Conjuring Post-Worthlessness: Contemporary Web Art and the Postmodern Context: part 1

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<art>   of the   world wide web   PART II

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Brett Stalbaum on Jan 14 1997   **issue 07**

In an essay entitled " -A Conjuration of Imbeciles "1, Jean Baudrillard suggests a similarity between contemporary art and contemporary French politics. He does not discuss art at all, preferring to instantiate the idea of art to serve as a metaphor for his analysis of politics

> "Two situations, both critical and insoluble. One is the total worthlessness of contemporary art. The other is the impotence of the political class in front of Le Pen."

Introduction

In an essay entitled " **A Conjuration of Imbeciles** "[1], Jean Baudrillard suggests a similarity between contemporary art and contemporary French politics. He does not discuss art at all, preferring to instantiate the idea of art to serve as a metaphor for his analysis of politics. Conversely, French politics is positioned as a metaphor for contemporary art. The essay's commentary is that 1), the energies and strategies of the French left have dissipated into a vapid pedagogy, and 2) the strategies of artists have dissipated and become similarly impotent. The end results are the left's unwitting culpability in supporting the rise of the "Savage analysis" of the far right, and a similar unwitting culpability on the part of contemporary artists in their own worthlessness. As his critique of the French left proceeds, so does his critique of art:

> It has become a purely moralistic... structure, a representative of universal values, a sacred holder of the reign of Virtue, and an incarnation of antiquated values such as Good or Truth. It now acts as a jurisdiction which asks everyone to act responsibly while still granting itself the right to remain irresponsible...

In this essay I wish to explore and ground this particular postmodern sense of the post-usefulness of art in relation to art practice as it is emerging on the world wide web. In trying to fill in some of the gaps relative to art left by Baudrillard in "A Conjuration of Imbeciles", I turn to some of his theoretical writing. I examine the modernist formulation of art and artistic identity and show how these are playing out on the web. In considering the recent emergence of the avant-garde or formalist strategy of web art, I position the movement as simultaneously derivative of modernism, and as a sophisticated pastiche of a historical model which successfully positions the web as a medium; not merely a form of documentation. I conclude with an analysis of the social role that art can play on the www in terms of Faucaultian "Technologies" of production, sign system, domination and self. Here I suggest a turn toward sign systems.

Deterrence machinery: art simulations as incantations to resurrect the dead

To understand Baudrillard's critique of art (either to support it or take it to task), we need to look at some of his other theory. In *Simulacra and Simulations*[2] he theorizes a

new set of foundations for social experience, which when stripped of some of his more extreme conclusions forms the basis of a useful critical perspective with which to treat the the issue of art on the world wide web. The basic idea is that models of the real have become more fundamental than the real:

> It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory-*precession of simulacra* (1) (italics his)

Based on this, Baudrillard theorizes contemporary social space as one in which meaning and foundations of difference based on the real implode. For example, all distinction between the political behavior of the right and the left is lost, but the model survives in a state more real than real. The implosion of the real and the power of the model then become the dominant social facts in the construction of existence and being, and simulation becomes the central process through which this "hyperreal" is mediated. The explication of simulation as culturally central has serious consequences for the evaluation of art on the web, specifically because the web is a major and expanding cultural center of simulation. If the imposition of simulacra as a prescient model (no longer as second order representation) is a phenomena that applies to art at all, it surely applies to art as it is represented in the world wide web.

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner[3] point out that when the theory is pushed to its (hyper)logical extremes, as is Baudrillard's tendency, it closes off social and even physical phenomena which are readily observable.

> Baudrillard argues that the masses become bored and resentful of their constant bombardment with messages...[and] thus become a sullen silent majority in which all meaning, messages, and solicitations implode as if sucked into a black hole. The social thus disappears and with it distinctions between classes, political ideologies, cultural forms...(121)

While we can analyze such collapse of meaning in many kinds of social events and ideas, it is nevertheless clear that the social world is still grounded in economics and distribution. Certainly these concepts, (implosive cultural meaning and representation on one hand; the social distribution of wealth on the other), are interconnected as parts of a complex fabric. This means, for the purpose of analysis, that Baudrillard's theory is simultaneously vital, and yet inadequate in how it deals with productive and distributive forces in the economy.

