

## ICARUS ESTRANGED

### OR ON ART MOVING TOWARDS UNDER-DEVELOPMENT

Out of what the West now terms contemporary art, some would construct the synthesis and final accomplishment of every civilization, of all the great forms of art that have followed one another, blending and overlapping ever since man has existed and began expressing himself, like a fugue with innumerable developments that always returns to focus on the same theme, headed in the same direction. This evolution, as strangely loaded with analogies as it is rigidly anachronous, has borne, followed and determined without failing, the mutations in our image. Art of the West in particular, in all its principal incarnations from ancient mythologies all the way to Rodin, from the Romanesque pilgrimage down to Daumier and Picasso—moving through culminating points of extreme harmony or tension: Rembrandt, Goya, Soutine—is presented as the great figure of a God in human appearance. Around this figure has been formed an entire world in which the real has continually been re-invented as art renewed its

Translated by R. Scott Walker

statements of it. Did this God and this world lose soul and memory on the day when the photographer's lens, a disastrously incorruptible witness, indicated the limits of very strict anthropomorphism?

Although Millet's bathers, in the twilight of the last glow of Romanticism, still illustrate the most human, the most amorous of combats with the Angel, did not Nadar definitively prohibit Courbet, Manet or Degas from conceiving a creature of divine essence? From that time—the artist having been mercilessly condemned to the human, too human—would not art try everything to escape this stricture?

With its intimate and complex mixture of matter and spirit, painting has made it possible for man to incarnate the spirituality of his image in the reality of the world just as he had incarnated God in his very own image. Each time one of these images discovers in its depth, as if in the sensitive bath of a revealing agent, the reality of another (and thus Rembrandt contains Goya who liberates Soutine who returns to Rembrandt) the image obtained radiates with this inimitable light, this light of eclipse through which an unknown and obscure figure seems to arise and be illuminated by another who returns to the darkness: the double evidence of two superimposed profiles of a single figure who appears where, a moment before, there was nothing but night.

By separating matter from spirit, by accumulating the weight of the real within the limits of its inflexible framing, has the relentless eye of the camera not reduced the eye of the painter—excessively dilated to uncontrolled infinity—to the status of a blind lens and a soul in pain? Is this very infinity more than a focal artifice, a mirage due to the exhaustion of an optic nerve, to an increasingly acute myopia? If we imagine that the force of vision is measured by the distance it is capable of imposing with regard to a real object known to and recognized by all, what revelation can we hope for now from a reality so vague and open to every type of imposture? Monochromism with its epigones is never more than the lamentable declaration of lost reality. Since the Renaissance, which invented him, the artist had constantly assumed a double articulation, the interaction of great destinies with collective destiny, the enriching of one through the other. We have known men who by themselves enriched their age, others who allowed

themselves to be enriched to the point of being able to express it fully. Western society has found, continuously, more than an echo in the person of the artist; he is a witness who struggles from within against that part of himself that attaches him to his times and his environment. When this struggle ceases, creation is finished.

In fact the Western world has constantly reinvented the artist, ever since the Quattrocento when it extracted him from collective art to endow him with the fearsome aura that was also to be to a great extent a curse: "The artist, the man who comes closest to God;" down to our own times where mythology and overweening success mercilessly condemn this curse. After having been monstrously hypertrophied at the expense of man, the artist now tends to return once again to being one of the masses, stifled by multiplication and dizzying inflation. At present art is the masses, crushed under a fallacious identification of the general with the particular. Thus, designated by a simple algebraic sign or the magic gesture that turns a pumpkin into a carriage, artists refuse to be such and no longer need to use their art as a recommendation to legitimate their theories, and even less so their practices. To the contrary, the "culture industry," an expression invented by Theodor W. Adorno, functions like a system that produces its own legitimacy. Artists and consumers live within it in, by and through this functioning: total and absurd abstraction, leading to phantom creation and consumption. Everything takes place as if each one expected from the other something that does not exist but which certainly should not be missed. Art has been so totally assimilated into the consumer spirit that it is no longer consumable. The artist has become a social robot. The right to culture, to creation, to intelligence and to genius has developed to such a point, as abstract representation of widespread injustice, that all responsibility or concrete initiative is abolished. The medium has replaced the function. Culture, that which is being sought after all, has shifted from one instance to another, following the meanderings of the bureaucratic hierarchy that has become its very objective: form and substance. This very hierarchy distributes the roles and functions, holding onto the monopoly of the little algebraic sign that can turn anything into a cultural product. Is not the organizer of an exhibition both officiant and creator—in a word, the "exhibitor"—infinitely more so than the person being exhibited,

who speaks only for himself? The person truly in charge is the functionary who places all his learning at stake. And so, within the framework of his professional responsibilities, he is actually forbidden to think to the very extent that thinking implies a subjective responsibility that his function objectively forbids.

