

Extract from Freedom and Limitation — The Anatomy of Post-modernism

by Jan Swidzinski

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Chapter One

Looking from the '80s

Specialists, when discussing the art of today, find themselves in an absurd situation. Stating that there are no criteria for the qualification or disqualification of something as art, on the other hand they tend to strictly separate recognized art from unrecognized art. Whether something is art or not is determined by its appearance in accepted areas of the art world; by frequent participation in significant international events, and by its publication in recognized journals and books. It is a closed, tautological system by which the art world recognizes as art whatever it approves of, without justifying its choices.

1. We must not discuss the values of art until we find adequate criteria for art's evaluation.
2. We must cease to define the area of art if its limits are more than doubtful.
3. We must concentrate on the context, on the function of art in culture, rather than on the attitude of art to itself.

It is my metalogical and non-metalogical point of view which I intend to present in this book.

Break-up

There is nothing in the art of today that cannot be found in the art of yesterday. An artist of the 1980s can equally be someone who practices Expressionism or the New Expression; who represents Post-constructivism or who is a Symbolist; who is a Naturalist or an Abstractionist; who writes a novel or who writes an anti-novel or romance; who makes open theatre or who makes traditional theatre; who produces good art or who produces bad art; someone with a personality of his own or someone devoid of one. The only view one can express while producing or discussing art is that one does not have any view at all.

Our world is flooded with signals that do not reach us. We are stunned by a mass of information which storms against us. We change our surroundings, the time of day and night, the geographical climate. We are unable to differentiate between the way information is conveyed from its content, reality from its symbols, reality from fiction, truth from falsehood, right from wrong. We lack a hierarchy of values, a coherent cause and effect sequence. We are unable to establish an order to things, a temporal sequence of events. We live within a mobile, unordered structure of chaotically shifting elements. If anyone wished to describe the programme of art after Modernism or Post-modernism they would have to repeat Ihab Hassan; that we have become helpless before the complexity of a reality beyond comprehension. We are also exhausted.

What Art Wanted to Be and What it is not Today

The art of the 1970s wanted to be permanent, concrete, objective, structuralized, integral, intellectual, natural; it wanted to be an entity. In the 1980s it has become transient, ostensible, fragmentary, chaotic, glamourized, emotional, artificial and technological. It has become ephemeral, a seeming existence, subject to our changing moods. It is subjective, devoid of such ideas as logical sequence. Nothing in it can be approved or rejected. It is also unfalsifiable. It is devoid of ethics, aesthetics, ideology and politics. It is what it is and this is its only hallmark.

One can ask why it is so and why artists are such as they are. Why have they given up creation, rebellion and rejection? Why have they become passive? One can speculate as to why artists of the previous era wanted to be original, to have their own personality, and why it is not so now. Why did artists take themselves seriously before and auto-ironically now? Why did we wish to have our own ego and why did we then believe that other people would be able to find their own identity through art? Why have we become artificial and transparent in the wake of a long search for our own nature and our own substantiality? Contemporary art can be blamed for its lack of meaning, but at the same time its meaning can be in its endeavour to tell us this.

New Terms, New Tendencies, New Artists

One of the baroque features of our contemporary situation is hypertrophy - the hypertrophy of things, definitions and concepts. Post-modernism, Post-contemporain, Super-modernism and Neo-modernism, along with Transfiction, Trans-avantgarde and Post-humanism are some of the terms used to describe the phenomenon of art today, defined by Hassan as the silence caused by a multitude of mutually muffling languages. Jean Francois Lyotard, in *Règles et paradoxés* describes it as "Corrosion des derniers vestiges mythologiques," and Baudrillard as "délegitimation des grands récits."

This is the hypertrophy and hyper-reality of the art world - art production moving, like contemporary industry, from the phase of production to the phase of self-reproduction. Short-lived art; an artist for a couple of seasons; an endless TV show presented on tens of channels simultaneously; art in the galleries and art on the walls, covered overnight with absurd graffiti. All these aspects co-exist and, at the same time, interfere with each other. By neutralizing each other they transform the ensuing chaos into the neutrality of entropy. Benito Oliva, to whom we owe the term Trans-avanguardia and the launching of Italian artists representing this trend, wrote:

Trans-avanguardia is aware of the semantic catastrophe of the language of art and of related ideologies. It has moved the image into a relationship between turbulence and serenity, drama and comedy, myth and everyday occurrence, tragedy and irony, placing it in a condition of greater openness and expressive freedom, outside of any plan or inhibition. New trans-avanguardia art lets the image ride without asking where it comes from or where it is going, following drifts of pleasure which also re-establish the primacy of the intensity of the work over that of technique. Here a neo-manneristic sensibility takes over, a sensibility that runs through the history of art without rhetoric and pathetic identification, displaying instead a flexibility, laterality capable of translating the historic depth of metaphysics into a disenchanting uninhibited superficiality.

Contemporary art lives on the surface. However, not much can be said about surface. Contrary to what many contemporary critics say, it is not possessed of its own mythology, which might differentiate it from the art of other periods. It differs from the art of the 1970s as the 1970s differ from the period between 1940 and 1960. Its formal novelty is the return to the means of expression used in painting; to the expressionistic possibilities of colour. It reverts to such artists as Matisse, Chagall, Degas, Duffy and de Chirico.

There is no overriding rule here. There is no well defined trend. Simply, there is no reason to be original. Each morphology is useful yet equally useless. Painting has not replaced sculpture. An incentive to turn to other media has run its course. There is no truth to be sought if there is no faith in its existence. An artist may use one art medium or another. He may discard it quickly and do something totally different. The means that he uses do not express anything beyond themselves, and even this is questionable. They do not reflect any reality, be it extrinsic or intrinsic, nor do they enunciate the artist. This tendency seems to gain in force the further away we get from the 1970s. Young artists change beyond recognition from one exhibition to another. The elucidation of the trends they represent is merely a sophist effort undertaken by critics.

Art Show, Funny Art

Reiner Fetting says "Deep down we're all would-be rock stars." Contemporary art does not want to be a serious occupation. In recent years in New York's East Village an ongoing exhibition of exuberance has manifested itself. It is the world of punks, of beat rock and C.B.G.B. It is Max's Kansas City in New York, and S.O. 36 in Berlin.

The world of contemporary art is the world of superficiality, of cheap mass entertainment, of stimuli that irritate the skin but have no reason to penetrate any deeper. Art is becoming an imitation of mass media just as mass media are becoming an imitation of super-consumptive society. The sense of life is not in life itself but in what can be found on the surface, in mere decoration. Robert Kushner is not the only one to speak of intelligence and "decorative reason" in art, or to believe that it is not worthwhile to detach decoration from art or to detach decorative art from life. Art, operating on the surface, is life itself when reduced to its epidermis. It is the symbolic projection of the reality in which it happens to exist.

