

AUDACITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

The aim of this article is to examine the growing predominance of audacity, or that which audaciously seeks to be taken as such, in all the manifestations of the art of our time. To do that, and to be able to agree or disagree with any meaning, it would be best to start by limiting ourselves to a definition which sets certain boundaries for the word *audacity*, which, by its very nature, defies that kind of qualification. The *Petit Larousse* can't help us out because it very cautiously defines *audacity* with such synonyms as boldness and daring, and for boldness and daring gives the definition of *audacity*, which once again proves that a dictionary is no more than an ingenious collection of tautologies. In order to break that vicious circle I venture to propose, without much rashness on my part, that we understand by audacity that attitude which consists of ignoring what is expected of you and daring to what no one else dares to do.

Translated by Ines Jimenez

Audacity in Contemporary Art

If a painter is expected to paint and to use paints to do it, audacity could manifest itself, among many other ways, by mocking those expectations. The artist can work, not in the traditional sense of spreading paints over a surface with a brush and a palette knife, but instead by flinging them on at random and letting the arbitrary dripping take care of the rest. Or he can do without paints altogether and use in their stead any other chromatically neutral substance, giving preference to the most unusual, among which he needn't exclude faecal matter. To take another step towards audacity it would be advisable for him to abandon pigments completely, whether colored or fragrant, and even canvas and brush, and to limit himself to proclaiming his "creative attitude" as he passes his finger over his model's profile, with the advantageous result of not leaving any proveable traces of his gesture. I'm not going to enlarge upon the repertory of negations which have already been attempted, through which the audacious painter becomes (the former at the expense of the latter), merely audacious at the cost of no longer being a painter.

A highly generalized naïve attitude seeming akin to audacity is a symptom of modernity, a new invention of our violent times, forgetting that a proverb taken from a hemistich of Virgil's *Aeneid* is quoted in the pink pages of the same *Petit Larousse*: "*Audaces fortuna juvat*," which reveals the very relative newness of audacity. Of course the poet wasn't referring to our contemporary art, nor to that of any other epoch, but to the attitudes, vital ones like love, or mortal ones like war, in which case his statement, if it doesn't quite attain absolute truth, does possess a certain stimulating verisimilitude. Just the same, it is best not to forget that it is fickle Fortune, whose reputation as regards the constancy of her favors or the evaluation of real merit is not very recommendable, (which tendency is explained by the shallowness of her judgment), who aids the audacious.

If a statistic on the subject were possible it would prove to us what we already know without it: that audacity is often used in place of more fundamental values. Not always, by any means, but generally speaking we can say that audacity is the only prudence allowed to the audacious person.

To grab a white-hot spike one has to have, without a doubt, a good dose of audacity under normal conditions, but that ceases

to be the case when such a spike is the only available hold in a moment of peril.

Even if the aid of fortune became uncertain and went no further than to lessen the degree of burning of the hands, the least audacious person would risk it by instinct. Because we reach a point where audacity changes into necessity, and after that point is reached it is no longer justifiable to continue to call it audacity. Such is the situation in which so many faddists of the “burning spike” of contemporary art find themselves.

But I said that the poet never thought that his verse would be applicable, either to himself or to art as such, for when he wrote it the difference between art and craftsmanship hadn't even been established, fused together as they were later in the pursuit of serving man.

And only occasionally can craftsmanship allow itself a shred of authentic audacity, as *when* it began to make use of fire. Most likely that *when* can't be limited to a fixed point in time, to the instantaneousness of a determined date, but is spread out rather, covering a series of tries, of successive attempts and approximations. The artisan has always been very warily audacious, and only after persistent tries does he risk any variation of his techniques. Never does he allow himself to be gratuitously audacious, even less in open opposition to his personal desire to be useful: the soft anvil can't be invented outside of insane asylums. In contemporary art, on the other hand, the least attempt at lucidity makes suspect he who suffers it.

Unpretentious craftsmanship, which by the way bequeathed to us the Parthenon and Notre Dame, never thought of audacity as an end, nor did it permit itself to add any more risks to those which its own destiny already provided. Instead, the politicians, the warriors, the lovers used it as far back as history can remember. Fortune could help them—when it did help—because the techniques of their ancestors were always suspected of failure when applied to the unrepeatable moments of life.

