

banging and switching and dabbling away, burying notions of beauty, discipline, labor, talent, and courage beneath mounds of lacquered tinker-toys, amplified eggbeaters, interview magazines, action-painted Danskins, atom bomb montages, and flaming diaries. Still, the point is not so much that drawing stick figures, jerking off into one's hat, singing unkind songs about the president, or ring-modulating the Dave Clark Five with an Australian *didgeridoo* is not, or is, bad art, but that it is all we have left after the smoke clears.

And it is particularly ironic that this final, overwhelming victory of art produces its destruction, and indeed so irrevocably that even essays such as this are helpless to retard its collapse. Fifty or even twenty years ago this essay might have aroused a grunt of controversy, perhaps even mild resistance; certainly it would have been quite justifiably considered by some artists to be reactionary and philistine, and they would have passionately opposed it on precisely those grounds. (Occasionally in reading about past art I come across this word "furor": can anyone define this for me, this "furor"?) Today, however, artists know they have nothing to fear from a mere article, or even several articles: as such they would be among a multitude of articles, appearing in myriad art magazines and vanishing without a trace, while the birthrate of works and even genres asymptotically approaches infinity.

This is the crux: obviously, everyone has a certain modicum of creative potential; the mere acts of thinking, speaking, fighting, earning a living, and making love are creative ones; the very word *procreative* captions the heart of all life. This latter is no coincidence; no coincidence either that the animal most successful, and *creative*, in adapting to modern civilization is the cockroach. He fits but poorly our aesthetic of the beautiful: living in filth, on filth; able to consume anything, endure anything, adapt to anything;

neither tragic nor pathetic; all-too-numerous and all-too-natural; as a species he seems immortal as a stone. Nor is there much that is tragic or pathetic or beautiful about contemporary art: like the cockroach, it is simply, and immensely, there, and worse, it is reproducing at an hyperbolic rate.

Let us for once relax our defenses and be honest: you and I are without genius; we have only gifts more valuable perhaps, a thimbleful of luck, a fleas mouthful of time. Let us use them to do something that is truly of value to someone. Art that is not born out of love, pain, obsession, passion, and desperation is useless to us; better by far that artists devote themselves to some truly valuable task (religion, revolution, procreation, medicine, entertainment, science) than that they continue to squander our planet's resources creating a public nuisance of the freedom to melodramatize narcissism. If all the artists who are able even for a moment to consider giving up and entering a different field were to do so, we would be left with the minute percentage who are not, the tiny fraction of artists who create not to educate or infuriate or amuse or even express, but to survive. This would surely be enough.

If we create art not out of vanity, boredom, competitiveness, convenience, or even choice, but out of necessity; only then perhaps will we have earned the right for which we have begged all these millennia: to stand our work next to the stems of grass and hope that it will go unnoticed.

—MICHAEL PEPPE, 1983

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NOBODY WANTS TO HEAR IT & EVEN FEWER WANT TO SAY IT BUT SOMEONE'S GOT TO: WHY IS OUR ART SO BAD?

Nowadays art is awful. When was the last time you experienced a recent work of art, in *any* idiom, that was as interesting as walking through a forest, or a crowd, or traffic? Or even simply thinking?

The mere word "art" (say it) has a somewhat narcoleptic effect: one thinks of dust, paper, a kind of insincere solemnity, a deliberate *retarding* of the mind, a certain *scarcity* of event and idea, and, above all, an endless waiting. More than anything, this is what we do when we experience contemporary art: we wait. Wait for a concept, an image, a sound that can even begin to compare, for mere interestingness, with nature, with industry, with sex, with conversation, with television, with riding in an automobile, with sleep.

Take improvisation. Although in ancient times it was probably virtually equivalent to performance, our inability to revert to the kind of utterly unconditional faith in intuition necessary for its truly inspired use has shrunk its domain to that of the nonverbal arts, where without the most rigorous of structures it becomes tedious almost immediately.

Unable to accept the irretrievable loss of primordial, unmediated creativity, artists improvising today do so usually to escape what they apparently feel are the corruptions of adult art-making: rationality, technique, self-criticism. Improvisation has become little more than the strutting of a puffy-chested hamster on the treadmill of the infinitely prolific human imagination. What could possibly be cheaper and easier for the mind than words, ideas, and images? Far from being difficult for us to produce, we are in our dullest moments unable to cease doing so. To make an

unabashed physical boast of the Brownian Motion in the laundry-list of one's consciousness is to express a supreme contempt for both one's own time and that of one's audience.

Granted, in the ever-dwindling fraction of artists still carrying the primitive tailbone, talent, still willing to subject it to a discipline of technique and a scrutiny of mind, and in addition courageous enough to suspend it between the jaws of personal risk, improvisation can be a noble and exhilarating art. But then talent, discipline, labor, self-criticism, and courage are no longer words one generally overhears in conversations about art these days. Rather one hears words like unique, stylistic, experimental, entertaining, revolutionary, important, and of course, the sparkliest flattery of all, in art *and* handsoap, new.