In the past, works discussing architecture spoke of the function and human scale of the space necessary for life and recreation. Modernist architecture, which has pervaded our towns, is becoming an archeology in front of our eyes. Robert Venturi's Post-modernist programme of new architecture, presented in *Learning from Las Vegas*, begins to look adequate for our times. In 1906 Loos stated that ornament is a crime, and in 1978 Venturi said that architecture is a "shelter with decoration on it." This exemplifies the difference between

the turn and the end of our century. Our obsession with space in architecture has led us to neglect its symbolic aspects. Whilst admiring function and structure, we make light of architectural iconography. Sensitive to spatial effect, we have neglected its symbolism. The parts of the whole - shape, colour, ornament - each convey information. In an interview in *L'architecture*, Venturi says that contemporary architecture is an eclectic expressionism going back to the painting of de Chirico and The New York Five group. It is MacDonald's Stand-ish. It is the lesson learned in Las Vegas, a gigantic symbol of show business in a society in which the sense of production and consumption - the reason and the cause - have been lost.

Reverting to Finnegans Wake...

Is *Finnegans Wake* the quintessence of Modernism or the root of Post-modernism? It is both at the same time, and there is no contradiction in this statement. Our consciousness does not make revolutionary leaps every decade and our subconscious would be even less likely to do so. The problems of an era emerge long before the world's critics begin to write about them. McLuhan says that *Finnegans Wake* creates a verbal world in which the press, film, radio and television mix with the languages of the world, creating a magic theatre.

The culture of a rapidly changing civilization always presents evidence of endless disintegration. The shock of what is just coming into being is always accompanied by the shock of what has just ceased to exist. Our Post-modernist fatigue results from this perpetual shock or perhaps from the loss of the meaning of change - change which takes place for its own sake. Post-modernist fatigue forces us to find the roots of our nihilism inherent in our aptitude for watching the ongoing process of disintegration. Can this be found in painting, sculpture or architecture? Certainly yes, but it is easier to demonstrate this process by analyzing its development in literature.

Taking literature as an example, it is possible to follow the process which has culminated in our present situation; diffusion (if not the total loss) of sense, entropy, nihilism. It is the nihilism of which Baudrillard speaks - its colour is transparent and its characteristic feature is the recognition of impossibility. The Nietzschean laugh that begins to ring empty (as Hassan says in *The Right of the Promethean Five*) indicates the stage reached, out of necessity, by the literature of today which has gravitated consistently to "degree zero." The problem of contemporary literature, and art as a whole, does not lie in the turn from Modernism to Post-modernism. The moment literature became literature as we understand it - primarily an independent entity and secondarily a means of rendering something to someone - it augured its present state. Its contemporary paradox originates in the mutual opposition between the need to be transparent - as one who speaks - and the awareness of its own non-transparency as an art.

In American literature, which is more "naive" than French literature, the other side of this problem is much more apparent; the predicament of a writer who wants to remain a man like all the others. Tony Tanner, in *City of Words*, writes:

There is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible. . . and that is also an abiding American dread, that someone else is patterning your life.

To write is to use a language. There is no natural language, no individual language of our own. It is always a means employed by culture to adjust us to itself, depriving us of our pure nature. In the history of the middle class, literature appears to be an irresistible problem. A literary work is created out of verbal matter, which is suppressed at the same time, so that from behind the words a writer - a human being - can emerge. His freedom as an artist lies beyond language and prevents him from giving in to the images of the world superimposed on him. Since Flaubert literature has lost its naivety, which once let it believe that it could be transparent, through which reality could be seen.

Marshall McLuhan's statement that the medium becomes identical to the content rendered by it is not new. It simply reflects the sense which can be read into the history of European literature since the middle of the 19th century. Kristeva, recalling Saussure's Anagrams, draws our attention to the concept of poetry as the self-destruction of the word (or of the meaning inherent in it) so that other meanings could emerge beyond and in spite of the language. Is there not a similarity between Anagrams and *Finnegans Wake*, in the accumulation of symbols and words both created and destroyed at the same time?

What can a Post-modernist writer propose? To go beyond language, beyond speech, in order to plunge into silence as John Cage suggests, or to seek a way to the truth beyond the limits set by reality. Can writing become, as Maurice Blanchet says in *Le pas au delà*:

Ecrire selon le fragmentaire, d'œuvrer invisiblement: la surface et la profondeur, le réel et la possible, le dessous, le manifeste et la cache "qui," "je" dit encore la présence.

Can it be anything else today?

Literature has become Philippe Sollers's *Une curieuse solitude*, an amazing theatre of text (and only text) in *Nombres* in the case of Borgese; a superfiction in the case of John Barth's *Sabbatical*; an unending auto-irony practiced by those of us who have got lost in the pleasure park of self-created reality. As a matter of fact our literature, when quoting from itself, quotes from reality. Saul Bellow said in 1968:

There is good reason to think that absurdities are travelling in two directions, from art to life and from life into art. We cannot continue to ignore Oscar Wilde's law that Nature imitates Art.

The world created by us, and not by God, is becoming Borgese's *First Encyclopedia* in front of our eyes; an alternative to reality so ideal that it eventually supersedes reality itself.

Mask Upon a Mask

Benito Oliva writes:

The Trans-avantgarde artist works on the skin of these cultural categories and on that of painting, the preferred instrument of this recovery. This recovery is therefore lateral in its outlook.

Modern art operates on the surface, surface being one of its most frequently described features. It can be viewed with the naked eye, unaided by critics. We might speak of the tendency towards an art which would constitute the surface of things, nothing more. Donald Judd expressed it in the following way:

Except for a complete and unvaried field of colour, of marks, anything placed in a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something in its surround, which suggests an object or figure in its space, in which these are clearer instances of a similar world - that's the main purpose of painting.

It is a dream cherished by art; a dream of becoming free, breaking away from the constraints of contradiction in which it has become entangled. What was never within the reach of literature, which uses language as a medium, seemed possible in visual art, the medium of Judd's colour, unlinked with anything, or Norris' grey-painted cube. It may be Malewicz's idea of a black square set against a white background, of which he wrote in 1913:

Desperate to free art from the ballast of objectivity I resorted to the form of a square and exhibited a picture which presented just a black square against the white background. Everything that we loved has been wasted: we are in the desert.

The surface of contemporary art is not a desert. It is full of people and things, swirling sights overlapping and fusing with each other in constant motion. If not a desert in the sense implied by Malewicz, it is even more desert-like if one considers the work of artists who wished to rid the world of things which had become mere appearances, veiling the true reality. Contemporary art has become the reality of a desert. To purge art of the seemingness of reality means to purge it of what only seems to be apparent.

Art has become a mask which while purporting to simulate reality merely overlaps it. However, the mask is devoid of any ritual; there is no spirit beneath it which could reveal itself. It is like a European death mask, an imprint of a face belonging to someone who has ceased to exist. It is a trace of a non-existent life, a non-existent form, the death mask of death itself. It is a mask placed upon another mask, that is to say on reality. There is no need to purge the operative surface of art. It is not possible to get beyond appearances. There is nowhere to go. There is no reality other than what merely appears to be. Art has become a simulacrum of a simulacrum, a substitute of a substitute.