From this collective cowardice issues “à la carte” culture, unordered and uncommissioned, that transforms our patrimony into mass-produced objects, reducing it to banalities and formulas. The artist participates fully in this reversal of responsibilities. He plays on both sides—which cancel one another—of this programmed stupidity. As Andy Warhol unequivocally expressed it, nothingness is perfect because it has nothing to lose and bothers no one.

We invented creativity, the state of potential and virtual creation, because we no longer create. The impossibility to communicate has become such that the artist no longer responds, to a society that asks of him absolutely nothing else, other than with the blankness of a mirror that has lost its silvering. Nevertheless, the artist has never aspired so visibly to identification and to qualification: the phantoms of identification and quality. In the same way, the pomp of official art only disguises mere theatrical tricks. How many times have we been able to note this effect of the defective—or even distorted—mirror that results in art only showing society its lacunae, an empty form that should contain a face. This is so true that to replace the sterile pomp of official art no one proposes anything more than the same spirit of officiality, minus the pomp.

Is art forever condemned to this museum of the dead where there is nothing more to see but the visitors? Is this not the most sinister homage that could be rendered to the impotence and the solitude of contemporary man, a grotesque statue, made of the badly reglued debris of his shattered individuality, of his pulverized self? The enormous mechanism of culture and society has so skillfully substituted the right to be free for liberty, the right to culture and the freedom to think for thought itself and for culture that judgment now remains the only thing forbidden in this paradise where it is prohibited to prohibit and where there is “power to the imagination.” Of art there remains but a data card, an interpretation so stylized that it looks like an empty cage. This void has

found its form, its volume and even, we might say, its substance: the super museum, the supermarket of culture, and those who fill it up. Everyone therein is both tree and forest. Everyone finds there, to the rhythm of moving escalators, the unending descent to regression. And everyone disintegrates in this environment instead of playing his role. The duped masses are so unaware of being such that each day they construct the living walls of this monument erected to dead culture. Flattered by their innate taste for imitation proper to gregarious instincts, the masses can only conform to this new form of planned economy. Trapped in the labyrinth, swallowed up by the mouth of darkness, they are digested and transferred to a new and collective identity, a living allegory of culture. Each one, having been addressed, believes himself addressed by something. In fact the individual is here modeled on imitative regression by the systematic manipulation of buried impulses, a manipulation that anticipates the imitation of the spectators themselves. From there it is but a simple step to the approval that is being sought and encouraged at the point of departure. For the cultural machine, culture itself is only an element in its own staging, the ideology of its own absence.

The museum has thus become a very ambiguous focus, the crossroads both at the beginning and the end of commercial circuits of which it forms a perfectly vicious circle. Its own role is to create around the work destined for these labyrinths a historical perspective that is as false as any dialectical publicity. The museum of contemporary art is an overwrought cliché, a vacant space where wasted spiritual values are consecrated. Art is no longer a synthesis of society but its residue, a sub-stratum of useless behavior and ideas, of lost forms. Beaubourg did not open its doors when the janitorial staff was on strike! Would it not have completely responded to its aesthetic principle by allowing the public to view, like the flower of its discoveries, the foreshadowed ruins of the modern world: garbage? Are Manzoni's *Merda d'artista*, Journiac's sausages and Spoerni's culinary reliefs not drying up indefinitely in their undecayable nothingness?

The immense majority of the great shrines dedicated to contemporary art in every large city exhibit the same synthesis of the conformity of the day, all perfectly interchangeable from one end to the other of the cultural universe. Recognition of this only

certifies indifference. Museums receive the merchants and give them a label, a seal, the image of an image, the reflection of a reflection, the copy of a copy infinitely reproduced. Art has become, literally, a meaningless luxury: deprived of meaning.

We are now directly arriving in an era of intense evaluation and major recapitulation. We are paying—and quite dearly—the cost of the awareness that art has acquired of itself. We have assembled around us the proofs of human grandeur. We are attempting to create a hierarchy within the framework of our culture for the most diverse and distant centers of art. Doing this we have deliberately sacrificed the powerful subconscious activity that pushes a creator toward unity for the eclecticism and dissipation that lead ineluctably to repetition, stereotyping and a lowering of values. Now art is inseparable from the enormous and indigestible mass of science and literature whose contents it is presumed to signify. We are overwhelmed with exhibitions and encyclopedic discourses in which all levels of consciousness are scrambled, which is infinitely more serious than scrambling chronology. Everything is constructed on a system of contradiction. We are told that the plastic force of a creator is measured by his ability to reject history. But the product obtained, no matter how insignificant, cannot be apprehended without the help of history, the significance of the one being inversely proportional to the insignificance of the other. Nothing is more annoying, more false and more useless than this desire to create an aesthetic of aesthetics without a value judgment, with no personal implication, one being impossible without the other. This spirit of accumulation that dissipates is exactly the opposite of an awareness that assembles, conjugates and constructs. Traditional dogmatism has been replaced by nostalgia for the grand style, which, for lack of opening up in depth on a spiritual field, attempts to cover the vastest temporal field, with instant focusing. Such aesthetics works with a zoom lens, a flash and a wide angle, meaning it is constantly cheating, like those aerial photographs that make Beaubourg look as if it is in front of Montmartre. It erases the perspectives of earlier distant views. It constantly obliges us, through a subtle play of references and transparency, not to re-examine the old through the vacuousness of the new, but the contrary. It is a derision and a falsification of the mission of art, which is to perpetuate man's unity throughout

