

The Piracy of Art

When Jean Baudrillard, the world-renowned French theorist, first published “The Conspiracy of Art” in 1996, he scandalized the international artistic community by declaring that contemporary art had no more reason to exist. Baudrillard was no art aficionado, but he was no stranger to art either. In 1983, after the publication in English of his ground-breaking essay, *Simulations*,¹ he was adopted by the New York art world and put on the mast of *Artforum*, the influential international art magazine. The book instantly became a must-read for any self-respecting artist—they suddenly were becoming legions—and it was quoted everywhere, even included in several artist installations. Eventually it made its way—full-frame—into the cult Hollywood SciFi film *The Matrix*. (Baudrillard is Neo). The prestigious lecture he gave on Andy Warhol at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1987 was booked months in advance. For a while artists fought around his name, jockeying for recognition. So it isn’t surprising that his sudden outburst against art would have raised such an uproar. There was a widespread sense of betrayal among art practitioners, as if he had broken an implicit contract. “The denunciation came as a slap in the face,”² a Canadian critic wrote, adding that it was “a radical delegitimization of his own position as

a cultural critic.” Baudrillard, of course, never claimed to be one. Like the Situationists, he has a healthy disrespect for “culture.”

True, he didn’t mince his words. Art was “confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity to turn them into values and ideologies,” he wrote, adding that contemporary art wasn’t just insignificant, but *null*. Null isn’t exactly a term of endearment—obsolete, worthless, without merit or effect, the dictionary says. Baudrillard seemed to have gone out of his way to provoke the art world, and he certainly got what he asked. It was all the more remarkable that another violent libel he published the following year, “A Conjuration of Imbeciles” (the French political establishment, which let Le Pen hijack the democratic system) elicited no reaction. Politicians apparently are used to this kind of treatment. So there is something special about the art world after all—it could do with a lot more abuse.

But could abuse really make a difference? Some critics or curators in the marches of Empire took the attack at face value and crossed him from their list, but people in the know simply basked in the frisson of a well-publicized “scandal.” It doesn’t matter what is said about art as long one pays attention to it. No sooner had Baudrillard’s column been published in the French leftist newspaper *Libération* in May 1996, and instantly beamed all over the place through the internet, Baudrillard was deluged with invitations for art events, lectures, catalogue essays. It was obvious that visibility and fame, not contents, were the real engine of the New Art Order. Its power and glamour managed to entice, subdue and integrate any potential threat. Criticizing art, in fact, has become the royal way to an art career *and this will be no exception*.

It was exactly the point Baudrillard was making in *The Conspiracy of Art*, and this reaction confirmed what he had already

anticipated twenty-five years earlier in *The Consumer Society*³: critique has become a mirage of critique, a counter-discourse immanent to consumption, the way Pop Art's "cool smile" was no different from commercial complicity. Two years later, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*,⁴ he went even further, asserting that contemporary art had an ambiguous status, half-way between a terrorist critique and a de facto cultural integration. Art, he concluded, was "the art of collusion." By now this collusion is affecting society at large and there is no more reason to consider art apart from the rest, as the composition of this book suggests. Obstacles and oppositions, in reality, are used by the system everywhere in order to bounce ahead. Art in the process has lost most of its singularity and unpredictability. There is no place anymore for accidents or unforeseen surprises, writes Chris Kraus in *Video Green*. "The life of the artist matters very little. What life?"⁵ Art now offers career benefits, rewarding investments, glorified consumer products, just like any other corporation. *And everything else is becoming art*. Roland Barthes used to say that in America sex was everywhere, except in sex. Now art is everywhere, *even* in art.

In *Simulations*, Baudrillard suggested that Disneyland's only function was to conceal the fact that the entire country was a huge theme park. Similarly art has become a front, a showcase, a deterrence machine meant to hide the fact that the whole society is transaestheticized. Art has definitely lost its privilege. By the same token it can be found everywhere. The end of the aesthetic principle signaled not its disappearance, but its perfusion throughout the social body. It is well-known that Surrealism eventually spread his slippery games thin through fashion, advertisement and the media, eventually turning the consumer's unconscious into kitsch. Now art is free as well to morph everywhere, into politics (the aestheti-

cization of politics isn't a sign of fascism anymore, nor is the politicization of aesthetics a sign of radicalism for that matter), into the economy, into the media. All the more reason for art to claim a dubious privilege in the face of its absolute commodification. Art is enclosing itself in a big bubble, ostensibly protected from consumer contagion. But consumption has spread inside, like a disease, and you can tell by everybody's rosy cheeks and febrile gestures. The bubble is quickly growing out of proportion. Soon it will reach its limit, achieving the perfection of its form—and burst with a pop like bubble-gum, or the 90s stock market.