Contemporary art is filled with images, be it painting, architecture or literature. These images could be archetypal symbols of our civilization - images which emerge in dreams, in paranoid obsessions, in the deep subconscious layer of our ego, eluding the control of reality. There is no logical relationship between these images. There is, as it were, no reason for introducing order into these images. What kind of order would it be? It is the logic of a-logicity, the sense of nonsense, the free interplay of associations that fill our imagination once the overriding principle of selection has ceased to function. These images are not literally images. They do not project one reality upon another. These images are not accompanied by their anti-images. They are like a mirror which merely reflects itself. They are closer to symbols. A symbol however,

without simulating reality, brings reality closer to us; it directs our mind towards it. In its wake there follows some mystery to be solved, to be felt. Such a symbol does not exist in the art of today. There is nothing more to be found behind what this art actually presents, neither the natural reality nor the metaphysical. The only reality that exists is the reality which once existed and which left unidentifiable traces or shadows - the liberated, unblocked store of subconscious releases, coming in brief explosions, of whatever had remained of our libidinal desire. However, when liberated and having found its way into consciousness, it loses its original libidinal energy. It is a process of self-destruction.

The best definition for whatever appears on the surface of art at present is a frequently used term - quotation. Works of contemporary literature or visual art are quotations. In spite of their apparent expressive force, they remain mere quotations, emotionless and unable to evoke emotion. Quotations often come from other quotations. John Barth proposes to fill literature with quotations; with well known literary plots and motifs. It is a language of another language. The same thing happens in painting. The Italian avant-garde is nothing else but that. Other artists behave in the same way, no matter what labels the critics pin on their art.

The chaos of images, symbols and quotations characteristic of contemporary art is not creative. Contemporary art cannot purport to be creation. It merely processes and reproduces. Its infantile commerciality is the only authentic image of reality it can produce.

From Res to Verba

The obvious features of art today often render it comparable to Italian Mannerism which established the ordered and rational world of the Renaissance in the 17th century. Although the similarity is superficial, a survey of the transition from the epoch of the Renaissance to the epoch of Mannerism can facilitate our understanding of the process currently taking place in art.

Contemporary art quotes stories on its surface and then continues their plots in depth, assuming more or less conscious attitudes towards them. It behaves like a society en masse in which any current state becomes fully explicable in relation to any other state.

The process discernable in European art and which began during the Renaissance is a transition from transcendence to Nature; from what is deeply hidden to what becomes manifest on the surface. It is a shift from God towards Man, from the world in which we are subjected to transcendence to the world which is subjected to us; where we are no longer restrained objects manipulated by a force beyond ourselves; where we are free in our creation. It represents the birth of the artist as we have seen her/him until today; a subjective, self-reliant creator. An artist, who was once an intermediary conveying messages between the transcendental force and ourselves, has now become the message itself. Thus a new avenue opens for the development of art; from the subjectivity of an artist to the expression of this subjectivity; to the form in which it is expressed. It is a move from res to verba and, at the same time, from things to their illusion. A dichotomy between words and things, between what really exists and what is merely an image, is being revealed. Art becomes familiar to us but as something which is not life. A dichotomy between the natural and the artificial is created. The entire history of modern art is in fact a succession of attempted attitudes towards this inevitable opposition.

The Renaissance still benefited from a single truth encompassing life and art which was inherited from antiquity. There are three paths leading to it: a) through allegory; b) through universalia (because it is impossible to render details faithfully); and c) through probability.

The ultimate disintegration of the single truth took place at the end of the 16th century, when Mannerism came into being in Italian art. The concept of a single truth will return with the avant-garde. It will be an overt motif in Dadaism and later in Fluxus, as well as in the socially aware art of the 1970s. In this sense (but only to a certain degree) we can draw an analogy between the shift from the aesthetics of the Renaissance to those of Mannerism, and the change in art which occurred at the end of the 1970s, foreshadowing the Post-modernist trend of the 1980s. However, this is only a half-truth.

Among the ancients there was a custom of announcing the "paragons of art" and it was argued which of them was superior - Horace or Fidiias, or more generally, poetry or visual arts, sculpture or painting. According to Cellini, painting was merely a reflection in the mirror. Its relation to sculpture was like that of a shadow to reality. Pontormo believed that painting held supreme position because it not only imitated nature but also improved on it. The former preference was tied in with the concept of the single truth in art and in life. The latter related to the concept of double truth. According to Zuccaro and the aesthetics of Mannerism, art not

only imitated Nature but it also improved it. In the concept accepting the single truth, God is the creator whereas, in the concept of the double truth, the artist operates in two directions; toward Nature, improving it, and toward the recipient of art by exerting an influence on him. Such a concept made it possible for art to become, for the first but not the last time, a specific kind of philosophy.

From the beginning of the 16th century the usefulness of art was discussed; whether it was of a moral, social, religious or psychological nature. In Conceptualism, the "After Philosophy" concept of art reverts unknowingly to the same concept of understanding art and its function. The problem of truth and the ensuing liability of art for falsification emerges in either case. In the philosophical concept of art as pleasure, vide Sasseti, this problem becomes obsolete. Art was associated with emotions - those expressed through it or those evoked by it - and as such it was not subject to objective assessment. Art today relates consistently to the latter concept, characteristic of Mannerism. Critics revert to the practice of the ancients. In their "paragons" they set the painting of the 1980s against the sculpture of the 1970s. However, the contemporary appreciation of the possibilities provided by painting and the declining interest in sculpture and photography as representations of objective truth seems to have a more valid justification. It is the awareness of the possibilities which art can offer rather than the liking for a brush that plays a predominant role.

Yet another problem should prove of interest to us in our present consideration. Art faced this problem for the first time in the period of Mannerism and it concerned the understanding of art when two truths were called into being; the truth of life and the truth of art. It is the essence of *disegno*, which means much more than our modern understanding of the word. "Drawing" can imply and is much closer to our use of the word "concept." Vasari, in his biography of Giulio Romano, says that art comes from the mind. Therefore, two solutions are possible: objective and subjective. Vasari accepts the latter. *Disegno* is a pattern, model, form, intention, idea. Mannerism distinguishes between *disegno interno* (*concetto*), and *disegno esterno* (the form in which the *concetto* is expressed).

At the end of the 16th century, art moved toward *disegno esterno* (from *res* to *verba*) so characteristic of Mannerism. At the same time, it was a move, as it was then interpreted, from *imitare buono* - the imitation of goodness, to *imitare bene* - imitating well. A similar turning point can be observed now; from art for the mind, as outlined by Sol Lewitt in *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* in 1967, to art which is the *disegno esterno* of the 1980s. It is a return to the pre-conceptual understanding of art, where art was supposed to give pleasure to the eye.

The way in which European art progressed, as reviewed over such a long period, also holds true for a society possessed of its own *Weltanschauung* and its own reality. The present situation in art does not evolve from the opposition between the sculpted and the painted, between Modernism's stylistic characteristics and the Post-modernist rejection of them. It involves much more than that. It heralds the change which took place not in art but in reality itself. Our contemporary *disegno esterno* has become a mask. Yet it differs both from Mannerism and the Impressionist concept of eye-pleasing art because it neither professes the concept of the two truths nor expresses the concept of one truth common to life and art. There is no art and life, the artificial and the natural, there is only art itself. Artificial creations have superseded Nature as it was perceived in our *Weltanschauung*. Hence art today is an overlap of the two European concepts of art; art as an artifice, existing on a plane other than life and natural art, identifiable with life.

