

THE EMPIRE OF THE LAST IMAGE

Within a notion of an age of indifference, images are probed to discover if there is anything that might be described as an edge that might introduce a transition into something that could be viewed as other to the image. In the very beginning of the modern aesthetic project Romanticism had offered the promise of the revelatory possibility of the image issuing from the inward journey to open the relation of the work to thought. Art became the other of philosophy that promised an exit from the self, redefining the relation between theory and practice as ecstatic union. In effect art had become its own object, providing the means whereby it could reflect itself as part of its own making. Schlegel thought that the thing that distinguished modern art was a capacity for infinite reflexivity and through this art became its own (infinite) end. In the romantic schema art is a figure of truth accomplishing “what philosophy can only point toward.” (Alain Badiou Handbook of Inaesthetics P.3) If the principle of art had become self-supporting, (“a negation that negates itself” in the words of Giorgio Agamben *The Man Without Content*), then art was foreign to itself and unable to reflect an understanding of a content not informed by a movement through negation. Thus a relationship between art and nihilism was secured at the heart of the modern project and if the end of the modern project might be conceived the relationship between art and thought, which appears to support the circularity of art and nihilism, must be fundamentally challenged. The notion that art is subject to decline, and in decline become a left over corpse of its former status as a means of securing truth, has lent the powerful shadow of death to modern art. The last remnant of spiritual power now appears to reside in its inability to realise final completion. The constant reflection upon the fate of mass culture becomes the source of reflection itself. It is through this relationship with mass culture, and in turn the subordination of mass culture to the technological principle, that art falls under the spell of the totalising logic of image culture. If art had held to the promise of originality in the form of the ever-new, mass culture delivered the reproduction of the ever-same and rather than this resulting in a collision based on difference, the two cultures have mutated into a new late culture under the sign of cynical circulation that simulates all values as equal.

So the question for us relates to the suggestion that the death of art as occurred without the drama of ending being understood as such. What happens to a generation who might still wish to invest in the disruptive power of art and with this enact an ecstatic relationship to the reality principle regulated by image culture? This is, I believe, a moment in which it might be possible to start to think outside of the modern project as the conditions of thought within it are subject to an increasing sense of impossibility. The operation of the culture rests upon a mode of forgetting that enables doing to be prioritised over being, and with this principle, technological willing assumes the basis of the reality principle. The image of September 11 might be read as a final image within a culture that has learnt to rehearse the possibilities of finality. After all it was as image, the unity of imagination, technology, spectacle, and above all will, that appeared to realise on the level of deep abstraction a unity that underscored the Romantic project. It is in this sense that the dimension of shock is perhaps most apparent; somehow that which appeared as external to advanced culture realised a dimension that was immanently inscribed into the foundation of the culture. The aesthetic impulse might be to stand back in order to restore ironic distance as the preserve of a sophisticated elite. Yet it might be apparent that irony might itself be integrated into reflex of negation that underwrites dominate culture. In this respect

this is a generation that can no longer invest in the trajectory of the culture, as it has been so constituted. Thus to continue to produce work is also to disturb the established relations of art and thought which serve as the basis of the image itself.

On the level of a project the very notion of altering the paradigmatic foundations of the modern project might appear as an impossible and dangerous ambition. With the total integration of the world market and the globalisation of culture, the realm of artistic production appears to be integrated as an economic force that is no longer capable of yielding difference. Already the actual speculative dimension of art appears to be capable of making all things, all situations, or even personal scripts, into the basis of art. In affect the speculative dimension of art has been rendered void because there is no longer the means of describing conditions whereby something is not art, if so described. The turn toward beauty is an intuitive attempt to re-inscribe judgement back into a condition that has lost the means of understanding the reason for evaluation. We cannot substitute the issue of beauty for what appears as conceptual banality, for the problem is far more far reaching than this and yet it is a debate that is capable of opening the space of questioning. This space of questioning is rooted in the way that work might have “both its end and its limit outside itself” as the work of art “does not bring itself into presence in the work” For Agamben this describes the possibility of “a more original temporal dimension” of being in the world for rather than securing a relationship to the world that appears in advance of the subject, poiesis is the opening of the potentiality of each instance and thus granting a poetic status on earth. What is of essence is the capacity of the work of art to open out this authentic temporal dimension to being because this enables the original measure of becoming to occur. “To look at a work of art, therefore, means to be hurled out into a more original time: it means ecstasy in the epochal opening of rhythm, which gives and holds back.” Poiesis as the bringing into being through the passage from non-being into being prioritises being over doing, and thus originality over reproducibility. In a radical sense it secures the possibility of setting ourselves apart from a ready-at-hand perspective on the world and thus to stand in the open.