the upheavals of history. In this way we in turn are experiencing the desperate, frightening idea of participating already in a dead culture, of surviving beyond our own creative energy—the collective energy that determines sequences of great historical maturity—just as the Egyptians, Mexicans, Africans, Indians or Chinese of today are survivors of the sovereign civilizations that gave rise to Angkor, Karnak, Yaxchilan, Teotihuacan, Persepolis or the Ming tombs. And if we, people and artists of the West, pull up around ourselves, and with such haste, these testimonies of human grandeur, is it not because we are aware, more or less clearly, of living in one of these periods of posthumous culture in which art seems to regress to childhood as a result of endless speculation about idols of fallacious origin? In the West popular art died with the people even while this modern art was being born, the preliminary symptoms of which cannot be described without simultaneously indicating the signs of its decline. If we refer without respite to the most prestigious periods of the past, it is because we have reached a point where the oldest dreams in the world are being diluted in the most superficial layers of collective unconsciousness.

#### OTHER CIVILIZATIONS: AFRICA, OCEANIA

It is as master disillusionists that we cite one after another these resurgences of a past we would like to see placed at the service of our desire to be its heirs. Works of art of all ages are ever more confused with their media image. No longer having a real price in themselves (does the fact that one or another Van Gogh or Rembrandt is sold for some astronomic sum not indicate that money has become even more abstract than the spirit?), now they are enclosed by this very mediatization and abstraction, reduced to a very general image, a sort of protection against living experience. Modern man seeks to abolish himself in this image beyond living realities. He seeks to identify himself with this definitively validated value of his image. He removes himself from his present, transferring his life into an abstraction where it crystallizes. He alienates himself from himself instead of finding fertility therein. In his desire to objectify himself with regard to the past, he desubjectifies himself in the present.

Out of this past we call insufficiencies to the aid of our own sufficiency. Who, in our times, does not think he knows everything of the art and civilizations of Black Africa? And yet, neither multiple confrontations with the various forms of this art nor the acceleration of political developments have succeeded in eliminating the cliché of a primitive civilization and primitive art, as if the technical notion of progress, such as we have in the West, was the only valid one, as if the conquest of form had not been accomplished thanks to these artists, for whom the idea of art did not exist. This obstinate ignorance, this stubborn confusion of infantile minds in all its force and all its fullness, with childishness or immaturity, for a long time preserved African art, guaranteeing the special place it occupied in the mysterious scale of spiritual values.

African art, like the art of Oceania, is linked so intimately to the very soul of the race, to social forms, to the resources of the land, that it cannot be considered to be the expression of some passive aesthetics. These two forms of art are these worlds themselves—the dark continent and aboriginal civilization—which, with their animism, have created an image of man endowed with a universal value, an image of man that is no doubt but one of the phases, one of the successive blossomings of an immemorial art. Elie Faure has said that Black African art preceded and followed Egyptian art, which was only the most successful and the most stable stage of the former. Moreover, we cannot deny the role played by the discovery of—or at least the recognition given to—African art in the evolution of modern sensitivity. Its two-fold social and religious function, the fact that its mystic expression and formal stylization are constantly exchanging their resources, are the guarantees of this powerful reconciliation between the orders of art and of crafts, a sign of the grand eras of creation. Statuary, which remains the greatest expression of the black world, was enriched by the arts of the body: hairstyles, tattoos, scarification and so on. In addition to being an act of conjuration, it also springs from a creative desire. Incantation seeks and finds its form, which itself becomes the symbol and reality of what it connotes. From that point the drama that presides over every creation is played out.

The same is true for Oceanic sculpture. Whether it be the masks and fetishes of New Ireland—so near to the stylization of North



American Indians—the tree ferns of New Caledonia, or the monumental statues of New Zealand, it developed between two almost opposite poles: the rhythmic obsession and dynamic violence of African Blacks and the tragic power and immobile enigma of the colossal Easter Island figures. The Kantian theory of play, which justifies the decomposition of architectural unity through individual emancipation of energies, does not suffice to explain the origins or the nature of these great cycles of collective creation that proceed directly from religious thought. All these arts, persistently designated as primitive, are the expression of an elementary metaphysics. Oceanic divinities are linked to their original forest like Romanesque capitals to the order and spirit of their forests of stone: cathedrals. The statue emerges from the tree trunk, at once a natural, abstract and fantastic form. It remains a tree in its essential function of being a column. Everything is full. The trunk is no more a shell than it is an underlying frame. It weighs down with all its weight and all its density. It is above all a vertical shaft that directs and contains the emerging image. The metamorphosis in fact occurs when the human face imposes its fascinating presence on the ornamental ensemble, no less rich in significance than Romanesque monsters or complex Asiatic mythology.