The first concept required art to separate from life so that artistry could be expressed. The second called for the abandonment of artistic artificiality so that art could become life. Art today does not require any resignation. Remaining artificial, it is life as well. Artificiality holds true for both. For the first time since the Renaissance the barrier which has bred dichotomies and around which revolved the artist's efforts to produce art as we understand it has been abolished. This does not imply, however, a return to the earlier stage. Art has now reached an absurd position where it is no longer what it once was - metaphysical transcendence has been discarded - and neither has it become what it was before. Deprived of transcendental as well as materialistic reality, it has become a copy of the image of what ceased to exist. When removed, the mask of art reveals nothing and we may feel cheated.

A Long Shot

The speed at which everything changes around us does not leave us enough time to integrate the signals reaching us into any sensible whole. We perceive more than we can process. For some time now we have lost control over our impressions; we are unable to tie words to things. Ours is a society which consumes everything that is supplied for its consumption.

The relation between words and things is as the relation between what appears on the surface of the sign and what resides in its depth, into which we peer while remaining on the surface. It is the meaningful relationship which occurs in the sign - as Saussure and Structuralists understood it - between signifiant and signifié; the relationship between that which gains meaning, becoming something definite (grass, the earth, the sky), and that which signifies a meaning to us. To establish those interrelations requires the knowledge of the rules that govern them - the common language and the time needed for the consolidation of all new interrelations arising from change. Living in modern society we have no time to discern any rules, to establish universality. We have no need to establish such rules. The rules, once established, preserve the existing state of things, hindering change. Our world of highly liberated individuals is turning into a world of monads, increasingly distant from each other.

It is possible to follow the gradual process of disintegration of our civilization, at one time an homogeneous universe. It disintegrates into the transcendental and the natural, into what is inside and outside an individual; into the conscious part of our ego and the subconscious part; into what is signified by the sign and what the sign actually means. It is a movement from the depth to the surface, making whatever there is in the depth insignificant by subjecting it to what appears on the surface. In turn, we fall behind the world of transcendence, the world of our biological nature (relegated by ego to id which finds expression only in dreams) and eventually the world of things contained in the sign with its pseudo-depth of arbitrary meanings. In our present thinking the reality of the natural world becomes as metaphysical as transcendence was. The reality is far less real than devils and angels in mediaeval thinking.

The scientific principle that governs us is best expressed by contemporary logic. Lyndon in Notes on Logic says that formal transition into any reality begins when an ideal characteristic of such a reality has been established. Selection of those idealized features should allow us to preserve those that are most essential, at least from the point of view of our study. Thus we find ourselves in need of abstract concepts which would stand for three things: a) thinking; b) reality; and c) the relationship between them. We shall assume that reality is an object called structure. It will be a concept defining a family of objects which could be used as meanings in various language expressions.

It is the reality of hypothetical worlds, of empty spaces to be filled in, spaces which are coded and transmitted by a pre-programmed computer. During transmission the reality generates mechanisms constructing our world which are, to an increasing extent, created by intelligent robots. We are being progressively submerged into the reality of science fiction. The last illusion to which simple people, humanists and artists succumb is the naive faith that things still generate signs, whereas in truth it is the encoded signs that generate things. In the computer-like thinking of Saussure, the division of the sign into signifiÇ and signifiant borders on old-fashioned sentiment. What the sign signifies is not relevant. It gains some significance if it can be combined with another sign. Meaning is replaced by the following principle; to combine or not to combine. An attempt at finding out what things mean is an unnecessary waste of time. What counts is the number of operations carried out per second and answering with a simple "Yes" or "No" to a succession of questions. Eventually, the task of showing the world as it really is is not essential and not viable. It is deemed desirable to find such an hypothesis of the world by means of which we could achieve some pragmatically defined purpose. If the reality is needed to achieve another goal, it will be necessary to use another model of the world. No relation, no analogy between those models is necessary. There are as many worlds as there are questions to which answers can be given, depending on the state of our knowledge. Living in a world whose needs are self-generating leads to an absolute rupture of the organic development of social needs.

Probably the first to become aware of this process was Guy Debord in *La societÇ du spectacle*, published in 1967. He says that the sacred godsend of our time has become an illusion dispersing the formerly revealed truth into the realm of the profane. What Debord means by the illusion is nothing more than the sign reduced to a single flat dimension, to the very surface of a signal which has only two attributes; it activates the flow of current in a computer and combines with other signals bearing the same principle in the form of a genetic code applied to man. The last die-hard illusion of our time is the asking of questions which have no definite pragmatic purpose and to which no other answer exists than simply "yes" or "no."

The reality that we perceive in both art and life becomes entirely insignificant. Its pragmatic utility is of its essence and of its appearance. While creating (through the chaotic accumulation of images bearing no relation to each other) an illusion of some perceivable organic reality, art implies, at the same time, absurdity - sentiments going back to the past, when there still existed a perceivable world. By not supporting the truth of the organic world, art becomes TV-like; a producer of shallow illusions necessary for relaxation; a meagre stimulation for our nerve centres.

Borges, in *The House of Astorian*, writes of a town erected by the immortals. Having built it, the gods died. Our modern world resembles Borges' town. Everything continues in the same way it did when it was ruled by the gods. Everything is in the same place as before; houses, people, animals. There are the same stars in the sky and everything moves as it used to move. Nobody is aware that the gods have died, forgetting to switch off the mechanism that they once set in motion. The motion continues but its meaning is gradually forgotten.

How Can We Call Up the Spirit of Reality?

Art as a means of communication is something that one person transfers to another. The decoded message possesses a certain meaning. This meaning corresponds to an object which is a designate of it. To discern the meaning is to be able to read the code used to transfer it. Only in the formalized sciences is a code set out explicitly and overtly. Codes that we use in our life while communicating with others take shape during the exchange and we are never fully aware why one thing signifies another. In our naive human imagination things are what they are. We give no thought to the arbitrariness of the code which ties words to things, endowing them with meaning. We do not ponder over the fact that in a different culture and language the same symbols may have different meanings to those we ascribed to them. When we find ourselves in a situation where the code used by another to communicate with us is not ours, we are aided by additional information; by the context in which the transmitted information appears. We may assume that a ticket collector, even if he speaks in a foreign language, is asking for our ticket and not inquiring about our health. The more changeable the world becomes and the more frequent and transitory our contacts are with others, the more the context of the situation determines our understanding. The codes produced in such a world, superseding the ones previously used, become more and more rudimentary, catering only to the simplest situations in life. It does not mean, however, that reality or its image, for a contemporary man, becomes as primitive as the code we use to communicate with others who are as alienated as we are in the changed circumstances of existence.

On close scrutiny the contemporary world reveals a tendency to set apart the two spheres in our life: a) pragmatic needs and the ensuing contact with others, and b) the co-operative rapport of individuals of the same cultural background where mutual understanding can be found in matters more complicated than mere money-making. Another phenomenon is the process of relegating to the subconscious (or disregarding completely) the concepts bestowed upon us by traditional culture. The infantilism of contemporary art may be partly explained by the fact that our relationship to non-pragmatic cultural patterns ends the moment we make professional contact with others and employ both the purely technical codes of our profession and the rudimentary code of daily life.