For audacity to establish its present relationship with art it was necessary that a certain maturity be reached in the successive sedimentations which served to differentiate between the various human activities. Until one of them, which we now call *art*, dared to proclaim its independence with a vehemence greater

Audacity in Contemporary Art

than all the others, finally demanding to be recognized as the most noble on account of its magnificent uselessness. From that uselessness would come total independence from all the rules which had until then *bound* it to one technique. Audacity's relationship with those who started, and continue, to call themselves *artists* began to become as venturesome as that of the warriors and the lovers, and for that reason it seemed justifiable that they began to seek the shelter of audacity.

For as soon as art became aware of its autonomy, covering itself with its ultimate justification, it drew itself up with arrogance and considered it not only plausible but also of the utmost necessity to break all ties with other human activities first, and later, with man himself. That "later" has reached its peak in our present disturbed times.

Moreover, it was theologically predictable; when art saw itself "for what it is" it had no other choice but to aspire to the Divine or to hurl itself into the diabolic, and the aid of audacity is equally indispensable to either alternative.

The simple intention of creating any aesthetic form, no longer as a function of craftsmanship capable of helping us to communicate with our fellow man, but as the assertion of the ego in the first place, and of the validity in itself of this form before the others, presupposes a reckless audacity, even though it may use the most timorous techniques and rely on perspectives of the greatest conventionality. For its goal is, no more no less, to repeat the original miracle of creating something out of nothing, something which must have been overlooked first by God, and then by his illustrious executors, all the great geniuses who have come before us.

We needn't wait to get the present deliberate outrages; from the moment when the artist decided that the principle aim of his work would be to express himself, and at the same time to add a new plot to the universal whole, the first thing he needed to be able to face such a great risk was a good dose of candid effrontery. The joke at the expense of Victor Hugo's megalomania, of whom it is said that upon arriving in Heaven he treated God as a *colleague*, is in the end what the most humble of artists aims at from the moment he confesses to himself his intention to create. Vitally, and even aesthetically, such an attitude

did not cease to be wholesome in the degree that it brought the almost insupportable feeling of responsibility which it implies. But that attitude necessarily became mortal as soon as it tried to ignore that responsibility and to transform art into an insignificant pastime, without agreeing to return to the more modest but no less rigorous activities of the artisan.

Even when the artist chooses as a theme and form to continue a tradition, without renouncing his claim to personal expression, perhaps then, as never before, will he need bold valor to recapture what Solomon and St. John of the Cross, or Virgil and Fray Luis de León had held one after the other in their hands, and dare to aspire to find something which had slipped by them.

While the predecessor of the one we today call an artist continued to see himself as an artisan things looked entirely different, and he could choose a subject of the greatest prestige without that being necessarily an audacious act. The great subject, like gold or a precious stone, was something given, a natural substance which could be worked, and to which his own personality could add but little if it wasn't humbly deferring to its intrinsic requirements. In the cases mentioned, St. John of the Cross as well as Fray Luis de León—and we could say the same thing of Solomon and Virgil—did not attempt to create “*ex-nihilo*” but instead acted like *translators* of something they found as given or revealed, and limited themselves to rejuvenating its form in order to render it accessible and to place it charitably, if not within everyone's reach, at least within the reach of a much larger group. Their craftsman-like attitude led them to act like shapers of a previously acknowledged immortality which they simply wanted to adapt to the requirements of their medium.

The ones who dedicated themselves to the craft of painting and sculpture and who knew how to make use of, with the success we are now aware of, a very small repertory dependent on the cultural circle in which they worked—Nativities, Crucifixions and Annunciations in Christianity, and mythological themes in paganism—proceeded in the same fashion. This did not hinder them from developing at the same time all the formal magnificence, valid still, through which shone, perhaps because it hadn't dared to confess it to itself, its own personality. The secular success of the artisan originated in his respect for the

Audacity in Contemporary Art

needs of his fellow man, which he considered to be his duty to interpret and to serve without any intention of substituting for them the imposition of his own audacious pride, to which everything else should be subjected.

