortality of art is taken for granted, and immortality means no more than the fifteen minutes of fame that Warhol thought was everyone’s due.

Writing about Henry James and Friedrich Nietzsche, Stephen Donadio notes “the extraordinary emotional investment made by both . . . in the power of art as the only activity capable of creating values and raising experience from insignificance.”¹⁴⁴ (Both, incidentally, seemed to be failures in human relationships, which is

why they thought they were less valuable and significant than art, and cultivated them with less enthusiasm and effort than they made art.) With Friedrich Schiller, they believed that “it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom [from the limitations of experience].”¹⁴⁵ Donadio notes Thomas Mann’s view that the “major premise” of Nietzsche’s philosophy is “that life can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon,” which is what Mann thought Nietzsche’s own life was, “down to his self-mythologizing, . . . down to [his] madness.”¹⁴⁶ “Within the closed circle of aesthetic contemplation,” Donadio writes, “inconclusive temporal experience is exchanged for the comprehensive calm of eternal form: at the same time, reason takes on the aspect of sensuousness, and the abstract form is made concrete and vibrant with the immediacy of the moment.”¹⁴⁷ Is it possible to make such an extraordinary emotional investment in art in a world in which art has become a business? Yes, one can answer, for the artist – like everyone else in capitalist society – is invested in business and marketing himself whether he knows it or not. Who believes in aesthetic contemplation when there is no time to contemplate and time is money? Life can never become an aesthetic phenomenon in a world in which economic survival is more important than emotional survival. The belief in eternal form has to be self-deception in a world that prides itself on being up-to-date and believes in change for the sake of change – a world in which everything is relative to everything else and nothing is absolutely what it is. And what is sensuousness in a world of simulation and reason in a world of computers?

Clearly, art, aesthetic contemplation, beauty, eternity, freedom are experientially and conceptually passé in a world of relative values and technological necessity. The best art can hope for – whatever calls itself art and the society agrees to call art (or is forced to do so by art administrators) – is to become a current, newsworthy social event. This is easily done by addressing some social phenomenon which is likely to continue to be current and newsworthy when the art no

longer is, for example, AIDS. Publicity also helps: when Madonna presented the Turner Prize to Martin Creed in 2001, she made his name by reason of hers, showing the power of kitsch celebrity over avant-garde celebrity, that is, showing that kitsch has become avant-garde. Not that Creed’s work – an empty room in which a light turned off and on – has any artistic virtue, although it did have the virtue of generating controversy, which by Pop cultural standards is even better than being immortal, and especially good when the alternative is to be forgettable. Controversy guarantees that one will have a certain place in short-term social memory if not in long-term art memory – not that anyone dares to believe in the latter these postmodern days. Controversy is the contemporary substitute for contemplation, and even though controversy – is it or isn’t it art? (it must be art because it was presented in an art institution, that is, it was administered into art) – is the cliché contemplation no longer is, if only because it has gone out of fashion.

If to be modern means to question the idea of immortality and even doubt its possibility (Nietzsche’s nihilistic mantra “God is dead”) – if it has become preferable to be modern and timely rather than to be immortal and timeless – then to be postmodern means to lose all interest in immortality as well as modernity, giving up belief in both, and simply marking time. Art becomes the preferred way of doing so among the intellectual and commercial cognoscenti. In postmodernism the sense of futility implicit in the nihilistic disavowal of immortality – although for Nietzsche art was its last ditch defense – becomes explicit. So does the melancholy of making art and with it the death of art. Postmodern art often looks like the corpse of art – Neo-Expressionism looks like the corpse of Expressionism, Neo-Abstraction looks like the corpse of Abstraction, Neo-Conceptualism looks like the corpse of Conceptualism (all cosmetically embalmed). Ingenious, hyperactive corpses, but nonetheless corpses – robot-like corpses, going through the motions of life in a dance of death. There is an air of sophisticated

ennui to postmodern art – appropriation art is the prime example – suggesting that art has become meaningless however much meaning it claims to have. The postart blurring of the boundary between art and life supposedly remedies the boredom and meaninglessness of both, for if life is arty it is no longer boring, even if artiness is boring. Art becomes empty and hollow when it no longer makes life feel timely and vivid – when it no longer seduces us to life, as Nietzsche said – and when it no longer makes us the gift of immortality by suggesting it through its own aesthetic substance.