The symbols called into being by culture, when laid aside, lose their original sense and their mutual relationship dissipates. Our intercourse with them begins to resemble an intercourse with phantoms. Trying to capture their meaning, we recall our symbols for assistance, in the hope that they will produce a context enabling us to understand the meanings previously hidden. Upon the first layer of signs made by those symbols, we put another. Such an operation, however, is carried out without the use of a metalanguage to explain the language strata beneath it. If we distinguish within the language (along with Hjelmslev) the plane of content (C1), the plane of expression (E1) and their mutual relationship (R1), we can say that in the metalanguage the primary layer of signs is incorporated as it were into the secondary layer, so that the expression (E1) and content (C1) together make the content (C2) of the secondary layer. In this way unfamiliar names become comprehensible to us. We discover the relationship between what we can see and what is beneath it, the content. When confronted with symbols whose meaning we have irretrievably lost we can resort to another method. The primary layer of the incomprehensible language is incorporated into the secondary layer of the language on top of it so that the expression (E1) and content (C1) together do not become the Content (C2), as was the case before, but the expression (E2) of the secondary layer.

The way in which we express symbols endows them with a content different from the original. Unable to recapture their original sense, we evoke them anew and combine them with other symbols which are equally obscure. We change them, multiplying them endlessly in the hope that at last they will become understandable; that they will tell us what we have forgotten. By intensifying the means, by constantly increasing expression, we hope to come closer to the forgotten meaning; the meaning which still exists somewhere in the depths of our consciousness, keeping us vaguely aware of its existence by sending ever faint signals to the surface. In the rapidly changing world, apart from those forgotten cultural signals, we are besieged with new symbols which we do not know at all or only vaguely perceive. We attempt to combine them with other familiar symbols, seeking analogy. The half-forgotten symbols of our lost culture are supplemented with new symbols of our contemporary reality. What we can no longer understand combines with what we cannot yet understand.

Our rational, orderly world becomes overgrown with an ever expanding sphere of irrational reality; phantoms, hallucinations and spectres of the other world from which we cannot free ourselves. It is the world portrayed in Barthelme's *City Life*, the world of collages and nonsensical sentences. It is the world of Roth, Bellow and Barth as well as of contemporary painting and architecture. It is a world in which everything is mingled - the present with the past and the future, our own experience with what we know from TV; the world in which intellectualism has become as doubtful as our emotions.

Unable to regain lost meanings, we become aggressive, obsessed, paranoid. We turn toward our innermost layers, releasing instincts, desires and aboriginal passions and, at the same time, we view ourselves with an irony which we do not wish to conceal. Yet our vehemence, which is called upon to stimulate a train of associations leading towards the truth, is accompanied by a sense of impotence, of exhaustion. Without any reliable key we look to other people. We will believe in anything, be it psychoanalysis or the magic rituals of exotic cultures. We believe in prophets as well as fairies. Failing to integrate the world into one coherent whole we spread it ever wider, assuming that liberalism and aleatorism, encouraging an extensive flow of new information, will introduce order to an increasingly chaotic reality. The world of total individual freedom is becoming the world of complete helplessness.

Our reality is turning into the reality of travesty and quotation. Losing our identity amidst incomprehensible symbols, we become as incomprehensible to ourselves as everything around us. It is possible to change sex, to change our appearance, to become a totally different person. What are we after all? Is there anything that can still be called our personality? Are we not becoming estranged from ourselves as much as from the people around us who transmit signals to us without providing us with their meanings? Whatever we perceive we can only repeat or quote. We are unable to endow it with meaning; to recall the life that once existed in what we are now quoting. There is no interaction between the apparently successful discharge of our passions and their object. The expressive power of contemporary art is not a passion directed at any specific object. There is no external reason to evoke it. It exists only because of our growing fear of losing our identity in the indeterministic world, where reality has been converted into its hypothesis. Quotation, along with travesty, is lending a hypothetical sense to our deteriorating identity.

The Lost Subconscious

Can contemporary art express the desires buried in our subconscious? Having broken its ties with reason, can it couple with our libido? Can its uncontrollable spontaneity allow the release of energy inherent in our subconscious? Will art, through emotion, reveal our "ego" uncontaminated with the impress of culture? Will it be possible for us, with the help of art, to overcome our inner disintegration, our dichotomy? Such are the hopes, expressed for art over the years, which endow it with meaning from our human point of view. It is an emotional assessment from which present day art with its rejection of rules and principles seems to draw its resources; an art whose sideways glance, as Goethe would say, allows her to become free. Psychoanalysis is the invention of the century which makes it possible to reach a compromise, reconciling our inherent need for freedom with the constraints imposed by culture.

For Freud the activity of art is like the activity of dreams. Lyotard, writing about Freud's theory of dreams and comparing it with artistic creation, points out its lack of consistency. Art cannot reveal the subconscious because the subconscious revealed becomes the conscious. The liberation of the subconscious indicates the abolition of prohibition. It annihilates an effort aimed at the rejection of the content of consciousness. By removing the barrier separating the conscious from the subconscious we also destroy the energy inherent in it by neutralizing it. In order to create, an artist can only imitate the work of the subconscious. His imitation has the effect of *reductio ad absurdum*; it brings together mutually exclusive and opposite meanings only to neutralize them and, in effect, destroy them. Images appearing in our dreams, through their "reversal," become both the suppression of desires and, at the same time, the desires themselves. A similar process can be seen in art; the same condensation, the same "shift," the same formation of images/symbols as in dreams - the symbols that become the travesty of desires. There occurs here the same desire to free oneself from what is "correct, good form" as there is to express the lack of form, i.e. the disorder of the subconscious. It is a movement from "Ego" to "Id."

Is art a reversal of the primary process of the subconscious turning into the secondary process of the conscious, or is it the imposition of rules governing the subconscious upon the conscious process, liberating it from suppression? According to Lyotard, art does not construct anything:

L'artiste est quelque'un dans qui le dÇsir de voir la mort, oó prix de mourir, l'emporte sur le dÇsir de produire.

In the fight with Eros it is the death drive that wins. Such an approach corresponds to that of Kristev in his study of Saussure's Anagrams. The Saussure in Anagrams is in opposition to Saussure the creator of Structuralism. In Anagrams the principle of constructing the language of poetry is translated in the same manner described by Lyotard, the destruction of the sense of language by forming oppositions. Poetry becomes the liberation of the poet from language through his/her use of it.

Is modern art still capable of self-liberation, thus making liberation possible for others as well? Is libido still doing the same work as implied by psychoanalysis? Can we cross the barrier between the subconscious and the conscious? It seems that this particular model of our psyche ceases to function, becoming a purely operational model. The opposition, in its genesis, derives from the earlier opposition between nature and culture; between two aspects of our existence subjected to the operation of both forces at once. Our present civilization, by abolishing the law of Nature and subjecting it to the principles of economy, makes a pseudo-reference of it. Nature exists as far as it can render itself useful as an argument, as a meaning which is necessary to support the formal existence of a sign. It is the meaning which, a posteriori, substantiates the sign preceding it. It becomes the justification explaining the functioning of the sign. It justifies its arbitrariness without eliminating it at the same time.