A self-taught sociologist in the 60s, Baudrillard remained intellectually close to the French Situationists and shared their unconditional distrust of “culture.” Ironically, on its way to complete surrender in the late 80s and 90s, the art world made a huge effort to reclaim its virginity by enlisting the Situationists' radicalism to its cause. It was a curious intellectual exercise, and I saw it unfolding at the time with some glee: the art world reappropriating avant-gardism long *after* proclaiming the “end of the avant-garde.” The way it was done was even more interesting: showcasing the Situationists' involvement with architecture and their ideological critique the better to evacuate their unequivocal condemnation of art and art criticism. “Nothing is more exhilarating than to see an entire generation of repentant politicians and intellectuals,” Baudrillard wrote, “becoming fully paid-up members of the conspiracy of imbeciles.”⁶ Art isn't even the only one to conspire.

“Get out, art critics, partial imbeciles, critics of bit parts, you have nothing more to say,” the Situationists threw at “the art of the spectacle.” They also violently expelled from their midst any artist tempted to participate in the bourgeois comedy of creation. By this account, Guy Debord and his acolytes would have to fire *everybody*

in the present art world, whatever their professed ideology. Granted, it is difficult to be more paranoiac than Debord was. And yet he was absolutely right. There *was* a conspiracy of art, even if he had to hallucinate it. Now duplicity is transparent. Who today could boast having *any* integrity? Debord was ahead of his time and we would actually benefit from having him among us today, *but not emasculated*. Actually we would be incapable of recognizing him if he did. Was Baudrillard's exasperated outburst so different from what the Situationists themselves would have done? Art, he wrote, "is mediocrity squared. It claims to be bad—'I am bad! I am bad!'—*and it truly is bad*." Baudrillard was wrong in one count. It is worse.

The Conspiracy of Art signaled the "return of the repressed" among the art world. It was displaced, of course, but symptoms always are. And it was unmistakable. Yet no one—especially those heavily invested in Freud—recognized it for what it was: Baudrillard was simply repaying the art world in its own coin. The real scandal was not that he would have attacked art, *but that art would have found this attack scandalous*. Unlike the Situationists, Baudrillard never believed it possible to maintain a distance within the society of spectacle. But his provocation was perfect pitch and totally in keeping with the Situationists' attempt to reclaim their subjectivity through calculated drifts. Except that Baudrillard's solitary drift into provocation was neither deliberate, nor existential. It was just a purge.

Baudrillard always had a knack for bringing out the most revealing features in a volatile situation. The year 1987 happened to be a real turning point for the New York art world, throngs of young artists flooding the art market desperately seeking Cesar, a "master thinker," a guru, anything really to peg their career on.

They took *Simulations* for an aesthetic statement (it was an anthropological diagnostic) and rushed to make it a template for their still inform art. Baudrillard protested, nonplussed by their sudden adulation. “Simulation,” for him, is not a thing. It is nothing in itself. It only means that there isn’t any more original in contemporary culture, only replicas of replicas. “Simulation,” he retorted, “couldn’t be represented or serve as a model for an artwork.” If anything, it is a challenge to art. The rush turned into a rout, everybody scattering around with their tails between their legs. Ten years later, Baudrillard did it again. *The Conspiracy of Art* took on not just the commercialization of art fueled by the return to painting and the real-estate boom, but its global projection through neo-liberal deregulation and the delirious speculations of a stock-market just about to go bust. It wasn’t the naivety of art anymore that Baudrillard blasted, but the cynical exploitation of “art” for non-artistic purposes.

Returning from a brief pilgrimage to the Venice Biennale, Baudrillard exploded. Too much art was too much! Immediately upping the ante, he claimed the existence of a “conspiracy” which didn’t exactly exist in the flesh, but was all the truer for that. Besides, who can resist a bit of conspiracy theory? The pamphlet was mostly an “abreaction,” an acting-out meant to free *his* own system from all the bad energy. An earnest French artist took the cue and claimed in *Libération* that Baudrillard was “feeding paranoia toward contemporary art.” She was absolutely right too. Who could doubt that contemporary art today is besieged by a hostile audience and badly in need of reinforcement? Aren’t artists and dealers, curators, critics, collectors, sponsors, speculators, not to mention socialites, snobs, spongers, crooks, parasites of all kinds, all feeding off art crumbs, heroically sacrificing themselves to

redeem art from shoddy consumerism, just like Russian “liquidators” putting down the sarcophagus on the Chernobyl reactor at the cost of their lives? It wasn’t enough that art would have become a huge business, a mammoth multinational corporation with its professional shows, channels and conventions, it still had to be treated with utter reverence, even awe. The controversy was briskly moving to pataphysical heights.