What is truly new about contemporary art is neither the work nor even the void of beauty therein, which has in some degree yawned in every age, but the sheer size and duration of that yawn. We find ourselves giving in to it with increasing frequency nowadays, despite art forms sprouting and blooming mad as dandelions, and "advancing" at such a rate as to virtually *consist* of newness. To our horror, what would appear newest of all, should it miraculously appear in our art, is something as old as neurons and photons: beauty.

One of the elder slugs in this idiom larvae-boom is the idiot bastard Performance Art. The best artists of this ilk, generally of less interest than those considered mediocre in the others, tend to be individuals with an alphabet Cup-A-Soup of economically worthless skills (usually tap-dancing, origami, yodeling, and underwater handshadows), with a desperate need (for obvious reasons) for an

idiom devoid of both training and critical standards. Somehow they can survive for years on the social Twinkie of art stardom, whining all the while about the lack of state funding, without once asking themselves if they accomplish anything more laudable than the squandering of time and attention.

Performance art is far from exceptional. Mail art, audio art, ceramic art, conceptual art, Xerox art, book art, etc.: all are forms that arose not so much out of any pressing urge to communicate ideas, emotions, or images (known pejoratively in the trade as “content”) but, as most of the artists themselves would boast, because they were there. In our more nostalgic moments we would like to think of these experiments as artistic crimes committed against a villainous and imperialistic Establishment, and of the artist as a Dada Robin Hood, heroically letting fly at the ramparts of bourgeois value.

No, the new idioms appeared mainly because they were easy: inexpensive, simple to work in, quick to become finished product, and best of all easy to reproduce and disseminate to the by then vast baby-boom art audiences cheeping open-beaked to the horizon. Even more happily for the artists, none of these forms possessed critical yardsticks against which a work’s relative success might be measured. Thus the art patron, already somewhat portly with education, had to be told that what he beheld was *good* art at the same time that he was told it was art.

As fast food and condominiums replaced home cooking and homes, so are we increasingly buried in Fast Art: performances prepared in three weeks, bands gigging after a month’s rehearsal, composers who stretch a measure’s worth of material into a full-length work, sculptors who mass-produce figurines under the guise of Embracing Capitalism. Fast Art is almost always breathtakingly hip, smooth as Frogurt, easy or unnecessary to be understood, flattering to its audience (at least for their taste, and their membership in the artist’s personality cult, which may number anywhere from in the dozens to in the millions), and, most importantly, stylistically indistinguishable from the rest of the artist’s work: it is an advertisement for his other advertisements for himself. And, as with his ideological cousin in the culinary arts, McDonald’s, his success depends largely on the comfort we take from knowing that no matter what artwork or franchise we go to, we *know what we’re getting*.

In a society in which few dare venture even the slenderest notion of what, in their terribly humble opinion, art is, it is not surprising it has become signature. Obviously if it

is anything in particular, someone else’s work is going to be left out in the woods overnight, leaving the critic or beholder who exiled it there open to the charge of “elitist” a disparagement about half a rung above “Nazi” on the descending ladder to hell. And if artists have no aesthetic nucleus to orbit, each is left to shout his own name in a deafening crowd scene: hoarse, unheard, and unlistening. If there is no concept of what constitutes an artist, it is surely inevitable that ever greater multitudes will turn out to qualify.

So ends the Age of Art. The ability to apprehend and analyze the structure of works, minds, and even the creative process itself stands at its height; indeed, ever greater phases of this process are now surrendered to what had once been mere tools and instruments: the recording studio, the sound stage, the editing room, the music synthesizer, the image-processor and, of course, the artist of the future, the computer. The point is not that artists are somehow “losing” creative prerogative to their technology, but that if they are wise they surrender it voluntarily, because the will-to-beauty in their own hearts is by now insufficient to create it alone. We have reduced art to the education and training necessary for its execution. Thanks at least in part to exponential growth in our ability to record, preserve, research, and reproduce art, every scrap of technical and psychological evidence as to how great art is made is now at our disposal. The knowledge has in fact the kind of comprehensiveness that can only result from one kind of operation: the autopsy.

But what was most fatal to art was its sudden availability, because of the epidemic spread of education and mass communication, to all people. Automation and other technologies have freed up vast featureless deserts of time for tens of millions of people, more of whom are high school- and college- and television-educated than ever before in history. Confronted by the yawning emptiness of automated culture’s bored mouth, they respond by making art. Hence the recent booms in poetry readings, rock bands, novelists, street performers, video artists, photo galleries, mime companies, etc., and of course a correspondingly massive increase in the ratio of bad to good in those fields.