Such a reversal becomes the reversal of the principle on which our picture of reality as a whole is founded. The relation between res and verba, i.e. the reason and cause sequence, is reversed. It is our words, ideas and symbols which produce reality and not the other way around. Our subconscious becomes the product of our consciousness. Unconsciousness becomes a distinctive feature of the language, permitting us to define the term "consciousness." There is a conventional game going on between these two spheres, necessary for keeping our imagination in motion. The primary as well as the secondary process becomes a mechanism that somebody has forgotten to switch off. Movement continues so that we do not lose the sense of our existence. The reason for the persistence of our imagination in forming images of reality is the growing fear of losing meaning, of losing the reason to function. It is like the predicament of a physicist who, speaking of hypothetical worlds, believes in the existence of a single actual world in which he lives. It is our resistance to the oppression of death.

Contemporary art, imitating the subconscious, expresses the fear which is common to us all. In an exhibitionistic way it recalls what we do not want to think about. By creating and destroying symbols it liberates us from them and, at the same time, it overcomes our fear of death. However, while creating oppositions, multiplying contradictions, it also neutralizes them. Its violence turns into auto-irony. Contemporary art is not a sideways glance. It is rather like standing on the sidelines, looking at itself without sympathy.

The Death of the Elite

In Barthelm's novel *City Life* we find ourselves close to the summit of a glass mountain (made from one hundred numbered sentences) where we reach (in the 98th sentence) the symbol which with all its wealth of meaning turns into a beautiful princess when touched. In the next sentence the author has the princess pushed down the mountain head first.

Perhaps our brain, impaired by art, is at fault as Barthelm suspects, or perhaps we have only got lost in the amusement park of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. Can creative artists be amused by such a place? "Please turn the music off," says the author. Nobody has and it has become louder since Barth made his request. Barth forgot, incidentally, to turn his own music off. Writers are convenient; it is possible to quote them. A performance or an image can only be reported without the certainty that we shall believe that it is really so. Our music gets louder and louder; we push our princess/art further and further down the mountain.

In terms of self-justification, is modern art still the creation of an artist? Are we not witnessing the death of the author of which Barth speaks? Perhaps the artist became (to quote Lyotard once again):

quelque'un dans qui le dÇsir de voir la mort, oó prix de mourir, l'emporte sur le dÇsir de produire.

Once criteria have been discarded, once we say "If someone calls it art it's art," we forfeit our right to decide. Our freedom, or rather our hyperfreedom, becomes our limitation.

The younger generation of artists is fully aware of this. The commerciality of contemporary art is not only a reflection of the artist's wish to make money but also an awareness that money is the only authentic value that exists in society.

A lot of the work that we can see at international promotional exhibitions or as reproductions in specialist journals is no better and no worse than that we don't see. Nobody maintains that it is not so. No one believes any longer that the unrecognized artist will be discovered after death. The epoch of Impressionism is a long way behind us. And what if he is discovered? Does it matter at all? Whether alive or dead, artists are subject to the same principle - "If someone calls it art, it's art." It is not the artist who decides nor the current system of cultural values. In our ÇpistomÇ the same arbitrary relationship exists between things (be they objects or facts) and art as there is between name and thing. Art is what becomes recognized as art.

In a culture in which an established consensus exists, such a recognition becomes the common value. An artist, when creating, is aware of the existence of such a norm whose realization is the creation of art. Art in a society ruled by the principle of individualism defies the obligatory norms, very much like the subconscious defies the conscious. Such opposition, rejection and destruction make it possible for art, as an institution, to play a significant role in society. It is an accepted role. Society expects art to play it. The creation of new alternatives functions in a society as a metavalue, justifying the constant rejection of values. Art as a creation is a model of a society of unrestrained initiative - a source of the nation's wealth.

In a traditional society (but of a different social model to ours) the role of the artist was constrained to the realization of ideas already in existence. The artist did not create ideas, s/he only fulfilled them through his/her works. Historically, the artist as a creator of ideas is a new concept which derives from the modern European understanding of art. The artist as an ideologist, as a producer of ideas, makes his/her appearance at the time of the formation of a new élite - scientists, philosophers, political and moral thinkers. The artist as a creator exists as a member of the Çlite and contributes to its formation. This is the source of his/her authority in society. The functioning of art as we understand it is, from a Freudian psychoanalysis, like the struggle between Eros and the death wish. It gains social meaning because it releases latent energy through the tension produced by the struggle between the two opposites; destruction and construction. Art, while creating itself, destroys itself as well, feeding on its own contradictions. Its energy comes from self-opposition. Contemporary art from its very beginning has become entangled in an unresolvable conflict. The process of evolving contradictions makes its history. By rejecting objective universal norms and replacing them with subjective individual ones it elevates the artist on the one hand but on the other, whilst creating this myth of an individual, it places him/her against other individuals. When creating its own subjective world it also justifies the subjectivity of another. On either side of a work of art there is an alien individual; the artist and the consumer. The two equivalent decisions about art receive the same justification; the decision of the artist who creates a work of art and the decision of the recipient regarding the work presented for his appreciation. Art is an intentional object for both parties. From Duchamp's Ready-made, through Happenings to Bainbridge's "Crane," the fact that artists create art becomes more and more questionable. Objects, situations, events are called art by an artist. Yet s/he also approves of others performing the same act. All of them are artists and everything is art, which means equally that nobody is an artist and nothing can be called art. An ideology, accepting other contradictory ideologies as a principle is also the destruction of ideology as such. The artist as a creator of ideology becomes self-destructive.

Contemporary art, coming in the wake of the art of the 1970s, is reaching the climax of this destructive process; the final loss of balance maintained by art for such a long time. Our beautiful princess has been precipitated once and for all. Watching her head-long flight is art's preoccupation.

Contemporary art is a-ideological, a-political; it does not see any sense in aesthetic values nor in the rejection of them. It does not reject the past nor approve of the present. Neither does it envisage any meaning in the future. Its attitude is not cynical since it does not place itself outside the system of values; it simply does not perceive its existence. It is nihilistic, extremely individualistic, but with no faith in the sense of its own individualism or in the sense of exchanging it for something else. Its media are as unstable as its ideological status. Not proposing any values, it also does not look for them beyond itself. It neither keeps to itself nor joins others. It is what Philip Roth made us aware of years earlier in Portnoy's Complaint. It is the loss of the community of subject. The predicament of art resembles the situation of the hero of John Barth's first novel, Floating Opera. Seeing no sense in his life, he decides to resort to suicide. But he does not commit it, failing to find sense in death either.

II

The instability of art and the destruction of values at the core of its performance reflect a process which can be traced throughout the past century. What Artaud wrote about art never interfered with its existence. Dadaism contributed to the formation of modern art to the same extent as Constructivism. Art as a desert is

not really a desert. The desire for death is not death itself. As a paragon of freedom, art functioned as a myth, a myth which lent sense to our image of reality for such a long time.

The performance of the myth and the performance of art along with it constitutes a process integrated with the law of Nature which, while destructive, also creates. Thus art maintained its existence not because it was what it was but because of its ability for self-adjustment. Art as an ideology found its justification not in self-created ideology but in the myth of human flexibility and openness of mind distinguishing Man from the other creatures of God.