Art even when not recognized as such, did not become proud until it considered itself an end unto itself, and whoever practised it couldn't forget at any time his noble submission to a craft to which he had to be completely committed to survive, and his position as aide to the aesthetic needs of his own group.

The incredible theoretic complexity of such monuments as the Greek temples or the Egyptian pyramids, decorously concealed beneath an appearance of simplicity, reveals how far one could go by virtue of that submission. Their lasting significance comes from the pressure exerted by a whole people acting through an artisan, whose subjected will was finally freed through the fulfillment of that need.

Things began to change after the beginning of the Renaissance, first in isolated flashes with ambitious excesses of art for which gradually the *theme* imposed by others began to be a pretext, (and the foreign necessity of having someone who was more gifted express what the average person could not), a good platform on which to exhibit the personality of he who with the excuse of serving art began to use it. That was repeated in the "crescendo" of the personality cult of Romanticism, until we reach the present day when more than personality, it is the symbol, the signature, which has value.

A wonderful way to renew authenticity, would be to hide for a long time the signatures in the museums and the libraries, so that people would "re-learn" to appreciate authentic values.

As a consequence of that our true needs would become self-evident, and the most wholesome of all of them would be the immediate cooling of the burning spike of audacity, which would no longer have any reason to exist.

In the present state of this individualizing process on the one hand and the arrogant independence of art on the other, which is in fact the same thing, we find that, by obstinately ignoring all contact with reality and with the no less dispensable human beings, the establishment of comparative bonds, and even of the smallest point of reference, becomes impossible, and frees artistic

labor from any verification of the success or failure of its results. These results can't depend on an unexpected approximation of the external, since creation implies disdain for any resemblance that would make this creation uncertain.

To draw away from any compromising family resemblance to reality, whatever that may be, is the pattern of aesthetic pursuits: each work of art only has to look like itself, and for that reason senselessness, in the etymological sense of the word, has become, if not a guarantee of excellence, at least a soothing indication that we are on the worst road, which is the best one.

Similarly, a reference to the state of mind produced in the observer by a work of art would be misleading because that would imply confusing aesthetics with psychology, which is to take a dangerous and slippery step backward in the differentiating process I have mentioned. We thus find ourselves before a considerable lack of a minimum of necessary values. It is the ideal moment which the creator and the critic (creator of what? critic of what?) needed to plunge themselves into their "work," without having to answer to any other tribunal than the uncheckable one of their good or bad faith.

It is very probable that what is happening now is nothing more than the reduction to the absurd (to take it to its final consequences) of the aims of art in considering itself as an activity independent of the rest of human endeavor; that we have reached the limits of an ambition, Satanic in its haughtiness, of which the growing dislike of the artist for any semblance of usefulness has always been a symptom. If I pass lightly over such an ambitious topic it is because I consider it indispensable to leave evidence that what we today understand by art implies an inevitable audacity, although the person who moves under its influence may not even know it. For the time being, I prefer to limit myself to examining what can be called *additional* audacity, and to test its authenticity as such.

Given this nature of the differentiating process from which art originated, we find that audacity, which first prodded it into motion, can now serve as a spur in the search for new forms of expression, without that in itself having to be considered as deplorable, as long as it keeps in mind that such audacity lacks what in its excesses it wound up attributing to itself: aesthetic value.

Audacity in Contemporary Art

Its impetus is of another nature, and ceases to be tolerable when it forgets that fact. Now that which is monstrous has come to be permissible. In any competition among works of equal merit, the basis for the definitive vote becomes the preference for the most audacious one, as if that detail, true or false, could be acceptable in a judgement that should stick to aesthetic values.

People forget that audacity is no more than a biological condition, that it can just as easily place itself in the service of the best as of the worst, or in the service of the ethical as well as the aesthetical. It is like underlining when you write, which doesn't alter the meaning of the words, limiting itself to stressing them, to increasing their character.