“If the future is the vision that lies at the base of technologies”, then the temporal is a posteria “reduced to the norms of the a priori spatial calculus. The progress of technologies is translated into the ever-increasing presumption of the pre-figuration of the future”. For Negri it is ontological enquiry within the immeasurable passage that might enable us to break with this vision of time and open out the body itself to the to come and “illuminate it with passion”. Art, as the embodiment of poiesis, performs an ontological task of illuminating rupture and it is this work of illuminating, with passion, the sense of a lost dimension of becoming that falls to this coming generation of artists. Rather than a critique of this world it might simply be concerned with the sense that the creation of a world is possible, for it is this work of imagination that signals the possibility of otherness. The pre-conditions of such undertaking lie in the very act of un-working the presuppositions of the modern project that would lend undertakings as lack of completion within the present. There is both a politics and a poetics in the work of resisting the present.

I want to examine aspects of recently produced contemporary art to see if it is possible to detect signs of the end of the modern project or at least signs of a world in which the realm of aesthetic manifestation has a restlessness that is neither in accord with the fragmentation of the modern nor the totalising logic of the new empire.

The recent work of Mustafa Hulusi circulates around issues relating to appropriation and exhaustion. Strategies of aesthetic appropriation appear to offer the possibility of

vast amounts of images that open out into critique, minor pleasures, visual excess, transgression of sense, and the manifestation of new ciphers of understanding, but equally all this manifold complexity and richness within the understanding of resource can be seen as haunted by vacuousness. Simply put this resource does not sustain itself in the form of an ever renewable promise but is itself subject to both fading and ultimately deadening. Mustafa has started to think, or perhaps more importantly, make manifest the difference with aesthetic and technological modes of appropriation. The starting point of his work is the way in which the eye itself seeks out a centre of attraction in order to realise a moment of bliss, attention or suspension. In the flower paintings we are offered visual emblems of visual pleasure outside the contingencies of history, or technological encroachment, representations of what Kant would have termed as free beauty. Flowers appear to signify their own attraction and that attraction is organised through the manifest forms of beauty itself. We do not require concepts to understand this, and this being so, is at the root of our pleasure within this encounter. Flowers almost appear, as if by design, to be a means of arresting vision. They might even make us feel that vision itself is a fragrance. They reproduce themselves through this power of attraction or solicitation. We might in this relationship find that the simple desire of release is enacted and in turn we strive for a process of symbolization which might adequately represent this. We might instinctively acknowledge that the flower as a code of visual pleasure is connected to the moment of arrest and as such a vehicle that potentially takes us out of ourselves. Do we in this moment contemplate upon the fading and decay of the bloom, mortality, the end of history? In further contemplation these things are possible but not within the immediate glance of the eye because this glance is impelled by the desire of arrest. This connects us with a feeling of deep time in which things and entities are not simply given over to us for our use, when the world could not be pictured as the resource for appropriation. If our lives from moment to moment might be described in terms of what we pay attention to then the way we understand appropriation is signifying centre of our enterprise of understanding our sense of purpose. Mustafa has produced a series of geometric monochromatic paintings which appear to emblemize visual attraction. Radiating lines attract us to a centre that simulates a form of visual "hitting upon." Visually they are as fast as any visual sign might be. We can instantly recognise what this kind of sign does. As visual form they are anchored in the visual economy of the 1960's which condense the rhetoric of both pop and op together. As signs there are purely efficient, offering no other information outside of their own functioning reality. Vision itself recognises that it is being worked upon within this matrix of geometry and in this respect the language is aggressive in the way that it limits us to a reflex. When we say that a flower is a flower is a flower it is because of the way that our absorption with its reality is such that we do not need to signify beyond it whereas with these targets nothing is offered beyond the power to simply signify the moment of our attention. Beauty in a certain way also signifies emptiness but the gaze of these abstractions appear as a form of revenge because their emptiness is closer to a vacuum that announce to us, as if from behind, that we lack the power to properly signify and within this we are trapped. If this is the case then it would follow that we cannot or even should not trust ourselves because how we appropriate also establishes the way in which we are in turn appropriated. The suggestion in this pairing of visual forms suggests to us a complex relationship between the sphere of technology and aesthetics. We are a culture that appears to now understand that there is a limit to the way in which we appropriate nature, not only in the form of energy but within the mechanism of grasping itself. Gradually we are being eaten by the very