How is art manifested in this implosive space of "meaning, messages, and solicitations"? The important notion to glean from Baudrillard is that simulation serves a social purpose: simulation masks its own hyperreality. The simulacra or map overtook the real in order of social importance, while simultaneously deterring a social awareness of their role in doing so. In *Simulacra and Simulations* Disneyland is analysed as such a simulacra which serves to reconstitute the real:

> Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of the "real" America that is Disneyland... The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a *deterrence machine* set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. (13, italics mine)

Based on this idea, the critical perspective which emerges regarding art on the world wide web forms around this question: to what extent does representation on the world wide web which positions itself as art act as deterrence machinery to reify art, artists and art practices as real? Under an analysis of art on the WWW as a deterrence machinery, the simulacra on the web serves a similar function as does Disneyland in Baudrillard's example: art on the web functions to conceal the fact that it is the rest of the artworld that is "Worthless". Art as represented on the web, the hundreds of museum, gallery, education and working artist sites, serve to conceal that it is art practice itself that is dead. A perhaps more accurate way of positioning art within such an analysis is that art is an impotent cultural form living on artificial life support through art administration and institutions. Art in this sense, on the web or in the world[4], exists to rejuvenate the fiction of art. This notion of art as living meaninglessly on artificial life support impacts a variety (perhaps a plurality), of less theoretical social perspectives.[5] It would be sad if artists were the last people to either understand or accept that this analysis has both enough theoretical validation and public support to undercut the cultural impact of almost anything called art. If this were the case, there would be no time to escape what amounts to a burning house.

There is, however, a way to view this situation so that the precession of models leads to an understanding capable of enabling routes of escape. There are deeper level models invested in the figure of the artist which need to be drawn out and eviscerated. These are for the most part related to the latent selfhoods of artistic identity from the modern era. This basically Faucaultian critique emerges from the idea that art is a

historically determined notion based on practices and objects, which in art's case also meet various semiotic conditions. The gallery, the museum, the materials, the objects, the patronage and the simulacra which form the art market are then seen not as deterrence machinery but rather as social practices which emerge from complex and contingent conditions. The focus then changes from contemporary art's worthlessness to how it can be made useful again. In this sense it is not enough to say that art is catatonic, but rather to understand how contemporary postmodern/postindustrial contingencies effect art practice and to situate that practice strategically within them.

Habitual modernism as the root of all worthlessness

Theorizing art practice on the world wide web is problematic because the intersection of 'art' and 'the world wide web' introduces multiple and discursive fields of inquiry into the questions at hand. The western concept of 'art' has been theoretically reconsidered in a variety of guises related to the postmodern turn.(2)[6] When combined with the emergence of the internet as a serious social and economic force as well as the accompanying identity issues raised by it, the increasingly unavoidable question that arises for artists is "What strategy do I employ in relation to this thing?" For the most part artists and art institutions have evaluated the web as marketing tool, either to sell objects or bring people past the ticket window.[7] In this sense, the web is not used for art expression beyond what words and pictures can document about objects and practices that lie outside of the internet.

An expanded way to look at the situation is to consider how closely this strategy of marketing is a reflection of modernist constructions of what art is. Mary Anne Staniszewski provides us with a clear description of modernism in the arts:

> Art-as-we-know-it is an emblem of [the] rights of modern subjecthood. In modernity, visual culture does not embody the mysteries of myth and ritual conjured by powers beyond humanity. It is not produced upon the command of the church or crown. Its marker does not subscribe to the dictates of an academy run by the state. Traditionally, great modern Art is made by one creator, who is inspired to produce it. This kind of inspiration has been understood as the rare gift of genius.
>
> Art functions as a demonstration of its maker's freedom, and it exemplifies the modern subject's right to own something and exchange it. A work of art has traditionally been seen as the artist's absolute property, a surrogate for and realization of his or her essential self. The artwork when exhibited and exchanged within the "free market" acquires meaning and value.(104)[8]