Audacity in a saint—a good dose of it is no doubt necessary to be one—increases its capacity to reach a spiritual loftiness, but the same audacity in the soul of a thief hurls him towards the vilest crimes. The eulogy or the vituperation of audacity in the field of conduct would sound equally absurd in any such cases, since it doesn't create anything in the field of ethics, limiting itself to strengthening what has been subjected to its elasticity, which is solely mechanical, to give it greater scope, whether it be to encompass the bad or the good.

There is no difference between that and what happens in art, when audacity is placed—supposedly, as we shall see—in the service of a great artist. We are dazzled by the results because his prestige keeps us from seeing that it wasn't audacity which produced them.

And now is the time to ask ourselves if that which we took for audacity in this case was such. Because the great artist works with the natural excessiveness which his equally excessive faculties either allow him or impose on him, and surprises us with his results, as the sun dazzles us without meaning to do so. It isn't that he resorts to that additional audacity which I mentioned before, but that the boundaries of his daring are of a naturally greater range. He leaves behind the possibilities of the others, without noticing them because he has not yet felt out his own limits, and for that reason can't commit the puerile error of finding merit in himself.

He doesn't rely on any other aims than those derived from his immediate needs, almost always of tragic character, and of such

intensity that it would be absurd to try to reinforce them with tricks. When you're in the grips of your own excessiveness you don't waste your time on juggling exercises.

It is clear that that original audacity, already existing in the artist, manifests itself in genius with great violence, almost always giving to his works aspects which his contemporaries find brutal, and for that reason it would be absurd for him to try to resort to the trickery of "additional" audacity, unless it is to avoid the consequences of being endowed with genius. In spite of the hypothetical outrages, and even though it may seem paradoxical, the true genius is never audacious in that sense, not only because he doesn't need to be but because his own temperament forbids it. The only audacity he can allow himself has a negative sign: triviality. And unfortunately, there is no lack of brilliant artists who commit themselves to this.

What can look audacious to its first confused observers, tends to be, on the contrary, the results inevitable in them, of the strict submission to the needs of his own excessiveness. It's explosive violence of expression leads them into being fooled with respect to the existence of an arbitrariness which doesn't really exist, and which on the contrary can be the short cut to placing itself where it is least expected: in the traditional.

In the life of all great masters, without exception, we come across a very personal struggle with the exigencies of their craft, made even greater by the novelty of the problems to which they must be applied, or by the difficulties arising from their own stature. How often their supposed audacity is only the passionate gesture with which, far from wishing to frighten anyone, they hold out a charitable hand!

They have to add their own laws, which are never capricious, to the ones they inherited. But these laws can appear capricious because of the instantaneous character of some of them. Sometimes, when needed, they limit their legitimacy, and they are substituted by others as indispensable as they are elusive. But they are all equally far from caprice, as it is usually noticed later, when the strong tie that binds them to great traditional art is revealed, that tie is often due to those presumed cases of singing off key.

From there arise all the difficulties of those who try to follow

Audacity in Contemporary Art

in the footsteps left by any genius; who perceives by intuition, second by second, the fluctuations of his own laws, and who moreover obeys his natural freeness, arising from the fact that his road had never been trodden before, while his followers try laboriously and uselessly to fit their small steps into the seven league strides of the giant. They, the ones who consider as audacious that which never was, at least not as a voluntary aim, are the first to be fooled by appearances, and it only has that appearance to those who judge it from the point of view of their own tiny stature. From there they go on to believe that the unusual merits consideration for that very reason, and that all that surprises us, scares us, and, more still, confuses us, is worth attempting. Then audacity tries to take the place of assumed audacity, and separated from the genius who ignored it, remains separated also from its own forces, which are aesthetically nil; If only things would go no further! Because what happens is even worse: audacity in the service of mediocrity makes it obvious, increases the impertinencies of its outcries, reveals each one of its vulgarities, and illuminates without reverence the empty spaces left by an absence of values.

The undeniable capacity for the echoing of audacity carries with it as an inevitable consequence the growth of the mediocrity which in its confusion seeks to shelter itself behind audacity, its worst enemy, although without remaining subjected to its augmentative capacity, it could have survived in the penumbra which is vitally fitting for it.