Baudrillard probably had his doubts about contemporary art even before he saw any of it, and he mostly managed to keep away from any serious involvement. To this day he prefers “strange attractors,” borderline objects or projects (Sophie Calle’s vacant drifts through sentiment, the strange cruelty of Michal Rovner’s biological theater), art that doesn’t claim to be art or mean anything, more anthropological than aesthetic in outlook. In a sense Baudrillard himself is a strange attractor (cruelty included), a borderline thinker doing to philosophy or sociology what these strange “things” do to art, all UFO’s coming from different galaxies, each endowed with rigorous rules that cannot be transgressed, even by themselves. Gilles Deleuze once superbly said that he wanted to exit philosophy to engage art, literature, film, *but as a philosopher*. Unlike him, Baudrillard never had to make a huge effort to get out of philosophy. He never belonged there in the first place, or anywhere for that matter. And he entered art not as a philosopher, but as a *traitor*, in Deleuze’s sense, inventing his own itinerary. He just went to the other side, becoming a practicing artist of sorts, imperceptibly showing in galleries photographs that he didn’t really believe in. And then becoming a traitor to art *again* by refusing to own up to it.

Baudrillard’s rejection of art was all the more unexpected, and appeared all the more outrageous for that to those who believed

he had crossed over. And yet he didn't seem to notice the contradiction. The episode of the "simulationist school" (and of the "anti-simulationist" controversy) may have had something to do with it. In 1987 Baudrillard didn't yet know much about the American art world and didn't quite realize what was happening around his name. At best, he told me later, he sensed that "there was something fishy there" [*Je me suis méfié*] with a sound peasant-like distrust of sleek city talkers. So he flatly refused to play into the artists' hands. He might as well have acceded their demand, the way he subsequently accepted the gallerists' offer to exhibit his photographs because *it would eventually have amounted to the same*. How could anything one does ever be wrong coming "after the orgy"? If art ceased to matter as art, then what prevented *anyone* from joining in? Actually that he, who admittedly had no artistic claim or pedigree, would be invited to exhibit his work, amply proved his point: there was nothing special anymore about art. Groucho Marx once said that he would never join a club that accepted him as a member. Baudrillard did worse: he joined a group whose reasons to exist he publicly denied.

"Pataphysician at twenty—situationist at thirty—utopian at forty—viral and metaleptic at sixty—the entire story," is the way Baudrillard once epitomized his own itinerary.⁷ Pataphysics was founded by Alfred Jarry, creator of Ubu, the brat-king with a paunch. It is the science of imaginary solutions, and this is precisely what Baudrillard reinvented in the circumstance. A pataphysical solution *to a problem that didn't exist*. Because *he* certainly had no problem with it. Others may have, but it was their problem and it wasn't up to him to solve it. Attacking art and becoming an artist all at the same time was perfectly acceptable in his book. He hadn't asked to show his photographs, merely obliged. As far as he knew,

they may have been trying to bribe him publicly, some kind of sting operation by the art squad. *But they always implicate you one way or another*, so at least it was all above board. It was part of the “conspiracy” of art. Baudrillard didn’t have to feel any qualms about it, could even enjoy the ride for what it was worth. Early on he learned from French anthropologist Marcel Mauss that “gifts” always come with a vengeance. He knew he would eventually have to reciprocate, squaring the circle. And *he did*: he wrote *The Conspiracy of Art*.

Baudrillard is a special kind of philosopher, especially in a country where ideologies come cheap and easy—what he does is no different from what he writes. He *performs* his philosophy, not just preaches it. He is a practicing artist of his own concepts. This is an art he never betrayed, his only claim to artistry. Exhibiting his photographs was part of his work as a pataphysician, as much as attacking art was part of his work as a Situationist. That people would be angered at him for these gestures simply proved that they didn’t have a clue. They hadn’t understood anything about his theory, or about the world we live in for that matter. For Baudrillard the actual photographs are beside the point. It is what *precedes* them that counts in his eyes—the *mental event* of taking a picture—and this could never be documented, let alone exhibited. But what could be more gratifying than having fully paid-up members of the conspiracy exhibit something that he himself doesn’t consider art? The products themselves will go the way of all things artistic—in the garbage or in a gallery. The Museum of Modern Art is considering acquiring his photographs for its collection. The Whitney Museum of American Art is thinking it too, and it would be just fair. What artist today is more modern and American than Baudrillard? The desert too is real.

Proclaiming that art is *null* was not an aesthetic judgment on his part, but an anthropological problem. It was a *polemic* gesture towards culture as a whole, which now is simultaneously nothing and everything, being at once elitist and crassly materialistic, repetitive, ingenious, pretentious and inflated beyond human recognition. For Baudrillard art has nothing to do with art as it is usually understood. It remains a yet unresolved issue for post-humans to deal with—if anyone in the far-away future still cares organizing another exciting panel on the future of art.