In short, art these postmodern days seems to have become another depressing way of passing time rather than of reaching beyond time, which is what it was for van Gogh. Art is no longer the path to salvation it was for him, but rather confirms that life is damned because it is meaningless, which is ultimately why art is meaningless, since it can do nothing to rescue life from itself. Today's postart seduces us to death not life. Warhol is the ultimate postmodern postartist, for he neither knows nor cares whether his business art – or is it art business? – is more art than business or more business than art. This suggests that he neither knows nor cares what art is, indicating that he doesn't believe in it – certainly not the way van Gogh did. More particularly, Warhol doesn't believe that it has anything to do with eternity. It can no longer envision a world that is not run like a business, that is, a world in which everything is for sale and nothing is priceless. The void left by the absence of faith in art is filled by the presence of money. Art's existence comes to depend on it, as though without money to sustain it, it would collapse into non-art. But Warhol's work shows that it is possible to be both art and non-art – it's the postmodern way of being nothing in particular while seeming to be everything. If money is only as meaningful as what it buys, and if what it buys is not meaningful as art – art that is unequivocally art rather than art whose identity is equivocally split between art and non-art – then money becomes meaningless. Money can only compromise itself by buying into something compromised

in itself – something as inherently flawed as business art. If postmodern business art also signals the bankruptcy and meaninglessness of modern nonbusiness art, then it is completely nihilistic.

In a brilliant account of "The Rise of Art as Religion," Jacques Barzun wrote that in the nineteenth century art became "the gateway to the realm of spirit for all those over whom the old religions have lost their hold."¹⁴⁸ The question today is why the religion of art has lost its hold – why art is no longer the gateway to the realm of spirit – however many artists continue to think that making art confers upon them "the attributes of a seer and prophet."¹⁴⁹ Indeed, contemporary art seems to have closed and barred the gateway, as though to declare there is no such thing as a realm of spirit. The artist may still believe he is a seer and prophet – it is no doubt narcissistically comforting for him to think he is – but the larger society no longer does. The artist is no longer "the model of human greatness" he once was, and it is no longer self-evident "that man's loftiest mode of expression is art."¹⁵⁰ The artist's vision is no better than anyone else's in a multicultural world. Indeed, the claim to a universal artistic vision, that is, the belief that art can convey universal experience, seems absurd and meaningless in a world where there are no universal experiences, only a variety of culturally determined experiences. In such a world art is simply one more elaboration of a cultural version of everyday life rather than a revolutionary challenge to it. Science is much more revolutionary and courageous, not to say demanding, in such a world, and has a more revolutionary, enduring effect on the lifeworld. Art may shape its surface – but then what art, what aesthetics? In the wide open world of postart, aesthetic judgments close down the ever-expanding horizon of art, precluding new possibilities of art making – indeed, new conceptions of art – which is why they are rarely if ever made. It is considered naive and short-sighted to make them.

Is it because after more than a century of avant-garde art – art which carries the banner of the religion of art (the banner changes,

but belief that “the life of art is the only one worth living” remains constant)¹⁵¹ – avant-garde art has become as tediously dogmatic and emotionally stale as any other institutional religion? “The spirituality of art can [be] demonstrated,” Barzun writes, by the fact that “in art the force and quality of the effect are out of all proportion to the cause,” which proves “the inadequacy of all materialistic explanations” of art.¹⁵² But in postart there is no discrepancy between cause and effect. Indeed, the social material and material condition of the work have no deep effect: we are hardly “shaken to the core” by “the arrangement of material particles” in Warhol’s art the way we are by their arrangement in Cézanne’s art.

