

■■■■■■■■■ New Protagonists and Alliances

in 21st Century Art

This brief essay does not deal with all contemporary currents in art; instead, it focuses on those artistic practices that are bringing about the ongoing development of the arts under the new social and economic conditions of a global culture and a ubiquitous Information Society, and extending, as it were, art's arena of activity from the purview of the image to global information space. Artists are aware of the progressive mediatization of society. They do not turn a blind eye to the shift of the visual media from the panel painting to the monitor screen any more than they do to the art function's shift from ready-made object to the performance of a service. They are at work at the threshold of a material revolution and an expansion of their competence.

There have repeatedly been moments in the history of art when artists have been interested not only in the composition of an image but also its technical construction, in a process of change affecting the material that bears the image. The development and investigation of the material technology of the image—from the invention of oil painting five centuries ago to photography in the last 150 years—were significant technical and aesthetic milestones. The expansion and deconstruction of the technical dispositive of the image was not only artistically revolutionary; it was also the upshot of a socially revolutionary impetus.

The lesson to be learned from all these artistically revolutionary moments is that material experiments, experiments with words and pictures, trial procedures utilizing new technical media as bearers of artistic content, also expand the operational realm of art itself. Thus, the deconstruction of the image is inevitably followed by the abandonment of the image. Experimentally taking leave of the image leads to taking leave of art—at least of the historical definition of art. It is generally acknowledged that the expanded conception of art that arises from the material-technical deconstruction and reformation of artistic practices has, to a considerable extent, opened up new fields of operation to art. This shock movement of Modernism that proceeded from a three-step process—consensus as to what art is; abrogating and going beyond this agreement; concluding a new consensus—has only seemingly been halted by the Postmodern declaration of the end of history. Especially of late, we witness a revival of acts transgressing the social contract's boundaries with respect to what art may permissibly be and do.

Nevertheless, the practices of these expansions differ. If painting from Picasso to Bacon has ceased delivering portraits that correspond to the classical ideal of beauty and rather more resemble the *corps morcelé*, the chopped-up body of which psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan speaks—thus, if the body in modern art is a fragmented, tormented, crushed and divided one—then the understandable longing for beautiful bodies can no longer be satisfied by art but instead by advertising alone. The beautiful body, the ideal body has been ceded by art to advertising. Beauty is no longer a field of artistic work. In the age of the molecular reproduction and medial construction of the body, the crisis of representation brought on by abstract art at around 1900 has led to the crisis of the body that reflects the human being's new image at around 2000. All in all, representation has become a ruin. The practices of processing, processual art both in everyday life and in data flows, interventions and installations supplement classical object art. The duplication of objects—since Duchamp, a field of work in modern art—will lead to a duplication of activities in the future, whereby the strategies of acquisition will make the historical differen-

tiation between production and presentation, original and copy, and author and collective more difficult.

It is advisable to pay attention to the origins of the expansion of the concept of art—namely, the coincidence of the material-technical and the thematic revolutions. Today, this coincidence is bringing about the emergence of new alliances. Using the example of the body, one can juxtapose the complicity of art and fashion to the controversy of art and biotechnology. The progressively expanded conception of art is not seeking to reclaim abandoned fields of work but to explore new ones. The results of this are new critical confrontations with science, politics and the economics. Art will be one of the last social residues that still call into question the primacy of the economics that asserts its dominion over all aspects of life.

During the course of this expansion into new alliances, fundamental constants of the consensus as to what art is are being called into question—namely, the concepts of the author, the work and the viewer. The objective is not the Postmodern death of the author, but rather the transformation of the concept of the author from individual into multiple authorships, into collectives, communes and transdisciplinary ways of working. The viewer himself no longer remains the passive observer standing before an image that is not materially changed by the act of observation; rather, in the case of an interactive work of art, the viewer becomes a user whose act of observation produces material changes in the artwork. This does away with the concept of the discrete work of art. The aesthetic object of Modernism is a self-contained object, and Modernism itself was art's reaction to the machine-driven Industrial Revolution. Postmodernism is the reaction of art to the post-industrial, computer-driven information revolution. In Information Society, the aesthetic object does not just become, as Umberto Eco proclaimed in 1962, an "open artwork," an open object; instead, the work completely vanishes and is replaced by instructions for activity, communicative acts and arrays of offered actions. Open fields of action in which new alliances arise between the author, the work and the viewer, in which new protagonists—i.e. modified authors and viewers—are operational, replace the classic object of art.