way we appropriate. Emptiness and exhaustion resides within this dialectic which appears only to speak to us of ending. Mustafa appears to want us to pay attention to tiny moments, the fraction of seconds, in which arrest appears to occur as a route into thinking about ending. There are no political choices, no moral dilemmas posed, no panoramatic scanning, but instead an attention to the ways in which we pay attention. There is also the suggestion that art itself is trapped in a dangerous fixation with a largely unattended drift toward become a product made possible by a technological mode of thought. The question if this were to be the case is to what extent does this bringing together a visual forms actually mimic the contemporary realisation that a collapse of difference between aesthetics and technology (and with this a collapse also of picture and product) is the very offering of post-culture? I think that we might extend this thought further by saying that they both exhibit the danger and lend a possibility that the danger might be thought as such. This would also be in accord with the notion that there is no position that can be purely exterior to the object of critique. In this respect very little is being offered other than the sense of the offering from which, moment to moment, there might be a potential opening created within a position of difference. As works they stand aside from the critical or the socially convivial, in order to concern themselves with a reflex which might interrupt the circulation of pleasure, promise, delivery, origination, limit and finality. If art is “the unnamed, unknown and unsurpassed ‘other’ of technology” then it contains within it elements of the “preserved essence of technology.” In this respect art might force us into understanding the essence of technology. The work of Mustafa has no programmatic aim in this regard, rather it has moved intuitively across the spaces of art, politics, information, vision, ethics and technology in order to work out ways in which a possible relationship to the world could be realised. Through the confrontation with the possibility that the various registers of difference appear to have been eroded in ways that enable art to speak of everything whilst being close to nothing, Mustafa has elected instead to address this very condition, but without the recourse to calculative thought. Hegel defined beauty as “the sensuous shining of the idea” and it is both the emblematic representation of shining alongside images of flowers that are deployed within this address. Material sign and image are thus allowed a radiant play of sense. The optical register is rich in the reward of presence but the relationship appears vacuous, without idea, and we might instead ponder on the emptiness of the promise. Yet through this gap another space is secured, even if by error, yielding to a rapture of an unwritten time. If indeed there is arrest, then it is related to the singularity of this rapture. We are simply asked to pay attention to this possibility, if otherwise we are simply left with fading.

In an essay ‘The Vestige of Art’ Jean-Luc Nancy asks the question of what remains of art answering in turn that only a vestige in the form of an evanescent trace and ungraspable fragment. For Nancy the idea that art might border on the cosmology of its time is now no longer a possibility because there is no cosmos in the sense that it was evoked in the past instead the “art in our time imposes upon itself a severe gesture, a painful move toward its own essence become enigma, a manifest enigma of its own vestige.” Implicated within this is of course the notion of the decline or end of art because art has each time responded to this by becoming radically another art. In a strange way the nihilism of the present is a simple reversal of idealism. “If for Hegel art is finite because the Idea comes round to presenting itself in its proper element, in the philosophical concept, for the nihilist art finishes itself by presenting itself in its proper – and empty – concept.” As part of this withdrawal of the Idea, the image also

withdraws, with the other of the image being the vestige. This leads Nancy to a startling conclusion that “far from being the “civilisation of the image” that is accused of crimes committed against art, we are rather a civilisation without image, because without Idea.” Paradoxically a world without image results in “a profusion, a whirlwind of imageries” in which it is impossible to find anything other than a “proliferation of views” which “refer to nothing...views without vision.” If art is its own vestige, it presents what is not “Idea” but rather motion, passage and coming and “this is what opens us to it.”