Happily, at least one field has managed to benefit from the glut: entertainment. Almost immediately after becoming neon-lit with the post-modernist logo “Anyone Can Make Art,” the playing fields of art began to teem with the untalented. Not surprisingly they soon became heaped with contempt, causing a large number of those more gifted to defect to entertainment, a field that had once looked vulgar

and common, but by then looked positively exclusive by comparison. Because entertainment does not stammer and vacillate about what it wants, the best, there will always be room for only a limited amount of it, and the rest can go back to art. In entertainment one either succeeds or fails; its door is not at all open to the huddled masses leeching the corpses of their hapless muses: it is in fact *strictly* elitist. Naturally there are a certain number of failures and fools, as there are anywhere, but these are errors quickly corrected by marketplace economics. Bad entertainers, unlike bad artists, do not have friends on grant committees.

Moreover, even as art grows commoner, easier, and sillier, the artists and audiences for entertainment become daily more educated and sophisticated. This has prompted the more naïve among us to announce that the Art of the Future will be *in the form* of entertainment, as if somehow all the idioms of art might someday mystically unite with those of entertainment in some grand aesthetic Moonie Marriage. But this is truly the silliest kind of romanticism: a merely cursory examination of the marriage’s progeny reveals that entertainment and art have not merged symbiotically at all: rather, the former has quite absorbed the latter. Our experience of this kind of event is in fact nothing like a great art experience, which can suspend one shivering with vision on a wire hung from the ineffable, but is rather a mild glow, such as one’s feet might get from a steam pipe on a winter morning.

The process is ultimately rooted in what is one of the most important events of the 20th century: the final and incontrovertible victory of a great eighteenth-century idea: that of the fundamental equality of all people. The socialist attack on class hierarchy and its concomitant vision of all workers as potential art-workers, alongside the democratic notion of freedom of expression are the vast groundswells that carry the innumerable wavelets of more recent, localized expressions. And in combination with the still larger socioeconomic forces already discussed, such as the increase in leisure time, the spread of literacy, the inexpensiveness and availability of art technology, the democratization of education, the expansion of mass communication, the gradual decline of white *and* imperialistic First and Second World values, and of course the sheer growth of population, these forces have sufficed to virtually eliminate the ancient Western (and, ultimately, aristocratic) notion of the artist as a uniquely gifted individual. Or, for that matter as anyone in particular. Unfortunately for beauty, whose role as *raison d’être* in art is simultaneously usurped by pure freedom (which, capitalized, would now also replace the “Truth” in Keats’s famous equation), that notion of individual charisma is at the root of what we have until now called art.

To its credit, Western art saw it coming, and not only predicted, but with its usual fiercely perverse sense of humor, actually precipitated its own downfall. Warhol’s famous pronouncement about everyone becoming famous for fifteen minutes deserves mention. John Cage devoted an entire career to the notion of the artist erasing rather than engraving the traces of himself in his work, and earlier still Artaud had called for “no more geniuses” in an essay entitled “No More Masterpieces.” Even earlier Italian Futurist theater with its minute-long *sintesi* (tiny performances), and French Surrealist poetry with its automatic writing, Duchamp with his urinal and again with his early retirement, had all leveled crippling blows at the traditions both of work-as-masterpiece and artist-as-genius, little realizing that, as usual in culture, the job would be completed not by future artists and their manifestos but by economics and demographics.

The expanding Red Giant of culture reached critical mass in the 1960s 1970s and 1980s. And with the creative explosion of forms that lit those decades (performance art, mail art, sound sculpture, textile art, poster art, apartment theater, art rock, art graffiti, ceramic sculpture, environmental sculpture, sound poetry, radio art, computer music, conceptual art, laser sculpture, artists books, concrete poetry, Xerox art, art comics, video sculpture, body art, interactive video, etc.), under the influence of idiom cross-fertilizers like Robert Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik, Vito Acconci, Yoko Ono, Allan Kaprow, *ad infinitum*, it became increasingly obvious to artists, critics, and audiences that art was simply whatever the artist chose to call art. At the same time, the idea of performance as merely a framed swatch of ordinary time, of sculpture as an imperceptibly altered environment, of music as any ordinary sound (Cage), of dance as any natural movement (Cunningham), of literature as randomly-selected print (Burroughs), of performer as non-artist (Robert Wilson), of film as documentation of ordinary time (Warhol), and of video and music as pure ambiance (Eno), combined in an unapologetic assault on the idea of the art work itself. Like the identifying features of value in general, those of art have, as in a supernova, expanded quickly enough to qualify as an explosion, and we are left with a vast, indistinct nebula of dust and gas.

At this crucial moment the political and socioeconomic forces described above become paramount. The mighty armies of freshly self-christened artists stretching scores abreast to the horizon, having both ignited and been ignited by this cultural nova, delightedly pick up mallets and brushes, photocopier knobs and synthesizer toggles, and begin