In a world in which Nature ceases to exist, being replaced with what we have produced ourselves, one begins to doubt whether the myth of Nature can still remain a valid justification. Is not the concept of the genetic code in opposition to the Darwinian concept of the struggle for survival? Is not the concept of freedom being replaced by the concept of constraint, through a code which governs us as well as our technological world? Are we not mad to believe in the idea of totally unlimited freedom in a world of machines? Perhaps what art can offer - its vehemence - is an anachronism, a relic of the primitive world. Any further rejection of values by art loses sense the moment those values stop functioning, when the ultimate mythological reason justifying such acts becomes finally abolished.

Contemporary art, rejecting the avant-garde, rejects yet another myth which no longer exists. Our picture of the world today, as a certain epoch is coming to an end, is in contradiction to the picture which was formed at its birth. The Çlite which once construed the social Weltanschauung lost its reason to exist when it contributed, unawares, to the destruction of the self-proposed paradigm. The only sense in which the contemporary art world functions is that it continues to produce art not knowing whether it is art or not. It is movement within movement, the reproduction of production, giving meaning to some other reproduction. My title "The death of the Çlite", and not "The death of art", is not accidental. The death of art indicates only the death of the art which we have grown accustomed to; the value of a certain paradigm of culture. Art, when quoting from art, is no longer the art that it is quoting from. Its entropy is the awareness of some other entropy. The auto-irony exercised by art has its source outside of art.

Pseudo-Sacrum

Contemporary art displays several characteristics ascribed by ethnologists to sacrum, such as the rejection and transcendence of the commonplace. It is the departure from daily life of profanum, from culture and its norms and values. The area of sacrum is sacred but also dangerous. It means leaving the sphere of things for the sphere ruled by an immaterial power, the sacred mana. This power inspires us with fear but it also evokes desire. It can prove beneficial to us but it can also destroy us. On entering sacrum we find ourselves in a world where the familiar order of things no longer applies, where linear time becomes the mythical Urzeit, where everything is always and everywhere, where we are beyond and above accepted morality, above what comes into being and perishes with us; where the world continues, without erosion.

The difference between the sacrum of history and the sacrum of our civilization is the difference between Freud and God, the difference between the urge for transcendence and libidinal desire. We cannot stay too long in any sacrum - for only as long as we need to regain the energy that mana can offer us, to cleanse ourselves of tensions resulting from our being subject to the norms in force in the profanum. The performance of contemporary art, its rejection of all norms, becomes the contemporary ritual accompanying the entrance into the sacrum.

Contemporary man, having removed transcendence from his mythology, has replaced it with Nature. Nature, having been divorced from the invisible hand of God, has itself become God. The knowledge of the laws of God has been replaced by the knowledge of the laws of Nature. Nature has become God and yet it is not above us but beside us and within us. In our industrial civilization the Nature vs. Culture dichotomy is gradually changing into sacrum vs. profanum. The Counter-culture movement becomes an escape from profanum and from its conflicts; from the oppressive power of culture which destroys the natural sacredness in Man. The triumph of youth as well as the triumph of sex, the abolition of conventional taboos, meant the transgression of forbidden barriers and, at the same time, a return to creative power.

The difference between the sacrum of the 1960s and the 1970s and the sacrum of the 1980s is the difference between the need for liberation through the natural or through the artificial. The removal of the barrier between the pure and the impure, between the conscious and the subconscious, causes mutual neutralization; it implies the annihilation of the two distinctive attributes at once. Thus what defines Nature and what defines culture or civilization (what is natural and what is artificial) is obliterated. To say that the contemporary world

is no longer natural, having become artificial, is a simplification, a necessary shortcut in lieu of an extended discussion. When the barrier between the two spheres is removed their original meanings are annihilated. It is not only a phylogenetic subterfuge, a relatively new linguistic term - genetic engineering - describes this change equally well.

Sacrum, having degraded its transcendental dimension to Nature and having thus changed its original sense, eventually becomes simulacrum, pseudo-sacrum, a double pretense which cannot liberate us from anything. The sacrum and profanum, ceasing to exist in reality, continue to exist as a shadow of our need to become free in the world - a world in which it is impossible to cross any border without finding oneself in the place one has just left. The sacrum of contemporary art turns into the sacrum of TV serials. It becomes a repetition of the term which calls to mind the lost sense of and longing for transcendence.

Reverting to Nietzsche

In Borges' novel, the Gods left the town empty when they died. Nietzsche's Gods, having died, left their idols. Idols should not be stared at in full sunlight because it is then possible to see clearly what they are made of. It is hard to perceive God in them. We still assume, however, that there is something concealed beneath the mask of gold, stone or wood, since we cannot come to terms with the fact that the gods have left, creating an empty space in our imagination - a replica of a void beneath the mask.

It is not the world that has disintegrated but our Gedankbilder that has succumbed to entropy. The death of God does not destroy the world, it only unhinges it. The pleasure ground where we live becomes more and more incomprehensible. We find it more and more difficult to move. From time to time we descend into the labyrinth but, failing to win Ariadne's favour (only Teseus could do that) we have no ball of thread and thus are unable to find Minotaur. We do not set anyone free. It is we who remain in the labyrinth but it is not the labyrinth of Teseus, it is our own Disneyland wherein we perform our functions. According to some authors it was darkness rather than the intricate route that made Teseus' venture so dangerous. Teseus was supposedly accompanied by Ariadne whose golden wreath lit the way. Our gods have died and they cannot be replaced with our longing for the sacrum. The floodlights installed in our labyrinth simply blind us without showing us the way.

Let us go back to Nietzsche now. Who is this god who died and whom we trusted? It is our culture, our morality, our own deification. Along with the god the entire mythology that we have created perishes, replacing the mythology of transcendence with the mythology of Man. Without admitting it, we have engineered the termination of metaphysics. Can we restore Nature by abolishing the myth of culture? That is, both the nature within us and the nature beyond us. Does a natural man, when liberated from the pressures of superimposed culture, become a new man? Comprehensive thinking, the formation of a structure where the position of one element is determined by the position of other elements, is what puts myth in constant demand.

Nature forms a part of the same myth as our concept of Man. It is a logical opposition to the concept of culture, an argument of the same theorem. We need Nature to justify our cultural activities - our human effort to build civilization. Nature is energy which we draw from and which we subjugate in order to justify the myth of Man, which views him as a creator of reality as well as acknowledging his will to power. The forces of Nature are at once both energy and law, justifying our activity. In our metaphysical thinking we seek support from some external factor. There is the need for "being" as a measure of the phenomena. The sense of the materialistic idea does not consist of the discovery of matter, but the replacement of the idea of transcendence with a materialistic concept in order for it to perform an identical function in our concept of universum. By placing something outside of an idea, we defend ourselves against the paradox of tautology. Our human doubt, looking for an answer, cannot find it in itself.

Nietzsche wrote in more or less the following words: We who think and feel are those who obstinately create things, endowing an idea with reality. We create the world believing that it is eternal in its totality; the world of colours, accents, perspectives, gradations, estimations, approval and negation.

It is not the labyrinth but mirrors which are the most dangerous thing in our pleasure park, because of our inability to go beyond our reflection, our inability to obtain confirmation of the image, our lack of certainty that our reflection is not a mere illusion.