Art doesn't come from a natural impulse, but from calculated artifice (at the dawn of modernism, Baudelaire already figured this out). So it is always possible to question its status, and even its existence. We have grown so accustomed to take art with a sense of awe that we cannot look at it anymore with dispassionate eyes, let alone question its legitimacy. This is what Baudrillard had in mind, and few people realized it at the time. First one has to *nullify* art in order to look at it for what it is. And this is precisely what Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol respectively did. By now art may well have outgrown this function, although everyone keeps acting as if it still mattered. Actually nothing proves that it was meant to persevere, or would persist in the forms it has given itself, except by some kind of tacit agreement *on everybody's part*. Baudrillard called it a “conspiracy,” but he might as well have called Disneyland “the Conspiracy of Reality.” And none of it, of course, was real, except as a conspiracy. Conspiracy too is calculated artifice. Maybe the art world is an art onto itself, possibly the only one left. Waiting to be given its final form by someone like Baudrillard. Capital, the ultimate art. We all are artists on this account.

Art is no different anymore from anything else. This doesn't prevent it from growing exponentially. The “end of art,” so often

trumpeted, never happened. It was replaced instead by unrestrained proliferation and cultural overproduction. Never has art been more successful than it is today—*but is it still art?* Like material goods, art is endlessly recycling itself to meet the demands of the market. Worse yet: the less pertinent art has become *as art*, the louder it keeps claiming its “exceptionalism.” Instead of bravely acknowledging its own obsolescence and questioning its own status, it is basking in its own self-importance. The only legitimate reason art would have to exist nowadays would be *to reinvent itself as art*. But this may be asking too much. It may not be capable of doing that, because it has been doing everything it could to prove that it still is art. In that sense Baudrillard may well be one of the last people who really cares about art.

Baudrillard is notoriously “cool” and it may come as a big surprise that he would have got genuinely excited after viewing a major retrospective of Andy Warhol’s work.⁵ Didn’t Baudelaire say that a dandy should never lapse from indifference, at most keep a “latent fire”? What Baudrillard so readily embraced in Warhol, though, was not the great artist, but the machine he masterfully managed to turn himself into. Both in his art and in his frozen persona, Warhol embodied in an extreme form the only radical alternative still conceivable in the century: renouncing art altogether and turning commodity itself into an art form. It mattered little that the work eventually got re-commodified as art, and that Warhol himself somehow betrayed his own machinic impulse. Can one ever expect capital to leave anything unchallenged?

The same thing happened earlier on with the invention of the readymade. The idea of exhibiting a “fountain” (a public urinal) in a gallery was totally unprecedented and it sent reality itself reeling. Duchamp probably meant merely shaking the art institution, in dada

fashion, but it was art itself that was the casualty, precipitating the collapse of art history, including his own stunt with painting. There was no more reason to wonder if art should be realistic, expressionistic, impressionistic, futuristic, if it had to paint the light or bring out the scaffolding. It was all in the mind. Non-retinarian art was an oxymoron, an explosive device. Something like Nietzsche's laughter. It was a challenge to "culture," meaning the business of art. Reality itself everywhere was up for sale, so why not in a gallery? The readymade wasn't a point of departure, but a point of no return. Once added up, art and reality amounted to a *sum zero equation*. It was *null*. Opening the floodgates of art to the decodification of capital, Duchamp left nothing behind.

Could art survive such an abrupt deterritorialization? Apparently yes, but over Duchamp's dead body. Morphing banality into art, Duchamp hadn't fathered a new artistic era, instead he left art intestate, a bachelor machine with nothing more to grind except itself. But this was enough to turn his iconoclastic gesture into a new art paradigm. One can always reterritorialize everything on nothing. This is what the "conspiracy" of art really was about, "striving for nullity when already null and void," as Baudrillard put it. This *nullity* triggered the great rush of 20th century art, stripping the bride bare, hastily throwing along the way everything that could still justify its own existence as art, gradually exhausting its own resources as a rocket exhausts its fuel to stay on orbit. Filling the gap between reality and art didn't give either of them a new boost, as everyone hoped it would, rather cancelled out any possibility for creative illusion. What was left was an endless recycling of art's own demise, deconstruction and self-reference replacing a more secret kind of alterity, or the reinvention of more inflexible rules. Andy Warhol managed to complete this anorexic cycle by

replacing art itself with mechanical reproduction, by the same token returning banality to its irremediable enigma. Anything that came after that was bound to merely re-trivialize banality, eagerly affixing finality to an end already gone out of sight. Going nowhere, art came to nothing—and everything—simply staying there, grinding its teeth, losing its bite, then losing the point of it all. It is now floating in some kind of vapid, all-consuming euphoria traversed by painful spurts of lucidity, sleep-walking in its sleep, not yet dead, hardly alive, but still thriving.

— Sylvère Lotringer