Is it because what Blake feared in 1820 has come to pass? “Where any view of Money exists, Art cannot be carried on,” he wrote on an engraving of the Laöcoon.¹⁵³ Seventy years later Gauguin wrote: “A terrible epoch is brewing in Europe for the coming generation: the kingdom of gold. Everything is putrefied, even men, even the arts.”¹⁵⁴ Certainly, Warhol is this nightmare come horribly true. If “Christianity is Art and not Money,” and “Money is its Curse,” as Blake said, then Warhol’s commercial postart is clearly cursed and far from Christian. Art viewed through money – as money – lacks spiritual meaning and purpose, and is thus only nominally art. When Blake wrote that “the Man or Woman who is not one of these [a Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect] is not a Christian,” he never imagined that there could be an un-Christian artist like Warhol. Gold has become king in the kingdom of art, and Warhol, whose art and person were putrefied by the “struggle for money,” was king in the kingdom of art gold.

He is a long way from being the “mystic of art” that the Symbolist art critic G.-Albert Aurier said we must become if we are to save ourselves from the “brutalization, sensualism and utilitarianism” of modern society.¹⁵⁵ But Warhol had no interest in becoming a mystic of art; he regarded money, rather than art, as the “plank of salvation.” His

subtly brutal, ironically sensual, unabashedly utilitarian art celebrates the values of profane modern society. “The love of a woman is no longer permitted us” in modern society, Aurier wrote, for society “has denied us the ability to see in a woman something else than flesh suitable for the appeasement of our physical desires.” “The love of God is no longer permitted us,” for modern “skepticism . . . has denied us the ability to see in God anything else than a nominal abstraction, perhaps non-existent.” Warhol’s loveless art is the epitome of the modern denial of love – indeed, the modern inability to love. The people Warhol depicts lack “the superior qualities of the soul,” of which the capacity for love, “the source of all understanding,” is the most important. In short, Warhol’s art lacks “transcendental emotivity.” “Emotion first! understanding later,” Gauguin famously declared,¹⁵⁶ but Warhol’s art has neither emotion nor understanding.

It is thus an art of death. If “Art is the Tree of Life” and “Science is the Tree of Death,” as Blake wrote, then Warhol’s art has a scientific bent, as its mechanical character indicates. It is based on photography, which is not “beneficial” for art, as Gauguin argued. It belongs to the “aberration caused by physics, chemistry, mechanics,” which caused artists to lose their “instincts,” even “imagination,” thus leading them “astray.”¹⁵⁷ “When machines have come, art has fled,” Gauguin wrote,¹⁵⁸ which suggests that Warhol, who identified with the machine – there was neither irony nor shame in his abandonment of humanness – was not an artist. He symbolizes the primacy and power of the machine in modern society, confirming that the tree of science – and technology – has grown higher than the tree of art. However much it has grown, it looks stunted in comparison – art in fact seems to exist in the shadow of science and technology, which are worshipped more than it ever thought of being. Indeed, the ripest fruits of art seem like sour grapes compared to the ripest fruits of science and technology.

Barzun writes: "the dogma that daily life is trivial, coupled with a denunciation of those who do not agree, has been repeated innumerable times by artists and their advocates, not with regret but with scorn."¹⁵⁹ But in postart daily life is not trivial, but art itself, suggesting that the "social alienation that aggravates man's spiritual alienation" no longer exists. Avant-garde art is hardly alienated socially (although it must act as though it is to maintain its avant-garde credentials). However, in the form of postart, it remains spiritually alienated, for spiritual experience has become completely meaningless to it. Postart regards spirituality as a bad joke – indeed, like God, non-existent. According to postart, man has no need to transcend daily life and could not do so if he had the need. Postart denies the existential reality of what Erich Fromm called the human "need to transcend one's self-centered, narcissistic, isolated position."¹⁶⁰ It implies pathological separateness from and indifference to others, and may be pathologically necessary in mass society, for it gives one a psychic space – ironically empty – in which one can survive, that is, not be engulfed by the enormous mass of endless others.