This art remains above all sacred art responding to a system of ethical beliefs with a set of signs and forms inspired by the needs of the soul and the resources of the soil. Born of the forest, supported by the material from which it arises, it is located at the heart of a fabulous universe inhabited by the presence of the dead and the spirits of natural forces. Its twofold social and religious function, the fact that its mystic expression and painted or sculpted decoration constantly exchange their resources, give it this cohesive power, this supremely balanced force between the differing orders of creation and of crafts, a sign of the great eras. It suffices to see the close relationships between arts of the body, costumes, the useful (that we designate with the vile term of functional art) and the greatest expression of the Black world: statuary.

Apart from a few isolated pockets of logical and homogeneous development, it is not easy to create order out of the chaos of African chronology and ethnology. Nevertheless, an ensemble as

vast and as perfect as that represented by the De Menil collection allows us to see to what point Black African art, seemingly simple and essentially instinctive, is in reality complex and diverse and to what extent ethnography is needed in order to understand the origins, development and multiple transitions. The mysterious creatures, half-man half-bird, discovered in Zimba, attain a density of form and stylization that have left many contemporaries in awe even while completely outdistancing them.

## INDIA

Indian art—from the first Sanchi stupas to the miniatures of the 16th to the 18th century—may seem to us today a particular abbreviation, and an especially striking one, of the history and development of the arts since their common origin in all the great sequences of civilization: the synthesis and combination of those initial forms of a primitive expression that in fact already contains them all. We also see the original mimodrama composed of ever more grandiose plastic visions, while architectural decoration expands to the very rhythm of great mystic inspiration.

Indian sculpture, that polymorphous monster born of the mystic intuition of universal transformism, is inseparable from its own particular realm and space: the temple. Each statue, each gesture or form, concave or in relief, corresponds to an overall rhythm, existing in relation to an architectonic whole, and is meant to provoke or prolong organic exchanges. The significance of certain mythological scenes—and particularly of erotic scenes—appears, when they are isolated, more immediate and intense, but deprived of a vaster resonance and of their true grandeur: the quality of frenzied celebration and jubilation. Other scenes, moreover, (for Indian art organizes an enormous and living narration around the mysterious presence of Buddha) gain in religiousness and gravity what they lose in cosmic power; some seem to us like Nativities, Annunciations, fiery Pentecosts. We see flourish before their times the most beautiful Christian and biblical legends, even though they are transposed within an inordinate harmony. We are constantly reminded of the myth of Babel, but of a Babel without pride and without purpose, that seeks no other formal balance than the

harmony of the plastic development within an architectural framework. Two centuries before Christ, the bas-reliefs of Bahrhout and Sanchi possess mystic realism, depicting grimacing monsters and heraldic demons, using the irrational methods of anamorphosis of the Christian High Middle Ages. An identical movement of collective and animist elaboration of the images and the mysteries of life determines in both cases the same explosive and tumultuous nature of the forms, the same concentric scrolls of expressive surfaces, the same rhythm of feverish and organized improvisation. Nevertheless, despite evident analogies, the Indian soul, with its sensual divinization of the cosmos, is profoundly different. It resides completely in the disorderly unity of the giant temple, the carnal development of every mystic intoxication, sculpted in matter that unfurls from the explosion of sensual genius. The power of erotic solicitation—which even the paintings of Rubens, with their too gestural ardor, cannot equal—is borne from form to form, from the top to the bottom of the monument, with a nearly musical rhythm, as it prolongs its relationships, harmonies and passages in expanse as well as in duration.

The medieval Western world was too religious and too anxious, too preoccupied with death and hell, for the flesh not to be reviled and punished. There is no art more mystical and less religious in this respect than Indian art. The magnificent and inexhaustible sensual orgy that excites it and animates it—from the first Sanchi stupas (two centuries B.C.) up to the enormous temples of the Gupta and post-Gupta dynasties (from the 5th to 9th century A.D.)—neither disdains nor fears death, but submerges it. In his meditation on death, the Indian discovers the spiritual voluptuousness of a sinister and grandiose myth, represented on earth by the inhuman caste system. Life and death provoke the same carnally—sometimes monstrously—developed forms, the same dynamic images often combined in the same symbol: the dance of Civa who creates and destroys worlds, or the terrible tantric goddesses who dispense death and pleasure. Arising out of the deepest and most obscure depths of the Indian soul (but also those most enriched by the bloody mysticism of the brahmas), these divinities are as near to funereal Aztec goddesses as they are far from Romanesque representations of hell and the Last Judgment. One of the miracles proper to Indian art is to have realized the