Audacity augments whatever it is focusing on without adding, nor of course bettering anything, just as it is done by the curvatures of lenses or mirrors. Not even the magnifying glass of the greatest power could discover hippopotomi in the tributaries of the Nile in the most detailed map unless a patient cartographer with a sense of humor had put them there beforehand. It seems incredible, but the hope that breathes life into all audacity is of this type.

In the case I've just mentioned, when in the hour of decision a jury appreciates audacity as a decisive merit, it is proceeding with identical criteria as he who values a painting for its size, a piece of sculpture for its specific weight, or a symphony for the number of hours which its execution demands. All of them

false values, and all of them extrinsic, which can only interfere negatively with the judgment. A phenomenon which is no less self-defeating, and which the supporters of audacity hadn't suspected, is the contagion that the public suffers from such an attitude. Since they don't want to be caught in the sin of frankness, they set up a higher bid to see who exceeds whom in foolishness, a phenomenon very similar to the one which occurs inside a cyclotron, where each acceleration provokes a greater one, until it escapes the possible control of the sorcerer's apprentices, to whom the exciting expectation of their own victims incites them to increase the rhythm until they produce the final insanity of art. The overvaluing of a work of art on account of its audacity could not hope for another result, and what makes it worse is that the uninterrupted expectancy of the unexpected leads to tedium in a very short time.

Given the ethically and aesthetically neutral character of audacity, it can just as easily seek aggressive goals as charitable ends, even though it is the first attitude that is more frequent in contemporary art. In almost all cases it is wielded with the aim of creating a scandal in the anticipatory mockery of the incomprehension of the others which is taken for granted, approaching that incomprehension until it becomes inevitable from thinking of it as such. But to remain efficient in its aggressiveness it has to abide by the norms with which it plans to attack us with as much or more submission as the academician who will venerate them. That is why we now help in the proliferation of an academism with a changed sign, no less compassionately ridiculous than the other, with its laws, its ticks, its manias, and of course its inertia.

The audacious artist needs the "*bien-pensant*" so that he can despise him at will, and to know what the "*bien-pensant*" expects of him in order to do the contrary, without noticing that nowadays what is already expected of him beforehand is that he should not do what he does, with which we have reached a type of coexistence very similar to the shallowest provincialism. Never has the artist sought to attract the public as much as he does now, with the sole difference that today the public's masochism is taken for granted.

Contempt for the public started in the middle of the last century, but it appeared only in the opinions of the artist and not

Audacity in Contemporary Art

in the works themselves. The public was referred to as cretinous or as "municipal and thick" and even worse things, sometimes by great artists, but they never introduced "thick cretinisms" into their work. Although statistically such modifiers can turn out to be dangerously close to the truth, it is best not to forget: that among those who are ridiculed in this fashion, lost among them in a solitude very similar to that of the very creators, are to be found those people, many or few, alive or not yet born, before whom the work of the artist will finally find its justification, if it has any, the possible fellow men (the "large minority" of Juan Ramon Jiménez) who can never be treated with too much solicitude.

In spite of that the arrogance of the artist already takes for granted that even among those who understand him, they never understand him enough, and it is that thought which tempts him to take a part in the process, thereby adding (on his part) new elements of incomprehension.

What his vanity seems to ignore is the existence of people, the only ones that should count for him, capable not only of comprehending the meaning of his work, but also of generously enlarging that meaning for him by discovering in it valid elements never suspected by its own author. All gratuitous attempts to confuse such beings, on whose existence depends the existence of art, constitutes an injury (paid for beforehand) of the worst possible kind to the detriment of the work of the artist who inflicted that injury.

That remaining incomprehension which the artist considers inevitable irritates him much more than agreement on the essentials, and develops in him a psychosis which leads him to think of anyone who approaches his work as an enemy, and for that reason takes pleasure in fooling him, attacking him from the start with audacity, to confuse him, thus increasing the distance, to the artist an immeasurable one, which is always between them and audacity never ceases to act like an attractive lure. Because the vulgar artists of audacity have the double aim of first alluring to the surface and then driving back into the depths, creating an equivocal relationship, similar to the one used by the seducer who manages to satisfy his appetites while avoiding the risks inherent in true love.