According to Fromm's humanistic understanding, transcendence involves "the acquisition of specifically human qualities" through which individuals "overcome the role of being merely created,"¹⁶¹ both by nature and society. Postart lacks such human qualities and does nothing to encourage them, and thus help people humanize themselves. Warhol's postart portraits make this transparently clear. His figures are unhuman – they are robotic papier-maché creations of daily life. They find it gratifying, and define themselves by it, to the extent that they do not seem to exist – certainly lack selfhood – apart from it. People are nothing but their social identity for Warhol. They are centered in it, and apart from it they have no identity. They are not persons, but occupy a social place. Apart from their social roles, they are human blanks. They are all social surface, which is what Warhol acknowledged he was. Like him, they have no inner lives, and deny that inner life exists. His art

devalues and discards inner life, for it seems meaningless compared to social life.

This is why we feel no empathy for Warhol's figures. Lacking critical consciousness of their unhuman condition, they are narcissistically isolated in daily life. Critical consciousness can humanize them – the same "advanced" consciousness that once gave art spiritual originality – but there is no critical consciousness in Warhol's art. Unless its indifference is critical consciousness. But Warhol's indifference, like Duchamp's, mirrors society's indifference rather than critiques it. Their indifference is "critical" only with respect to art. Since Symbolism, we expect art to be responsive and sensitive to – rather than disdainful of and indifferent to – the spiritual condition and needs of humanity. We see such human concern, expressed in very different ways, in Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Constructivism, Abstract Art, Surrealism, New Objectivity – even Dadaism, which registered the spiritual bankruptcy of Europe after the first world war by declaring the bankruptcy of art, which seemed to have failed in its civilizing mission. The Dadaists were disillusioned with art – they even thought that art was dead – because it failed humankind, which implies that art without its humanizing effect is not art.

Disillusionment with art – even by artists – seems to go hand in hand with its development in modernity, so much so that disillusionment seems to drive innovation. The more completely modern an art seems, the more indifferent it seems to human concerns – which suggests just how humanly indifferent we feel the modern world to be – and thus the more unconsciously disillusioning, however consciously we celebrate the advance of art as such. However unintentionally, the doctrine of art for art's sake – the belief in the absolute autonomy of art – is a defense of art's right to be indifferent to human concerns. The skepticism and anger that greeted Manet's art – even Redon rebuked it as soulless (unhuman), implying that it could not be taken seriously

as art – has to do with its apparent indifference to the human spirit. Clement Greenberg, who celebrated it as the beginning of pure art, seems to confirm its indifference, without realizing that it is the same indifference that informs Duchamp's and Warhol's art, and like theirs mirrors the subtle indifference – to their own humanness as well as the humanness of others – that permeates mass society.

Avant-garde art once made a critical, spiritual, and human difference – a genuine difference – because it offered, in a perhaps incomplete, unsatisfactory form, a kind of transcendence of daily life, sometimes by transforming it, sometimes by renouncing it. In genuine avant-garde art the existential yearning for spiritual transcendence – inner liberation from the mentality and perspective of daily life to the extent that one feels nominally rather than necessarily connected to it, so that it no longer feels compelling and intimidating (in the transcendent state of mind one views existence from what seems like the perspective of eternity, which gives it the enigmatic value it lacks in daily life) – takes the form of alienation. There is something “unworldly” and ascetic about alienation. Alienated from daily life, one is able to resist its temptations. One repudiates the unhuman superficial self of one's daily social role. Thus, social alienation is a necessary emotional step toward complete transcendence of society – total detachment from the social surface one's social identity is part of. One realizes the superficiality of social identity and social appearance, subverting their hold on one's existence. In a sense, postart – art that lacks avant-garde alienation and with that critical purpose, indeed, art that is not only no longer alienated from daily life but uncritically immersed in it – takes an emotional step backward. Instead of boldly taking the next and final avant-garde step, completing the creative transformation of alienation (negation of society) into transcendence (affirmation of selfhood) necessary for emotional survival, pseudo-avant-garde postart retrogresses to daily life. Instead of renouncing its values, postart endorses them. For postart, daily life and the unhuman social role we have in it, are the

only possible life and identity we can have. (The struggle toward pure abstraction, which is an attempt to uproot all traces of dailiness from [self-]consciousness, shows the transformation in difficult process.)