Santiago Sierra (born 1966) creates situations involving participants who are paid to perform a task or even allow their bodies to be utilised as sites of inscription. The prices paid reflect the social cost of labour within any particular context and are not accorded any form of privileging based on the art context. ‘Ten People Paid to Masturbate,’ ‘A Person Paid for 360 Continuous Working Hours’ and ‘160cm Line Tattooed on Four People’ are typical of his works. Many of his actions have taken place in Latin America and often imply a critique of developing globalisation. He states that “I can’t change anything. There is no possibility that we can change anything with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don’t believe in the possibility of change.” (Santiago Sierra ‘Santiago sierra: Works 2002-1990 Ikon P15’) The works appear to appropriate the visual appearance of 60’s minimalism and conceptual art with confrontational situational encounters based on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Often spectators might appear to be both included and excluded by the works but there are always degrees of discomfort to be endured. Whereas the work of an artist such as Hans Haacke was always explicit in terms of an intended instrumental critique, Sierra’s work appears to be without ideological loading positing instead the nature of how things are as a mode of addressing the audience. Nevertheless the works do appear as final in their form and in this respect present themselves as hard kernels to be both consumed or more likely endured (both by the performers and spectators). Invariably the occasion of the exhibition, understanding of economy, aesthetic pleasure, forms of appropriation, social relations are disrupted and the relations between the various system that sustain the idea of a system brought into a position of tension or heterogeneous disturbance. The encounter between art and politics is never posed as being symmetrical but rather provides the means by which an understanding of the working of both might be negotiated within an order of difference. As works they might imply a form of sadistic economics within the art spectacle, perhaps a hard surface posed against the smooth transgressions of political correct art establishment. Rather than calling upon the facts of the world to prove inequality they instead perform themselves as a discrete relational form within the art world. These works do imply knowingness on the part of audiences but they never allow the audience to feel a mastery over the form that is on hand. We are left with a negative imprint of the social order, a negativity that calls political mediation into question but within this a vacuity of posed as a determining form in which our relationship to politics and aesthetics are placed within. Ultimately the formal elegance or completeness of the works have a disturbing obscenity that is difficult to consume or integrate. Literally we are pushed into the empty place of subjective encounter.

Nicolas Bourriaud’s book ‘Relational Aesthetics’ attempts to locate a series of important shifts that have occurred within art in the 1990’s and in it he states that the

“possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art.” Rather than a form of expression like TV and literature that refer each person to their own space of private consumption, art becomes an expression of a “hands-on civilisation, because it tightens the space of relations.” For Bourriaud art “is the place that produces a specific sociability” by creating free areas, durations that resist the empty time of everyday life, and interactive commerce opposed to the imposition of economic communication. Relational aesthetics is based on the notion that humanity is “purely trans-individual” and it is this “inter-human game which forms our objects.” Rather than being a theory of art, it is a theory of form, and hence a materialist aesthetics, or in the words of Althusser a “materialism of encounter.”

The book consists partly of a polemic against the social “spectacle” which is responsible for creating the illusion of an interactive democracy and against this there is an articulation of new forms of transivity that “introduces into the aesthetic arena that formal disorder which is inherent to dialogue.” Dialogue is postulated as the origin of image production and this undermines the idea that art is a place as opposed to a form “of a forever unfinished discursiveness.” If art is made of the same material as the social exchanges, it nonetheless has a quality of social transparency that sets it apart from other things that are socially produced.” The “transparency” of the artwork comes about from the fact that the gestures forming and informing it are freely chosen or invented, and is part of its subject.” Rather than referring back in time for models and procedures, relational art, for it to be so, “arises from the observation of the present.” The artwork becomes in this sense a “social intersice” making new possibilities of living possible. The utopian possibilities of art are repudiated so that art is instead an attempt “to construct concrete spaces.” Relational art “tends to draw inspiration from the flexible processes governing ordinary life” in order to explore the everyday as opposed to the fetishistic popish surfaces that serves as its soft administration. Overall the book places a strong emphasis on new forms of subjectivity defining the conception of art. Subjectivity is the site of reinvention and new forms of learning able to resist the rigid collective apparatus of power and as such it is a form of subjectivity that is permanently off centre in ways that reinforces difference over the principle of identity and the self-same. Overall the book is a major attempt to open out forms of oppositional social critique with new forms of aesthetic practice. It evokes a grim picture of contemporary culture. “For anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish. Before long, it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside of these trading areas. So here we are summoned to talk about things around a duly priced drink, as a symbolic form of contemporary human relations. You are looking for shared warmth, and the comforting feeling of well being for two? So try our coffee...”