Gods are immortal. What dies is our concept of God. The death of God is really the death of an idol. Viewed in full sunlight, the material reveals only itself, nothing more. A medium is only a medium; it is just a hollow

sign. The death of an idol is the death of the thought content of our Gedankenbilder which we love even more than what it is supposed to represent. That is why we become devoted to country, the Church, to art, says Nietzsche. We do not give ourselves up to something that really exists but to the dictates of our imagination. We make sacrifices for the sake of words and not for the sake of things.

The death of an immortal god is really the death of our mortal concept of God. Our awareness of this as well as our loss of faith in the products of our imagination is all the worse for us. Therefore, our contemporary symbolism becomes symbol-less; realism lacks realism and expression is expression-less. The obscenity of contemporary art does not call for moral censorship nor does social protest require political censorship. Our nihilism is accompanied by our auto-irony. Art as an idea, art for the mind as propagated by Sol Lewitt, has not reverted to the art of things or to art for the eye. Things - what we can see - are only our ideas, our concept of viewing, and thus we fail to be convinced as to their authenticity. What we want to prove happens to be the means with which the proof is carried out. There are no wrong ideas. All are equally conventional and arbitrarily selected. They are like symbols in mathematical equations, unknown quantities having no reference to any external system of real values. They always remain unknown, quantities "x" or "y" which may be substituted with other unknown quantities "x" or "y" in unending succession. It is possible to carry out operations on them but no result concluding a chain of successive transformations can be obtained. The sense of production becomes self-repetition, an ongoing process of self-reproduction. Quoting from quotations, imposing words upon other words which bear no relation to anything, is a permanent process of redundancy in which the past (what we did) the present (what we are doing) and the future (what we want to do) are equally devoid of any meaning. Life has become an on-going travesty, a succession of masks and pretenses which supersede each other.

"Einst war der Frevel an Gott der grösste Frevel, aber Gott starb, und damit sterben auch diese Frevelhaften" says Nietzsche in Also Sprach Zarathustra. There is neither blasphemy nor worship. The god to be blasphemed is dead whereas the god which could be worshipped does not exist. We are above good and evil. In reality we are in a neutral, empty place, on the sidelines. The revalorization of all the values mentioned by Nietzsche would require an abrupt change in our mode of thinking. Zarathustra failed to achieve it. Philosophers will not succeed but perhaps Dionysus will. It would be a superhuman effort requiring the "depth-thinking" to which only gods, madmen or supermen can aspire. God, dying in front of our eyes, is a man - Man as an independent creator, a superman of our culture. He dies as an idol whom we have created from ourselves and for ourselves. He dies, together with his concept of Nature, as another face of culture, being its compliment and justification. It is the death of an idol from which we cannot separate ourselves unless we break the mirror in which we are reflected. It is the moment when, as Sartre says, "Nous sommes seul sans excuse." We might add that we are condemned to being with ourselves, viewing ourselves with irony.

We should recall Nietzsche's words:

Was gross ist am Menschen, das ist, dass er eine Brücke und keine Zweck ist: was geliebt werden kann am Menschen, das ist dass er ein Übergang und Untergang ist.

It is the lesson of history again. It is impossible to destroy the world, it can only be set reeling. The real end of the world in our layman's civilization is the end tout court. It makes any consideration redundant. It is characteristic of an authentic "nothing" that nothing can result from it. It is a final period to the discussion, which will not be continued. It is something that we refuse to believe because we are not able to come to terms with it, particularly if it concerns us. The death of which we would speak is a symbolic death; the travesty of an idol. Our fervent activities, our reproduction of the reproduction, our constant pretense, one mask worn upon another, our pseudo-sacrum, express our tacit hope that through redundancy we could produce a new myth which we could believe in (like the magic movement of a prayer-wheel turned by a Buddhist monk in order to maintain the motion of the world). The entropy of contemporary art is not complete. Art is a simulacrum used by society. It is a myth that remains at its base and makes the existence of the world possible.

Thinking of Derrida

Reality in our contemporary world becomes auxiliary; it merely stimulates our imagination, allowing for the work of the mind. It can be clearly observed when moving from Heidegger (with his insight into the essence of meaning) to Derrida. Derrida, in "La différence," published in Marges de la philosophie in 1972, seems to reach the basic principle of contemporary thinking. Like Heidegger, he discusses the problem of difference arising between the being of things and their state. On the one hand there exists no state of being devoid of being and, on the other, there is a distance and an ontological difference between them. This distance may

separate things from each other but it also makes their mutual contact possible. The ontological difference, along with the distance, neutralizes the possibility of such contact. One does not exist without the other and they also exclude one another. Discussing the difference, Derrida turns it into a thing, much as mathematics converts "nothing" into something in astronomy. Eventually he separates the difference from its continuation, or in other words he defines it at both ends, thus making it exist. The ontologically defined difference becomes an independent being and also its own cause and effect. It ceases to be a difference between one thing and another. It does not indicate any distance in space or time (i.e. the distance that arises between the states). The ontological problem of being, as well as the problem of state, becomes obliterated. The difference, not existing between result and reason and thus becoming a neutral being between the two, is only the term of the language, creating no effects other than itself in this role.

There remains the problem of the physical validity of this logistic answer. This answer, linked to language, provides the basis of contemporary thought. It becomes primary for us. The problem of physical validity becomes neutralized. It would not make any sense to analyse such objects of dematerialized art as Atkinson's "Air Show" (in which the existence of an air column depends on the idea created by him), or Kosuth's "Photostat of the Word Water" that formed part of the publication Notebook on Water. (I discussed this subject in my book Art, Society and Self-consciousness). A word is only a word. It enters paradigmatic relations with other words. A literary plot is only a plot. Myth operates only from within the code, through which it is revealed for purposes of observation. The images of our reality, appearing in the new figuration in painting, are only symbols of painting conventions. Things are not subjected to ideas, as was the case in the era of Conceptualism. They are not born from ideas. Things have simply ceased to exist. They have become quotations from the extinct world. Our reality is so tedious these days because, while being in contact with art, we are not able to believe in it.

The difference as discussed by Derrida exists so that distinctive features, separating words from each other, could be created. These are not words which are required to give things names or to reveal their existence. On the contrary, it is things that have become necessary for words so that the existence of words could be revealed. It is the basic truth made apparent by contemporary art, even if art is not aware of it. The difference separating the terms of language generates new meanings.

These meanings create and fill in our world. Thanks to its operation, to the perpetual generation of difference, the movement of reality reproducing its own production is imitated, as in the difference between the terms the conscious/the unconscious, Nature/Culture, production/consumption, here/there, before/after. Its perfective function is possible only when the difference is neutral; when it neutralizes what it differentiates. In the final analysis it is an ideal interplay of differences that has relevance.

"Nous désignerons par différence le mouvement selon lequel la langue oó tout code, tout systéme de renvoi en général se constitué l'historiquement comme tissu de différence" Derrida will say. The strict realization of this principle, which we approach as we neutralize things by converting them into language terms, neutralizes our artistic/non-artistic effort to tell someone about something. We can only demonstrate the mechanism of such telling, showing the means which we employ to generate the difference. We can illustrate it with images drawn from the once existent reality. Our possibilities, related to the function once performed by the Çlite which had created Weltanschauung, have been exhausted. We can only repeat that such an image is necessary while continuing to turn our prayer-wheel which, we believe, will not let the world grind to a halt.