Warhol, once again, is exemplary: his figures are completely unhuman – not simply socially fabricated simulations of humanness, but unhuman beings for whom there is no human alternative, and who would not be interested in having a human identity if there was one. They are the absolute antithesis of the human beings pictured in traditional art. Postart, then, asserts that there is no escape from unhumanness – from the superficial self of daily life. Postart sells not only humanness short but also the humanizing potential of art. The best traditional art reveals the qualities – dignity and empathy especially – that make us human. It is morally concerned, and often shows the moral under siege in an immoral world. Integrity and generosity of spirit struggle to hold their own in a world that lacks both. It is not simply because of ideological and social reasons, but for existential reasons, that the story of Christ, the ultimate victim of the world – the human being who was brutally crucified by it but maintained his integrity and concern for others to the bitter end – is the subject of so much traditional art. Avant-garde art adds the unusual belief that creativity for the sake of creativity is the only way to become human – fully and desperately human – in the unhuman modern world. Avant-garde art may not be the humanistic religion for everybody, let alone a universal religion, and few people may experience it mystically, or feel re-humanized by its radical creativity, but postart mysticizes dehumanizing dailiness.

The collapse of the religion of art was inevitable. This is not because the postart tendency to demystify art – postart disillusionment with art – was built into avant-garde art from the start, suggesting that it was doomed to self-contradiction and self-defeat – the “ugly” avant-garde paintings of Courbet and Manet contain the seeds of postart in their “realistic” representation of daily life – but because of the

anomie of modern society. It brings with it the “ephemerization” typical of contemporary life¹⁶² and “the ruling mass man.”¹⁶³ They shape daily life in modernity, suggesting that postart, which “artistically” apotheosizes daily life, is a symptom of anomie rather than a strictly art phenomenon. (The dandyish Manet tried to distance himself from the masses, but he was fascinated by them and depicted people en masse, that is, as a crowd. So did Courbet, who was a man of the people rather than a bourgeois aristocrat. For all their differences in class and attitude, both revealed the ephemerality that subtly informs mass society. But Manet was more “advanced”: his gestures show that modern ephemerality has infected art itself. Ephemerality masks itself as spontaneity, but then spontaneity is ephemeral.)

As André Haynal writes,

the stress inherent in contemporary society is due first and foremost to an accelerating rate of change and loss of stability in our surroundings and semiotic environment. [Alvin] Toffler used the term ‘ephemerization’ for the phenomenon of nonpermanence, that is, the fleeing, transitory, and ephemeral nature of situations in postindustrial society. Given this, it is more and more difficult for individuals to anticipate events, to foresee the consequence of their acts and, especially, the value that will be attached to them, the reactions of other people and institutions.¹⁶⁴

Thus, “one of the main characteristics of contemporary society is the growing isolation of the individual”¹⁶⁵ and the normlessness typical of anomie, that is, the lack of “superego” norms by which the individual can guide and judge his behavior and in which he can find meaning and value as well as measure his own value and give himself meaning. Instead of stable, convincing norms and meaningful values there is the weed-like growth of numerous ephemeral norms and values – including

those of art – which have an ephemeral appeal to the individual, just because they confer an ephemeral individuality. Ephemerization – in art as well as in the social life of which it is a part – is a direct consequence of the deep uncertainty that exists in normless anomic society.

Anomie infects art, making it ephemeral to the extent that it loses any pretense to being eternal. The eternal is no longer the norm by which art measures itself. The fact that ephemeral movement rapidly replaces ephemeral movement in modern art, and ephemeral artist rapidly replaces ephemeral artist in postmodern postart – with a seasonal frequency more breathtaking than that of fashion, so that what was valuable, meaningful, and “normal” one ephemeral season becomes valueless, meaningless, and “abnormal” the next ephemeral season (and the seasons get shorter and shorter) – suggests as much. Postart must make its impact very quickly, for it has less time to do so than any previous art, since it is more ephemeral than any previous art. This means that it must be instantly comprehensible to the masses. Eagerly assimilated by the mass culture it eagerly caters to, postart quickly becomes the fashionable emblem of isolated individuality. It is the ephemeral sign of an ephemeral individuality, indeed, an individuality that only exists to the extent that it identifies with the currently fashionable postart, which is as pseudo-individual as it is.