permanent association of lyric and mystical intoxication and anguish, symbols and images of fertility and death, through an identification of substance and forms. A mass of contradictory and hostile (but equal) gods rises up against a background of primitive bestiality in continuous gestation. In this way form pours out, is multiplied and repeated tirelessly and unfailingly, seemingly born from the infinity of itself. New figures are grafted onto identical themes. Every symbol can relive the same cycle of spiritual mutations and formal representations indefinitely. It is difficult to speak of a plastic equilibrium with regard to these disconcerting baroque and overloaded symphonies that are the great sanctuaries of medieval India. Unlike an Egyptian temple—hermetic block, symbol in its verticality of solitary and upright man—nothing here is geometric, everything is crowded rhythm. Details are conceived but as a function of the architectural whole, which itself does not exhibit any capital form. This universal movement finds its fullness, its paradoxical unity in its very unpredictability, in its monumental and moving magic. However, a style is achieved through the intermediary of popular imagery, primitive and almost solely xylographic up until the Maourya period (four centuries B.C.), which will maintain and prolong the development of this admirable and frenzied decorative logic, based on movement. This style expanded, without degenerating, to the rhythm of the collective symphony, from the first Maourya and Sanchi bas-reliefs up to the Gupta dynasties, at the threshold of the medieval period. It expressed less and less man at the height of himself and more and more man submerged by social pantheism. It opened and resolved the vastest lyrical movement that the metaphysical sentiment of the universe has ever created. The Greco-Buddhist style of Gandhara developed parallel to—and on the margins of—this line. Plastically it fits in the extremity of Hellenistic classicism. It announces the migration of Buddhism towards Khmer art and the immense solitude of Chinese statuary. It also seems to foreshadow the Dravidian style, the last incarnation of Indian genius (10th century A.D.), in which statues were released from their original strait jacket, moving away from bas-relief and the temple. Sculpture broke definitively with the pictorial spirit that had ruled it until then. Blue or green schist, marble-like limestone, red and pink clays, black or leaden basalt gave way to

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bronze. Sensuality became precious, approaching mawkishness; form lost in power what it gained in mellowness. Individualized, isolated from the powerful decorative systems that sustained the sculpted crowds of the temple, the Dravidian bronze attempted unseen gestures and was lost in its attitudes. An epicurean taste for pleasure replaced the sacred Dionysian frenzy.

It was then that, laden with all the sumptuous sensuality that orchestrated the struggles and the loves of the gods, miniatures were to convey to Islam of the Thousand and One Nights what the Islam of the Hegira had brought to Gandhara—decoration exceptionally rich in images from which the Muslim world would draw the resources for its implacable abstraction and stylization. With purples and deep blues, velvety browns and shiny gold; with the immensity of the sea and the sky, the quivering of pink flesh and drapery, glossy banks of flowers, painters and miniaturists recreated the monumental magic that had died in the sanctuaries. This was the end of the high noon of the gods. Major constructions gave way to single works.

### CROSSING THE LINE

Everything coming from Pre-Columbian Mexico—Mayan or Aztec—is stamped with an obsession for architecture and style, for the collective unity that conceived these generations of inhuman and funereal divinities. As for France in the 14th century, from its cathedrals came forth a global challenge in stone to the symbolic expression of the infinite. The vertical thrust, reminiscent of the delusion of Babel, could even result, as in the case of Beauvais, in collapse. However, with its horizontal mass and the calm of its tombs (which act as foundation), it describes a perfectly harmonious angle. Every active civilization, through its evocation of death, attempts to transcend and to solemnize an image of itself that appears, beyond the age-old confrontation and questioning, doubly transfigured. The royal tombs at first had this privilege of perpetuated life, as if they were embalmed. In the crypt of St. Denis alone, where light plays rhythmically across the volumes, it is possible to follow the shift from plane to form, and then from exemplary form to the baroque. The late “frozen” works of the

14th and 15th century do not have this “reserve,” this preserved dignity. They open an aesthetic formula, which Olivier Brice and even Cristo (whose wrappings are but tombs in disguise) continue to parody, manufacturing whole series of empty tombs.

The most monstrous aspects of Aztec or Mayan art, so extremely stylized, always retain the grandiose consistency of an incantation that seeks its form and finds it. This form then becomes the symbol and reality of what it evokes. The same is true of Romanesque figures of Christ and the Virgin. In the 14th century, out of the faces of the Virgin and of saints, who are more and more real men and women, there arise the first portraits of the God with a human face that will practically incarnate European art until the invention of landscape painting. But we are not in the presence of isolated works, each claiming its own destiny. The collective genius is restated in each consciousness capable of animating it. Man penetrated into sacred history and made it his own history. What difference does it make if a portrait is signed with the name of its donor? Was the artist anonymous simply because he is anonymous for us six centuries later? Was he anonymous to his neighbors for whom he incarnated day by day the spiritual reality of what they experienced together? Art then was still unaware of closed studios, the ivory towers that slowly smother it. It obeyed the major impulses of the whole, participating in the global eurhythm that directs social transformations and urban revolutions and that organized the first great international fairs, the trading circuits along the Rhone and the Rhine, and even—despite a foreign war—across the English Channel.

