

# THE CONSPIRACY OF ART

By Jean Baudrillard / May 20, 1996

The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion. In porn, nothing is left to desire. After the orgies and the liberation of all desires, we have moved into the *transsexual*, the transparency of sex, with signs and images erasing all its secrets and ambiguity. Transsexual, in the sense that it now has nothing to do with the illusion of desire, only with the hyperreality of the image.

The same is true for art, which has also lost the desire for illusion, and instead raises everything to aesthetic banality, becoming *transaesthetic*. For art, the orgy of modernity consisted in the heady deconstruction of the object and of representation. During that period, the aesthetic illusion remained very powerful, just as the illusion of desire was for sex. The energy of sexual difference, which moved through all the figures of desire, corresponded, in art, to the energy of dissociation from reality (cubism, abstraction, expressionism). Both, however, corresponded to the will to crack the secret of desire and the secret of the object. Up until the disappearance of these two powerful configurations -- the scene of desire, the scene of illusion -- in favor of the same transsexual, transaesthetic obscenity, the obscenity of visibility, the relentless transparency of all things. In reality, there is no longer any pornography, since it is virtually everywhere. The essence of pornography permeates all visual and televisual techniques.

Maybe we are just acting out the comedy of art, just as other societies acted out the comedy of ideology, just as Italian society (though it is not alone) keeps acting out the comedy of power, just as we keep acting out the comedy of porn in the obscene advertising pictures of women's bodies. Perpetual striptease, fantasies of exposed organs, sexual blackmail: if all this were true, it would indeed be unbearable. Fortunately, it is all too obvious to be true. The transparency is too good to be true. As for art, it is too superficial to be truly null and void. There must be some underlying mystery. Like for anamorphosis: there must be an angle from which all of this useless excess of sex and signs becomes meaningful, but, for the time being, we can only experience it with ironic indifference. In this unreality of porn, in this insignificance of art, is there a negative enigma, a mysterious thread, or, who knows, an ironic form of our destiny? If everything becomes too obvious to be true, maybe there still is a chance for illusion. What lies hidden behind this falsely transparent world? Another kind of intelligence or a terminal lobotomy? (Modern) art managed to be a part of the accursed share, a kind of dramatic alternative to reality, by translating the rush of unreality in reality. But what could art possibly mean in a world that has already become hyperrealist, cool, transparent, marketable? What can porn mean in a world made pornographic beforehand? All it can do is make a final, paradoxical wink -- the wink of reality laughing at itself in its most hyperrealist form, of sex laughing at itself in

its most exhibitionist form, of art laughing at itself and at its own disappearance in its most artificial form, irony. In any case, the dictatorship of images is an ironic dictatorship. Yet this irony itself is no longer part of the accursed share. It now belongs to insider trading, the shameful and hidden complicity binding the artist who uses his or her aura of derision against the bewildered and doubtful masses. Irony is also part of the conspiracy of art.

As long as art was making use of its own disappearance and the disappearance of its object, it still was a major enterprise. But art trying to recycle itself indefinitely by storming reality? The majority of contemporary art has attempted to do precisely that by confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies. These countless installations and performances are merely compromising with the state of things, and with all the past forms of art history. Raising originality, banality and nullity to the level of values or even to perverse aesthetic pleasure. Of course, all of this mediocrity claims to transcend itself by moving art to a second, ironic level. But it is just as empty and insignificant on the second as on the first level. The passage to the aesthetic level salvages nothing; on the contrary, it is mediocrity squared. It claims to be null -- "I am null! I am null! -- *and it truly is null.*

Therein lies all the duplicity of contemporary art: asserting *nullity*, insignificance, meaninglessness, striving for nullity when already null and void. Striving for emptiness when already empty. Claiming superficiality in superficial terms. Nullity, however, is a secret quality that cannot be claimed by just anyone. Insignificance -- real insignificance, the victorious challenge to meaning, the shedding of sense, the art of disappearance of meaning -- is the rare quality of a few exceptional works that never strive for it. There is an initiatory form of Nothingness, or an initiatory form of Evil. And then there are the inside traders, the counterfeiters of nullity, the snobs of nullity, of all those who prostitute Nothingness to value, who prostitute Evil for useful ends. The counterfeiters must not be allowed free reign. When Nothing surfaces in signs, when Nothingness emerges at the very heart of the sign system, that is the fundamental event of art. The poetic operation is to make Nothingness rise from the power of signs -- not banality or indifference toward reality but radical illusion. Warhol is thus truly null, in the sense that he reintroduces nothingness into the heart of the image. He turns nullity and insignificance into an event that he changes into a fatal strategy of the image.

Other artists only have a commercial strategy of nullity, one to which they give a marketable form, the sentimental form of commodity, as Baudelaire said. They hide behind their own nullity and behind the metastases of the discourse on art, which generously promotes this nullity as a value (within the art market as well, obviously). In a way, it is worse than nothing, because it means nothing and it nonetheless exists, providing itself with all the right reasons to exist. This paranoia in collusion with art means that there is no longer any possible critical judgment, and only an amiable, necessarily genial sharing of nullity. Therein lies the conspiracy of art and its primal scene, transmitted by

all of the openings, hangings, exhibitions, restorations, collections, donations and speculations, and that cannot be undone in any known universe, since it has hidden itself from thought behind the mystification of images.

The flip side of this duplicity is, through the bluff on nullity, to force people *a contrario* to give it all some importance and credit under the pretext that there is no way it could be so null, that it must be hiding something. Contemporary art makes use of this uncertainty, of the impossibility of grounding aesthetic value judgments and speculates on the guilt of those who do not understand it or who have not realized that there is nothing to understand. Another case of insider trading. In the end, one might also think that these people, who are held in respect by art, really got it since their very bewilderment betrays an intuitive intelligence. They realize that they've been made victims of an abuse of power, that they have been denied access to the rules of the game and manipulated behind their backs. In other words, art has become involved (not only from the financial point of view of the art market, but in the very management of aesthetic values) in the general process of insider trading. Art is not alone: politics, economics, the news all benefit from the same complicity and ironic resignation from their "consumers."

*"Our admiration for painting results from a long process of adaptation that has taken place over centuries and for reasons that often have nothing to do with art or the mind. Painting created its receiver. It is basically a conventional relationship"* (Gombrowitz to Dubuffet). The only question is: How can such a machine continue to operate in the midst of critical disillusion and commercial frenzy? And if it does, how long will this conjuring act last? One hundred, two hundred years? Will art have the right to a second, interminable existence, like the secret services that, as we know, haven't had any secrets to steal or exchange for some time but who still continue to flourish in the utter superstition of their usefulness, perpetuating their own myth.