And in the measure, always excessive, which the abused public agrees to go on assimilating the explosive requirements of audacity, it becomes necessary to quickly replace it with another, before it cools off and loses its power before another more daring one. This artist prevents the breaching of that gap the disappearance of which should be the greatest wish of every artist.

But we have to recognize that the hopeful suspicion always exists that someone can use audacity with the charitable aim of helping another. The true artist knows that his condition as such arises from, among other things, his being endowed with a greater capacity to brave the necessary risk he has to run in order to increase the scope of human sensitivity. He would use the jolt of audacity then as an incentive to shake the receptive laziness it is wisest to take for granted in most publics.

We can lie at times quite honestly, about aesthetic enjoyment as a simple conditioned reflex before what is taken for granted produces it. Usually the artist conceals the inertia resting complacently in the smallest effort, and the jolt which tears us away from such sinful placidity is always wholesome. The auxiliary value of audacity used for such purposes can be meritorious. I don't know if I'm too distrustful in suspecting that this stimulating use is not among the most frequent ones, but it would be unfair not to mention it since it has occurred in a number of cases.

At any rate the artist should run the risk on his own and make his generosity pass unnoticed, hiding from the eyes of the beneficiaries the risks run on their account, until he can get from them the confession of moving frankness that they had tried "that" before, although they would have never known how to express it so well. An audacity practised so discretely couldn't deserve less than gratitude in the unlikely event of becoming aware of its own existence, and would never have provoked my present comments. That it exists is certain, for all great art rests on its own tacit tension in the end.

Given the complex psychology of artists, a simplification which would allow us to group them into saints and reprobates is unlikely, and their combinations in all conceivable proportions of their charitable as well as aggressive aims should be taken for granted.

Audacity in Contemporary Art

Ignoring intentions, it would be conceivable for an intemperate aggression to stir up the comprehension discarded as impossible. Or sometimes the best intentions could remain as good intentions by the automatic rebound effect produced by all suspicion of audacity.

We have only to point out one aspect which is often wrongly attributed to the personal audacity of the artist, who is in that sense its first victim, and which comes from what could be called the *impersonal audacity* of contemporary art. Many misunderstandings originate there, and we could even question the legitimacy of the name of audacity which for more than a century has been acting superficially through the personal will of the artists.

Each art in the degree in which it started to practice its autonomy felt the consciousness of its intrinsic technical necessities, which had always struggled to manifest themselves as such, increase until it managed to overpower the secular aims of another nature than those they had subjugated. Painting ignored what was painted aiming at the rarified concept of abstract design, which was finally abandoned for "informalism," and stumbles from the rigidity of the *concrete* to the grotesque masks of *pop* or the precious light games of *op*. Poetry ignores all lyric pretext, evaporating into translucent phantasmagoria, free from the impurity of any meaning, even that which can be attributed to the suspicious subconscious residues of automatic writing. And music with its austere goals of auto-consciousness sees the least indication of melodic idea, of dramatic intent, as the worst abomination, and limits itself to ingenious experiments in the electronic laboratory.

The old formula at the beginning of the century, of "art for art's sake" has been replaced by this one: "art for art's benefit". By thinking only of itself it has acquired the morbid habit of fixing its attention on its physiological being, giving preference, as it always winds up by doing, to the disorder of that physiology, and ignoring the superior ends to which its healthy functions could be applied. It is impudence exactly like that of certain sick people, uninterested in their possible metaphysical, religious, historical, or more modestly domestic future, to limit their interest and topic of conversation to their pancreas, or what is no less

distressing, their subconscious. A pathological disturbance which puts life in peril can render such an obsessive state excusable. But in art, that growing preoccupation with its vegetable being, which in moderate doses could be healthy, has ended by working against what every human being has always expected of himself: emotions of a superior nature which permit him to reach higher levels of the spirit.

I seem to see now the pitying smiles of some of my readers as they see that candid confession. I already know the reply: What should interest the artist is not psychology, neither that of the public nor his own. To think that he can paint for some reason other than the very act of painting, is to offend him. Painting, as such, has its own problems foreign to every observer.