In Michael Landy’s work ‘Breakdown,’ which was performed in an empty department store on Oxford Street, he created a parody of an assembly line through which all his entire catalogued possessions passed through in order to be disassembled by the worker-performers. Everything was broken down into their smallest component elements, reversing the usual logic of the assembly line. In effect all the values retained in the different objects were being destroyed, emotional as well as financial. It was unclear how the aesthetic component of the work aligned with the structural form of expenditure that was constructed as a mirror of the economic process and

whether or not critique, allegory or nihilism became joined together in different ways and conjunctions. In some respects it might be that the position of the artist was allegorised in relationship to the whole way in which the value form itself is understood. If the artist might have been viewed as the marginal left over within the value system we can now see ways in which the artist in being integrated into ways of understanding new value forms. How much personal value did the artist lose in order to find expanded value within the market place? Is the artist at the forefront of the realisation that the economy itself is running on “empty” and is simply held together by collective belief? Was it this which was being tested? Equally is the new world economy reconstituting the value form with the utilisation of the principles of virtuality in order to go beyond fixed forms of measure (see Empire Hardt and Negri P356 for this discussion on immeasurability and the value form)? What is clear about this work, whether or not we see it as a mode of relational aesthetics or situational art is that it aims to make us think about systems of organising life on a scale that has barely ever been witnessed? It is also perhaps telling that his next work was a series of etched drawings of weeds and flowers that grow within the crevices of pavements, life on the edge of impossibility. Perhaps it is in the movement across works that we start to see a sense of project, an understanding of spacing and interval, the purpose of scale, a structural coding of view and an absorption into formal extremity. In ‘The Politics of Aesthetics’ Ranciere discusses the relationship of art and work when he states that the “cult of art presupposes a revalorization of the abilities attached to the very idea of work. However, this idea is less the discovery of the essence of human activity than a recomposition of the landscape of the visible, a recomposition of the relationship between doing, making, being, seeing, and saying. Whatever might be the specific type of economic circuits they lie within, artistic practices are not ‘exceptions’ to other practices. They represent and reconfigure the distribution of these activities.” (P45)

Slavoj Zizek has attempted to systematically understand the dynamics of the economic and political system and psychoanalytical perspectives. In ‘The Fragile Absolute’ he uses ‘Coke’ as an example of an ‘objet petit a’, a drink that functions as a direct embodiment of the ‘it’ factor. The point that Zizek makes is that the ‘it’ is in fact anything at all other than the desire for more, so in the case of caffeine-free diet Coke, “we drink the Nothingness itself, the pure semblance of a property that is in effect merely an envelop of a void.” (P23) This situation is not of course unfamiliar within the art market, for example if you take Damien Hirst’s ‘dot paintings’ they conform perfectly to this principle. For a great deal of money you own something that many other people also own in like form, a work that is its own special signification which ultimately on the level of meaning is reducible to the idea that you have one and are thus part of a special elite how exposed to the same pleasure of empty community. Perhaps you are simply left with the satisfaction of knowing that the price keeps ascending as many others want to part of this exclusive group of people who have one. You could say that the celebration here is the collapse of difference that used to signify art as an exceptional form of object. The ‘dot paintings’ are indeed so dumb, and intentionally so, that nothing needs to be said or appreciated rather the mere fact of owning is the purely satisfying attribute because they are repetitions of a gesture toward self-sameness as a principle. Anyone could do them because anyone has of course done them but the signatures real and that makes it something as opposed to anything. In effect they are purely a commodity, produced as such and distributed as such with a label attached. Zizek addresses the situation of the art