#### PAST PRESENT OR GROUND ZERO

African sculpture never strays far from the haunted form, so highly magic, which is that of the great anthropomorphic birds of Senufo. Such form is both a conjuration and an act of creative desire. Incantation seeks and finds its form that itself becomes symbol and reality for what it evokes.

Why should we, to return to the context of the De Menil collection\*, first pass under the yoke in modern exhibition

\* Substance of the new museum in Houston.

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galleries, and suffer the crossing of an almost perfect symbol of the cultural desert? The “Espace Zéro”\*\* matches up to its name all the more in that it multiplies only because of its own infinite repetition, that it totally crushes from the outset all personality and every principle of reality, assuring man and art of their nothingness in the name of supreme rationalization, which has nothing other to rationalize than the stupidity of the human mind, eager to make itself the butt of derision with all the solemnity that such a weighty pleonasm merits.

When, in better times, the aesthetic intelligentsia still engaged in historical reflection, would it have undertaken such a (one-way) journey to the land of myth? It is clear that there is no return, that the freedom to dialogue with the archetype died with all this production of flashy gadgetry, soon reduced to the masses of video-clips that are there only to create a derisory screen in the now superfluous space and time of creativity; and the gadgetry no longer functions other than by using the very principle that destroys its own image.

### THE VOICE OF UNITY, THE MUTISM OF DERISION

When efforts are made to evoke the diverse civilizations of India, China and Pre-Columbian America, or the Romanesque and Gothic Christian periods (and exhibitions of this type have appeared regularly over the past several years), the space utilized always seems ridiculous in comparison to what it offers and contains. In fact a few key objects are sufficient to bring together the living forces of a dead civilization, reminding us that the very substance of art is life itself. We then can measure how much the weight of a shared heritage—faith, humanism—dominates our little, our very little personal world. The invention of the museum of contemporary art seems to have made official the passage from a shared heritage to a shared cliché: a dead world, the final statement of a disincarnation. Does not human unity, which resides in our harmony with the universe, lose itself more and more

\*\* Exhibition in 1985 in the Grand Palais in Paris, composed of a large part of the collection.

in this expanding hiatus between our past and our present, to the point that the voices of silence are forced to become mute? New mutations in art tend toward nothing more than mutism, particularly in painting, the most individual of all, which has divorced itself from everything that forms its very essence. Art seems emptied of substance because the very substance of man is deficient. We conjugate our memory in the past tense because we have lost the dimensions of the individual, of his need for renewal, his faculty of prescience. Humanism now consumes but memories because man himself is consumed and used up. He takes refuge in a past that then seems to be a closed system in which signs no longer contain fantasy or any spark of reality, this reality we flee like ourselves in a fake symbolic ritual and that we systematically reduce to being a sign-object. It is with infinite nostalgia that we look back at the spirit of adventure—at the travelers and their travels—that revealed to Renaissance man the faces of himself that he already knew. What Marco Polo in reverse now urges us on to rediscover constantly what we have lost? It is as if, in front of such prodigious accents of liberty and fruitfulness, no one dared measure the modern achievement, which places the Indian, the Egyptian or the Mexican of today, in comparison with their past, irrevocably on the other side of an abolished Renaissance.

#### A REVERSED PASCALIAN CHALLENGE

In these times when “to paint is a challenge,” it is not possible to speak of art and artists without encountering head-on the absurd image that both art and artists has taken on—and accepted—within a social mechanism that intends to reduce everything to the same level, including the stars it produces for this purpose. Understood in this manner, “creativity” has no more or less seriousness in art than in high fashion or in show business. No doubt 1987 man can consider as the most dishonored part of himself these artists so determined to seduce a society that does not accept them other than to the extent that it scorns them. And this scorn has become a sort of currency: you scorn me, you pay me.



Hegel described the implacable mechanism that led the West to this double *impasse*! An unbearable existence leads to disincarnated art. When an entire society works against itself in this way, the field of action is rapidly and drastically reduced. The sound level rises in turn. While the work is silent, the artist harangues. Everywhere we find this style at once practical and technical, saturated with pseudo-psychoanalytical references and neologisms. The language is as puffed-up as that of a lawyer pleading a bad case. When thinking is devalued, language is devalued, art is devalued, to the point that every word becomes intolerable and that to be heard it is necessary above all not to say anything.