A transdisciplinary mapping of competences is taking place in the fields of art. The extension of art history's field of work to include Gender Studies and other comparative social sciences that can be subsumed under the heading of Culture Studies is, in a subsequent step, extended even further to encompass fields of work that had previously been reserved for areas of scholarship far removed from art—ranging from sociology to ecology. Thereby, the mere transgression of the consensus as to what art is said to be is transformed into an act of exceeding one's competence, which is vehemently rejected by those who until now have been the monopolistic proprietors of these fields of work. This is the actual meaning of the Science War as expressed in "Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science," the 1997 book by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. Conservative science is taking up arms against those intruding upon its turf and against the redistribution of competence. But that is precisely the progressive practice of the contemporary avant-garde: instead of pursuing historic avant-garde practices like synesthesia of images and sound, the correspondence of color and music, its protagonists attempt to undertake new comparisons and redistributions of competence, and to make the transition from the formal level to the level of practice. Extension of competence is the latest phase in the expansion of the concept of art. Art expands from the object to the practice and its practice expands from its field of work into new domains that were previously reserved for the social and natural sciences.

Jean François Lyotard, in his famous 1985 exhibition "Les Immatériaux," attempted to

describe this transition as one from materiality to immateriality. On the level of the signifier, this interpretation was completely legitimate. Its deficiency was perhaps to have registered the traces of this transformation in accordance with a libidinal economy instead of a monetary one. After all, the concept of immateriality actually refers to not only that historical moment of the dissolution of the work of art as a material object; it also goes beyond this to designate the economic shift from a material, product-based economy of labor to an economy of immaterial labor, as the theories of Toni Negri, Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno [see “Radical Thought in Italy” (1996), “Umherschweifende Produzenten” (1988), “Die Arbeit des Dionysos” (1996)] have shown. The historical economy of the Industrial Revolution was built upon the conditions of material labor that produced products manually or by machine, products that could be exchanged for money. In this discourse, production is the primary sphere of the economy. The new economy of the Information Revolution, on the other hand, is based to a lesser extent on the products of material labor and rather more on the immaterial labor of the distribution of products and the communication of information. These so-called secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy—the service and communication technologies—play a dominant role in the global accumulation of capital and constitute the actual driving force behind social innovation. We are in the midst of a process of transition from a product-based economy to one based on time. Network-linked society establishes the technical preconditions for such a time-based economy in which we are no longer remunerated for a product but rather for the use of the product over time. In other words, we will no longer buy music in the form of CDs as products, but rather download music from the Internet and pay royalties for listening to it (like we do with radio today).

Contemporary avant-garde artists react sensitively to these social changes by structurally changing the way they work and entering into new alliances with new protagonists. And artists as well are shifting their way of working from production to providing services. They too are operating more in the secondary and tertiary sectors of communication than in the primary sector of production. The substitution of activities in fields of action for the production of objects is attributable to this transition. And the shift in contemporary artistic practice from the observation of the world to the observation of media and communication goes back to this economic transformation.

In their observation of the media, contemporary artists proceed under the assumption that the media are not a map that depicts the terrain of reality and that the media have also not become so big and powerful—as in Baudrillard’s simulation theory—that they overlay and cover up reality, and that it has become impossible to make out any essential difference between map (simulation) and land (reality); instead, the point of departure is the assertion that the map constructs the land and thus that the media play an essential part in the construction of reality. The function of new media resembles that of a rainbow. They are diffractive and recombinatory. Their composition is part real, part fictional. They recombine subjective and objective elements. They are reciprocal images. The mapping of the media, the expansion of artistic, cultural and intercultural competences, the extension of the arena of the image to the arena of global information space (in network art) constitute the new practices of avant-garde art of the coming decades. Artists operate with their interdisciplinary and intercultural competence.

Translated from the German by Mel Greenwald