Thus, postart keeps keeps one suicidally “attached” – addictively bonded – to ephemeral contemporary society. But the excitement of ephemerality – and the ephemeral is supposed to be more exciting than the eternal, just as the contemporary is supposed to be more exciting than the historical and the abnormal more exciting than the normal – masks the sense of futility that invariably exists in an ephemeral, rapid turnover society. It is impossible to keep up with ever-changing norms, however desperately one tries to, so that one always despairs of knowing what the true – even *au courant* – norms are. In unstable modern and especially unstable postmodern society durable values, sustained meanings, and a hard-won sense of deep purpose seem impossible,

for nothing has any significant hold on one's inner life. All of this is obscured by the celebration of the plurality of values, the multitude of meanings, and the variety of everyday purposes, along with mass culture manipulation of inner life. It too must conform to ephemeral norms, and it seems as ephemeral as they do.

For Émile Durkheim, anomic suicide was one possible result of the breakdown of commonly believed standards and socially unifying norms. But exploitive acceptance of the breakdown is a kind of living suicide. That is exactly what Duchamp's and Warhol's indifference was. It was already latent in Manet's dandyism, as noted. Indeed, Duchamp and Warhol carry the tradition of the artist dandy into the twentieth century; the former was an intellectual dandy, the latter a populist dandy. A symptom of the breakdown and confusion of values and standards in art, and of its loss of meaning and spiritual emptiness, their indifference is a form of depression. Indeed, indifference is depression inside out, that is, depression expelled from the self back into the disillusioning world that caused it. Indifference is hardened insensitivity, and the indifference of Duchamp and Warhol is their way of giving the world's insensitivity back to it, hardening themselves against it in the process. If insensitivity poisons the wellsprings of life, then their indifference poisons the wellsprings of art. The indifference of Duchamp and Warhol is the Achilles heel of their anomic, suicidal art, just as the indifference that exists in the masses is the Achilles heel of anomic, suicidal society. It needs entertaining ephemerality – including Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's celebrities – to feel that life is valuable, exciting, and meaningful, rather than the depressing daily grind it seems to be. Accepting mass society's everyday version of life, one unwittingly acknowledges one's indifference to life, however different one may believe one's particular life is because it seems exciting for a few ephemeral "artistic" moments.

Writing in 1957, Richard Huelsenbeck observed that "the dada assertion that art is dead is not too far from the truth."¹⁶⁶ A few years

later, in 1963, the Constructivist sculptor David Rabinowitch remarked that "art has ceased to exist" because it has become "literal" – he was thinking of Minimalist objects, but he could also have referred to Pop imagery, which was then also trendy – even as he made works that eloquently finessed literal objectness or givenness while acknowledging it, suggesting that art could still live, that there could continue to be artful not simply literally given objects.¹⁶⁷ As Rabinowitch suggests, literalism is a form of indifference to meaning and inquiry into meaning, even a way of canceling and finally denying meaning. At the least, literalism implies a refusal to reflect on meaning, so that the given has only its material (and social) face value. As Huelsenbeck suggests – so does Greenberg in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," written in 1939 – things (including art) tend to be taken literally rather than reflectively by mass man. For both Greenberg and Huelsenbeck the simple-minded literalism of the mass mind – a mind which denies the slippery vagaries of meaning, which lacks the openness to complex meaning implicit in Keats's concept of negative capability – is responsible for the death of art.