That art making is an act that springs from "inspiration", that it is the result of "genius", and that such art is "rare" roughly form the nexus of modernist assumptions and beliefs regarding art which many people, especially artists, hold very closely. That art is also a product of worth in the market place, and that it derives its value relative to that marketplace are equally common assumptions. On the web these assumptions are both reproduced verbatim and simultaneously challenged by the ontologically implosive method of reproduction and distribution. It is easy to see in the most typical of art sites, (the individual artist's homepage or 'gallery'), a clear focus on the individual artist as both the inspired creative wellspring from which the work emerges, as well as explicit reference to the value-added nature of the production via its position in the marketplace as an aesthetic product. One example:

> "My intent in painting the landscape is to center myself in the presence of nature so that each painting might emanate Its energy. I strive to make paintings that are an open door to the experience of nature rather than simply a representation of it."
> http://www.earthnet.net/~artshop/bio.html
>
> "Prices available by phone, regular mail, & email."
> http://www.earthnet.net/~artshop/

Here we see that the artist is central to the work, acting as a kind of medium (in the paranormal sense), mediating an experience between the viewer and other worlds, in this case "nature." And of course it is a mediated experience through an object which is for sale. The specific problems here are that the experience of nature is culturally determined just as the experience of art is, and by painting a reference to it, then further pushing it into the hyperreal by scanning it and posting it on the web, the artist is constructing an idea of art from modern models unstrategically and without reference or relevance to contemporary social contingencies. There is no question raised about whether landscape painting, electronically presented on the web, is a productive sign system which could ever actually mediate an experience with nature. (It's an equally valid question whether a painting can accomplish this.) The role of the artist is here assumed from a vast cultural pool of unquestioned knowledge about what

artists do.

Art institutions maintain a very similar dependence on these notions of modern artistic persona and value-added commodification. The only differences in the web practice of, for example, an individual painter and a museum, is that the museum web site also serves to promote the quality of the institution's collection, curatorial expertise, art knowledge, historical value and the general quality of experience a consumer should expect in terms of the institution being a tourist destination. But the museum system is nevertheless dependent on the cultural expectations surrounding art and artists, and these are still grounded to a large extent in the same modernist notions which focus on individual achievement. As such, a museum's collection is as much a collection of names as it is works. The focus of research, curation, cultural/recreational value and the marking of historical significance is pointed to by the one-of-a-kind products of important artists.

It may be fair for the reader to object at this point that I take to task fairly soft targets such as the museum system (which is perhaps maligned by contemporary critics far more than is fair), and landscape painting. I do so only to make a point. The reader should take a break and spend some time looking at sites to see if my characterization of art on the www as primarily based on a philosophically modernist figure of the artist rings true. The following links are to **Yahoo!'s** categories[10]:

http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Artists/
http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Museums_and_Galleries/
(see also **appendix 1** and **appendix 2**)

'Pastiching' the modernist avant-garde: a postmodern strategy

Sensing the limitations of contemporary art on the web, a number of artists have created sites which incorporate more sophisticated strategies which fall under the nevertheless modernist rubric of formalism. It is both productive and ironic that these sites turn to a specific historical manifestation of modernism as an escape avenue. The strategy of formal sites involves the exploration of the HTTP protocol, HTML, and browser specific features as a unique medium in a Greenbergian sense:

> The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape-not a picture- is aesthetically valid; something is given, increate, independent of meanings, similars, or originals. *Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself...*

> In turning his attention away from subject-matter or common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his own craft... These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature.(23, italics mine)[11]

Such sites, via the formal exploration of the www as medium, may employ a feature of the web such as navigation via hypertext (which was designed to clearly and quickly provide management of and access to information), and repurpose it to instead obscure navigation inside of hypertext spaces where the information is no longer contextualized as information. Such a strategy may force the viewer to navigate through non-obvious or even totally random links which lead to further abstractions.

Other features common to formal sites include user interface tricks (fake buttons and menus as examples), use and repurpose of data from outside the site elsewhere on the web, the redisposition of data into alternate MIME types (Example: parsing the data of a JPEG and presenting it as gibberish text instead of an image), improperly sized images to form abstract visuals, secret messages, hidden meanings, (sometimes in the form of the meta-structure of the site yet obscured by the opacity involved in navigating or viewing it), and the alternate, extended, 'wrong' or 'creative' use of HTML or browser features to achieve unexplored effects in ways which were not intended in HTML or by browser design. Stated far too simply but conveniently: web formalism is the use of the web for the web's sake. The most important of such sites seems to be **jodi** .[12]

::CrossReference

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