#### THE DEATH OF ART

The year 1000 foretold the end of the world. As we draw near to the year 2000, it is now only a question of the death of art, particularly painting. This magnificent instrument of individualism no longer seems to correspond to the norms of our times since the two principal characteristics of a work of art—its uniqueness and its duration—have been replaced by two absolutely opposite imperatives: instantaneousness, that can be reproduced infinitely. The works are in the image of man. They must leave not a shadow nor a trace. They must reject, in themselves and around themselves, conscious memory and hereditary memory: history and tradition. In this way the individual no longer exists except as the instantaneous sum of experiences with no tomorrow. Systematically in each work the immanent and the transcendent is evoked. In the hiatus is the painting of tomorrow. There is no longer a today. The present and presence have been abolished, just like the individual. “Our ideals last ten years,” Valéry protested in 1938, adding, “The arts do not accommodate themselves to haste.” Our own ideals last ten weeks, ten days, sometimes barely ten hours, for we throw ourselves furiously into pursuit of the perishable: originality and novelty at any cost. And each originality, each novelty rebounds with ten more. We are controlled by the laws of quantity ever-increasing to the rhythm of technical developments and the ways of conditioning man by his environment.

From which comes the systematization, the uniformization, the automatization of art—like language—mechanical and desensitized, a conceptual power reduced to its most miserable expedients.

Against the background of this period of false pomp, the terrifying confession of Couturier stands out, in the deeply secret pages of his diary. “Often I am worried about the true value of modern painters. I am afraid their perfection has only been obtained at the cost of terrible limitations. We can see this already in Cézanne, who perhaps was the most painterly of all painters in history and who, nevertheless, had to sacrifice so many things. Braque often seems narrow to me and Picasso superficial, acrobatic. Rouault terribly summary, Matisse lightweight. And this despite the successes that make of them the greatest of our painters. Can one express one’s fears? Year by year we see the human scope of art dangerously diminished. The price of a certain perfection in the plastic order, yes, but perhaps too high a price. Moreover, the keepers of this ‘human scope’ are losing year by year their appearance of rigor and consistency.”

#### FALSE PROBLEMS

Yes, the price is decidedly too high. We have managed to reach this paradox. We dispose of historical material of unprecedented wealth. We have assembled around us all human grandeur. But man—the creative individual—is rejected. And we should not allow ourselves to be tempted to resituate the problem in the absurd antithesis of the figurative and the abstract. As if there existed painting worthy of the name that is not abstract! For it is impossible to abstract from nothing; and to go beyond the image, it is first necessary to penetrate it. The problem is infinitely more serious than this. In place of the dehumanization of the work of art that was tending to become an object, artists first attempted to achieve the humanization of the object. In this manner Pop Art, which represents the source of all that followed, including the new figuration, attempted to achieve an immediate grasp of the world through an image. Spirit is added on to this like the balloons of a comic strip. To the contrary the desire to rationalize raw material,

taken from the most current reality, is brought down to the level of raw material without life, instead of making it sublime.

#### THE WORK OF ART: RESISTANCE OR COMPLACENCY?

A creator is only so to the extent that he transcends himself and the consciousness he incarnates in society. This operation is so essential that only the results of the creative force—individual and collective—can call it into question. It is no accident that in our times, instead of painting or writing, endless commentaries pour forth on the “the act of painting” or “the act of writing,” rejecting the fundamental naiveté that controls the creative impulse. We know what immense possibilities of adaptation and acceptance have been granted to artists, making them what Bernanos, referring to himself, called a “phenomenon of hope.” But these powers are addressed to man, to his ability to live and survive, and not to the work that is always, even for its very author, an opposition. The work exists before the creator to the point that it can be realized only despite him, despite—and with—his conscious labor. It is above all within this opposition and the tension it creates that the work finds its strength and its *raison d’être*.

Individual minds and consciousnesses conceal the most precious resources of humanity; widespread alienation reduces them to silence. Genius that comes to light—by whatever combination of chance and destiny—brings with it the unknown through which the calculations of the “specialists” are always distorted. Man resigns himself easily to the mediocre because he is the prey of a form of negation that calls for balancing an opposite resisting force. And man today sees in himself that this force is particularly undermined by the extreme solitude in which he is retained by a society practically reduced solely to a play of economic forces. Yet he no longer even realizes his solitude and his little freedom because he is constantly distracted from it. This is why it is important never to become attached, never to linger, never to require quiet calm or reflection. To the contrary stimulation and excitement, by every means possible, are required for a listless and saturated public, arousing it with continuous renewal into a state of perpetual distraction. After that it is impossible to stop oneself in this kind of unauthentic existence. Conceptual art has proven

this well: one is everywhere and nowhere. Such artificial values can repose only on ever more rapid consumption. Paradoxically overeating is the response to anorexia. All this consumption of synthetic cultural products is only addressed to a fundamental lack of appetite.

#### AUTHORIZED MARGINALITY, SUBSIDIZED MARGINALITY

Woe to the person to whom and through whom awareness arrives! The inadequate means available to him inhibit his access to accepted forms of communication. The very awareness of his impotence is seed for revolt. The individual, excluded from the social body, appears to be a wound, a scar, the suspicious mark of a mutilation. Van Gogh and his amputated ear represents all that our society detests and condemns: the accursed artist, "society's suicide victim."