For Greenberg the fact that mass man cannot see art as anything more than a literal slice of daily life – at one easily overcome remove – is the cause of its death, for it renders art meaningless as art. This is why mass man prefers kitsch, which offers itself as nothing but a readily comprehensible slice of daily life. Mass man's attitude to art is comically – tragicomically? – illustrated by an episode that occurred in the twenties. It seems a customs inspector refused to regard a Brancusi bird as anything more than a piece of polished metal. Thus, it was subject to an import duty; art objects were exempt. He couldn't see the art in it and refused to believe that it was art. To call him stupid and unsophisticated, or to think that he could not see beyond the concerns of his job, is to miss the point: he could only see literally. Brancusi's sculpture had no meaning as art. Like many of the first viewers of avant-garde art, he couldn't begin to conceive it as art. It is a problem that continues to haunt avant-garde art, especially when it walks a

tightwire between imaginative transformation and everyday life, like much performance art.

For Huelsenbeck the death of art is caused by the persistent confusion of it with entertainment in mass society. It is another way that mass man neutralizes it. He enjoys it by trivializing it. He also shows that it is possible to live without it. As Huelsenbeck ironically writes, "Mass man proves that without the slightest contact with quality one can not only live an excellent life but also attain a much greater age than our forebears."¹⁶⁸ The task of artists is "to prove that creative quality is a necessary component of life." The fact is that mass society "can get along without art as easily as without religion despite all assertions to the contrary," indeed, despite "the assumption that mankind would not be able to survive without the artist." "The agony of the modern artist is due to his revolution's being integrated in the mass life of our time," Huelsenbeck writes with devastating accuracy.¹⁶⁹ It becomes the entertainment which adds a little leaven to daily life. "In a highly industrialized country like America, in which universal conformity is lauded as a sound desire of the people, abstract art has become occupational therapy for the emotionally threatened. It is part of the general relaxation program. 'Relax with art' is taken as seriously as, say, 'Relax by bike riding.'" Thus, abstract art, which involved "a strong desire for a new form as well as a demand for a new feeling of form," and which "wanted to transform man by warning him in symbolic form to turn his back on egalitarianism," that is, mass society, has been assimilated by the materialistic mass society it repudiated. This does not mean it has been understood. It has become minor entertainment, indeed, a kind of novel R&R, offering mass man a short-lived respite from the trench warfare of daily life – a respite in which he can pretend he is creative, by proxy.

As Huelsenbeck says, the question is whether "what used to be called quality" is still in demand. He doesn't think so, or else what used to be called quality and what used to be understood as art and

regarded as creative have radically changed their character, so that they are no longer comprehensible – even recognizable – by those who once believed in them. "In a mass civilization art and religion can be so attenuated and changed that the mania for taking surrogates as something essential can be so encouraged that what we used to call quality is no longer in demand." For Huelsenbeck, "dada was a kind of shout of alarm and warning. 'Art,' said the shout, 'is moribund, and the artist, sensing his uselessness, is in a state of agony.'" Modern artists "want to reintroduce art wherever it has been destroyed by an altered world" – a world in which people have become part of the masses and lost their individuality and with that the sense that their existence has significance. Have the artists succeeded, or has art finally and completely died? Huelsenbeck, ever the "true dadaist," as he says, has "to reverse my stance at the end of my comments. Naturally art is not dead, but it needs a new effort at clarification of its principles in an age that is giving itself over to self-destruction with terrifying enthusiasm."

It is not clear that the clarification Huelsenbeck called for has occurred in the half century that has passed since he wrote these words. Nor does the world seem any less destructive and foolish than it was when it greeted "the detonation of H bombs" with "optimism." Mass destruction is now visible on television, as Huelsenbeck foresaw. Like some recording of the handwriting on the wall, it repeatedly announces our impending doom, keeping us up to date about developments in the death of our civilization. It may be that the only way modern art can finally clarify its principles and become up to date at the same time is by finishing the job of destroying itself that officially began with Dadaist anti-art. Postart seems to have done that, finishing what anti-art began, which suggests that modern art may have been a Dadaist farce all along – an unfolding drama of self-defeat, as its ironical attitude to itself and the world suggests – which is what the modern world has come to be.