The search for effects for the mere search, ignoring any intrusive pretext in the only thing which serves its attention. What does the human being think he is? Where does he get the idea that art has to bear his existence and his ridiculous *needs* in mind? Poets and musicians say the same thing about their respective arts, and the dangerous thing is that from the strictly professional point of view, they have a point, and to prove it we have some noble expressive refinements created in their hermetically sealed laboratories. But that professionalism which today holds a dictatorship almost without opposition in art, is still very far from constituting its own justification. No artist, do what he might, say what he might against the public, can ever ignore that public without ignoring himself. He has to publish, to exhibit, to make himself heard in concert, for that paradoxical and inexcusable destiny, which makes art the most individualistic activity to the point that all of its cultists proceed as convinced solipsists, must also inevitably be social. Each work of art has to resolve that contradiction in vital synthesis, for if it doesn't is simply no longer a work of art. It is in the oversight of this fundamental fact that all the diseases which ail contemporary art take root, since impersonal audacity takes an exclusive delight in the difficulties presented by its own problems, totally ignoring the problems of others, and thus transforming its means into ends.

The same thing happens to the reader of a cryptically lucid poem of *poetic poetry* whose capacity for penetrating obstinate

Audacity in Contemporary Art

lyrics goes a lot further than was expected of him, as what befell the lover who received as a keepsake, not the portrait but the X-ray of the beloved. Does it make any sense to discuss the greater or lesser veracity of the two pictures? Each is the result of a similar technique—cameras, lenses, chemical baths—but the poor lover has a perfect right to consider as impertinent that excess of lucid penetration that through complete objectivity has de-personalized the loved one until she was transformed into a skeleton.

Pure technique, by insisting on the pursuit of its own ends has exceeded them, sometimes with admirable results but results that are no longer its concern. The sin of excessive pride here stopped being the sin of the artist and we should appropriate it to art itself, which has fallen into a narcissism predictable from the moment it began to hold craftsmanship in contempt. Craftmanship's modesty in agreeing to serve utility is what art most despises in it. As for the difficulties which the contemptible public can suffer because of it, art takes as little interest in that as the one who was enamoured of his own image took in the lament of unfortunate Echo, and it is even amused and stimulated by them. From there comes its refusal to limit its aims to a perpetual search for the search, whose result is merely that heap of paintings which can only interest artists, or the "dealers" whose job is to find for those paintings potential clients aided by his accomplice vanity. Or of poems which only the poets can understand in the hypothetical case that they would condescend to waste their time reading what their colleagues write. Or of musical compositions intended to impress, not anyone's sensitivity, but the objective measures of the physicists who specialize in acoustics.

While the poor human being, pushed to one side, whose growing aesthetic needs remain without finding any legitimate satisfaction on account of the arrogance of those who should satisfy them, remains exposed to the aberrations which accompany all frustrated aspirations, and are so completely exploited by the less noble forms of publicity.

The reticence of contemporary art, which worries so much about its health and doesn't know what to do with it, might very well have an unmentionable common origin with the other

audacities, whether real or false, which afflict it. I venture the hypothesis that all that can come from the collection of super-iorities which become insupportable—to those who aspire to be creators, it is understood—of the art which has preceded us, and which has been reduced, is possibilities for novelty. The artistic inheritance we have received is overwhelming, and in spite of everything continues to grow, and the engagement, so full of dignity, which it imposes on those who intend to follow with some decorum is unbearable. The plan of the futurist manifesto to burn all the museums seems to be, within the framework of its hysterical candor, a clear confession of what I already suspected.

As the too favored inheritors we tend to squander what our our ancestors patiently and painfully bequeathed to us. We audaciously bet all their riches on the fleeting gaudiness of *pop*, or we let ourselves be robbed of them in exchange for the vacuity of the “object” thus joining the numerous victims of embezzlement. And since the cult of audacity can’t stop being the cult of brevity we reconcile ourselves beforehand to not participating in the succession of generousities that from Altamira and Lascaux to our day has been increasing the common artistic fortune which has so largely contributed so that man should reach manhood. We’ll boast of our shameful absence beforehand.