market when he states that “in today’s art, the gap that separates the sacred space of sublime beauty from the excremental space of trash (leftover) is gradually narrowing, up to the paradoxical identity of opposites: are not modern art objects more and more excremental objects, trash (often in a quite literal sense: faeces, rotting corpses...) displayed in – made to occupy, to fill in – the sacred place of the Thing?” (P26) Žižek sees the situation as relating to the threat to the “gap between the empty Place and the (positive) element filling it in.” Now it is not possible to believe that the Void of the (Sacred) Place being there as an offering to being occupied by human artefacts so that “the problem is no longer that of horror vacui, or filling in the Void, but, rather, that of creating the Void in the first place.” On a less elevated level we might look at the paradoxical functioning of art that has connotations of abjection or waste and think about why it might be collected. The class of people who tend to buy art tend to live in pristine apartments, invariably minimalist, everything refined and in place, likewise they live lives within very controlled time frames mediated by electronic calculation with all added services ‘tailor-made’ to requirement. Is it possible that these extreme objects might register with them a sense of being alive in a way that is not already calculated? There is a sense that contemporary art supplies the ‘dirt’ that might indicate the event of life. In effect abjection becomes the surplus enjoyment of a class who lack the means of gaining surplus enjoyment because it has been designed out of their situation. The last touch of desperation to this scenario it is also an attribute of being both sharp and cool as well because it is possible to use it as an unregulated form of speculation through which returns can be astronomical.

The Italian New-York based artist Vanessa Beecroft (b.1969) has been creating performances since the early 1990’s. She states that “I like the idea of a combination of a feminist background – not a real background but knowledge and awareness of it – and a Helmut Newton portrait of a naked woman in heels. I like to see if the two parts can match...I want to show women in a way that it’s painful for people to watch.” She later developed her perception of Newton in another interview. “I like the way he portrays women, which is not the same as I do. His big nudes deal with sex, power, politics, Germany. They are smart-asses. They have control. Mine are more vulnerable, not so stylized, not so beautifully perfect and refined. More like self-portraits.” The performances thus generate not only vulnerability, but a relationship to an unobtainable image or ideal. Newton’s photographs, within the duration of the event, serve as an imaginary horizon of impossibility. There is an obvious obsession with body image; she declares for instance that she suffers from exercise bulimia. The models she employs all tend to be young, slender, white and flawless, a look that lends itself to de-personalised and homogeneous display. Given that each performance might vary between two and three hours the initial postures undergo slow disintegration and eventually a general fatigue results in the models sitting or even laying on the floor. In effect the picture falls apart. For Christine Ross in her book ‘The Aesthetics of Disengagement’ she believes that Beecroft’s laboratory represents a form of gendering of depression as female and feminine because they act out identity-performance failure. She states that “Beecroft’s enactment of depressed subjectivity: not only confirms the fact that her subjects are continuously looked at following specific criteria of observation but also posits that the operation of coping is one of the main underlying principles governing the contemporary interrelation between depression and subjectivity.” (P76) These performances appear on one level as vacuous events, set in the vacuums of the modern museum or art gallery, for audiences saturated with sensation and transgression defying spectacle in which the

difference between entertainment and art might be blurred, staging a look of work that is re-assuring in that it enacts cool indifference touched by cruelty. In all these features it represents a strange realm of “zero degree” aesthetic form within the spectacle born out of the economy of desire. More than anything else they signify the emptying out of art and its disappearance into lack.

Agamben, Giorgio	The Man Without Content	Stanford	1999
Beistegui, Michael de	The New Heidegger	Continuum	2005
Bishop, Claire	Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics	October 110	2004
Bourriaud, Nicholas	Relational Aesthetics	Presses du reel	1998
Hardt & Negri	Empire	Harvard	2001
Nancy, Jean-Luc	The Muses	Stanford	1996
Ranciere, Jacques	The Politics of Aesthetics	Continuum	
Roberts & Murphy	Dialectic of Romanticism: A Critique of Modernism	Continuum	2004
Ross, Christine	The Aesthetics of Disengagement	Minnesota	2006
Zizek, Slavoj	The Fragile Absolute	Verso	2000