In his vain attempts to affirm himself against social subjection, all the more oppressing since it disguises itself in solicitude, the individual uses his strongest and most marked features. He hardens them even more. Society has every opportunity to condemn the monster. By then the unfortunate person is caught in an infernal circle. He comes up against himself when he seeks to escape from "the norm," and he finds this same "norm" when he tries to flee into his deepest inner self. Perhaps in our times Van Gogh would have needed an even more superhuman power in order not to "get well."

After this why should we be surprised that art tends to take refuge in a sort of authorized delinquency and marginality. There too we find the sad parody of the truest of aspirations. This was the fiasco of the explosion of May 1968, which produced nothing new by giving "power to the imagination," because this imagination immediately gave way to complacency, totally frustrating those who believed in it without discerning the ambiguities lying therein. The liberation of art, like that of sex, canonized a return to the indeterminate, to the protozoan stage. We see art galleries collapsing under the weight of unassimilated and inassimilable products, Minitel screens filled with double-meaning messages and phantom relationships. But true

solitude, the kind that contains in each being the most incommunicable part of himself—at least what cannot be communicated other than through his works and through the most objective part of what they convey—this solitude we have lost even more than freedom. And perhaps we no longer deserve either one.

It is by rectifying the general alignment into sub-products and conformity that general harmony can begin. He who does not adapt will be reduced to the spiritual impotence of someone standing on the margins. Culture bestows its privileges so democratically that only those are excluded who, through pride or conduct doomed to failure, persist in the delinquency of a forbidden curse. This curse of curses is so strong that now the masses are under the influence of the rhythm of success more strongly than those who are its object and who, for this very reason, are less taken in by it. The machine must run, and it never works better than when sitting still and empty.

Legitimated by success alone, and the lowest kind, the system of industrial culture obviously cannot take into account the failure inherent in every creative work. The creator is made by his works. And if each one were not a failure, would he continue? Each one is mutilated relative to an overall aspiration: it has been able to take hold of but an infinitesimal share of the resources and possibilities offered. The work in itself is limitation. And the creator runs from work to work—from failure to failure—to expand his limits. Is this not the meaning of Nietzsche's prayer: "Protect me from small victories!"? Moreover, the beautiful artist crowned by his works like a father by his children is a drawing-room myth. The temptation is great with the first success to retain its formula and to become enclosed in a paralyzing form of repetition, which is a betrayal of creative power. How many examples could we cite of such exploits that enjoyed an initial, and often premature, success?

What is proscribed in this image of the reviled artist, what our society can only condemn—under pain of being condemned itself—is the size of the failure and the perpetual effort to overcome it. This underlines the fact that the notion of progress does not exist in art. Progress only exists in going beyond exceptional experiences, but ones that can be transmitted by and that are legible to others.

The super-museum, the cultural super-market, will never be any more than the high commissioner of a contemporary form of thought that is bogged down in immobilizing history around several fixed points, several knots that reach to the very substance of time. Likewise each of these mass events rests ultimately on their common denominator itself: the masses, both as subject and object. This is a triply fraudulent identification. First that of an awareness of art with its historic totality; next the identification of the weight of this totality with the force of an aesthetic judgment, as if it were necessary at all costs to devalue on one side in order to re-evaluate on the other, to establish the validity of the future through reference to the past, and *vice versa*. There remains the present with neither history nor memory, the masses of people who have never before received so much information with so little message. This is the final point of this strange negative syllogism, the most monstrous identification of all: that of the general and the particular, of the masses and art. Art is the masses—this shadow from the empty temple that penetrates along close-ranked columns, in the endless rows in which we are proud to have mobilized them. Is the fox in the fable now only there to tell us that we will never see them come back out again? No doubt the columns continue on unendingly, always in the same direction, straight toward the center, empty, and now undiscoverable, from which formerly all great movements of the mind took their origin—the temple that no one looks after or deserves any longer.

#### ICARUS ESTRANGED

In this sense the history of art, and of man, seems fully terminated, no longer made up of images (so much does the popularization of the material determine an impoverishment of the contents and an inflation of the product) but of bursts of bad literature. The most recognized artists today are no longer capable of any more than reproducing themselves because they lack a historical and moral dimension, because the realm of their imagination is as limited as their memory.

Their imagination and memory are fully contained in holograms, miracles of precision and phantom presences, developing a

*Icarus Estranged*

spectrum of rays in space, a localizing of the imponderable, a fantastic rivalry that is never more than a complex of variable relationships, a metaphysical phenomenon that results from an accumulation of diverse points of view.

Is art today no more than an effect of ones's point of view, like the hang-gliders decorated by august hands whose distance alone keeps us from seeing the strings holding them back from flying off into the sky of the F.I.A.C. (*Foire Internationale de l'Art Contemporain*, in Paris) where they are suspended, mass-produced Icaruses whose modern machinery deprives them even of their fall: Icarus estranged.

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