But to save face we tend to look for not three, but five feet on the cat, attributing new aims to art, or better yet, we try to convince it to renounce all of them as a final definitive audacity. With what is now happening art simply ceases to be art, without the promoters of this nameless activity consenting to abandon the names of *artists* or *art critics* in the profit of a prestige whose foundations they detest.

Every six months, or every three, the abrupt mutation of traditional techniques and aims is attempted, techniques and aims which were traditionally animated by the successive contributions, so often contradictory between themselves, of the great masters. Those techniques are replaced by deliberately improvised ones, by an audacity that far from concealing itself blazes with ostentatious cheek as the best, of only one, of its merits.

Each artist that breaks or tries to—the thing is much more complicated than it seems—his ties with what till now has been

Audacity in Contemporary Art

understood by art, as much in procedures as in goals, the first thing he is looking for though he may not confess it to himself is to eliminate every upsetting possibility of comparison. As long as his hypothetical solitude lasts he will be the first, and the only one in his field. Unfortunately for him, such uniqueness will appear illusory from the start for it is very rare for someone to set out on the authentically adventurous road of what has never been tried before. In the presently heavily populated avenues of audacity a “master” frequently acquires his fame by plagiarizing the plagiarists.

It doesn't take much boldness to make the statement that never in the history of art has plagiarism been practised with more enthusiastic unanimity. Every one is alert to what his neighbor is doing for fear of being left behind, and audacity sets the pace in its way, but it sets it as a consequence of the hypothetical abolition of the traditional.

Because it so happens that tradition, despised to the point that impurity becomes a merit, and that the lack of reputable origins becomes honorable, is the accumulated result of the manias of provincial maiden aunts acting in complicity with retired academicians. It seems incredible to need the reminder, but tradition is inevitable in the human condition, not only to alleviate our intrinsic solitude but because from it comes, with language, that collective memory which speaks through art, science, philosophy, and religion, without which we would return to an animal state. Our very posture, standing erect on two feet, is a matter of tradition. And when we attempt the absurdity of trying to ignore tradition, which keeps us rooted in time, it is only to fall into the shallow puddle of what we could call *horizontal tradition* which spreads with the suspicious simultaneity of a drop of oil on top of the water, until it covers the four corners of the planet.

What particular type of audacity is it which urges young creators, and others which aren't—neither young nor creative—to identify themselves with the same absurdity in the most diverse latitudes of the globe, from the land of the midnight sun to the tropics?

This is what should really alarm us. Because the only justification, though it is sufficient, for any audacity, be it applied to

what it may, is the one which answers to the deepest needs of our personality and which imposes on us the risk of having to play a deadly game. The mutations which take place though outside of our control, as much in the field of culture as in that of biology, will sometimes move an already determined man to boldness, to face the unknown, and the history of art tells us in its most painful pages what price he pays. What happens now when we attend a real auction of incentives of all sorts, especially of pecuniary ones, for the development of a hypothetical *un-conformity* to which youth responds to order to *conform* to that demand, is completely the contrary.

In the field of the ethical, the universal practice of audacity would bring on as an immediate consequence the return to the law of the jungle, from which we are not as far as could be hoped. In the field of the aesthetic, that practice would lead us to the chaos of mutual withdrawal into ourselves. But through lack of authenticity in that audacity, the chaos in which we are submerged adds to its other wastelands that of monotony.

The growing break with temporal tradition has been succeeded with choral unanimity by an accord in the discord which the most modest estimate of probabilities would throw out as the likely result of an instantaneous harmony in all of the personal misencounters. Especially if we remember that that phenomenon has been repeating itself for too long, and with a rhythm that is as predictable for the audacities as it is for the new car models.

We stand before a regimented and ultra-conformist audacity and are too attentive to the secret signals of its specialized technicians. An audacity which no apprentice with a desire to make his fortune in the shortest possible time would dare resist.

In other words: we have reached the moment to ask ourselves if *daring to do what no one else dares to not dare to do deserves to be called audacity*.

I should be very sorry if anyone saw in this question of the greatest and most painful urgency, the least pretension of guile. On its proper answer depends the fate of the young generation of possible artists.

The authentic artist shouldn't forget that to be audacious in some sense which would justify it, but really audacious, it is now necessary to try to appear not to be so.