

# Dictionary of the Arts

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## THE COMPASS OF A DECADE (\*)

In the time since this dictionary first appeared nearly ten years ago,<sup>1</sup> the world of the arts has become the favorite spectacle of the global middle class. Last year, London's Tate Modern admitted two million visitors, and there's hardly a government-sponsored bash staged nowadays that lacks its own "Emerging Artists" exhibition.

On rereading the preface I wrote in 1995, I was taken aback by the realization that the developments I then saw as embryonic have in fact burgeoned into permanent structural elements. Some of the platitudes of that time, such as the idea that ours is the age called upon to witness "the end of the arts" (I would rather call it "the depletion of Art") have even found an echo in mass-circulation newspapers. In some countries, the notion has arrived somewhat late. *The Transfiguration of the*

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(\*) The first edition of this *Dictionary of the Arts* was published by Planeta in 1995. This preface was written on the occasion of a reissue brought out by Anagrama in 2002, which was otherwise virtually unchanged. The author is now preparing a new version for Mondadori; the original text, though remaining intact, will comprise just over a third of a much expanded work.

*Commonplace*, Arthur C. Danto's popularization of the "death of Art" thesis, has been widely influential since 1981, but was unavailable in translation in Spain until 2002. A twenty-year time lag is quite a wait, even for a country like ours. This may explain why some reviewers, when this dictionary first saw daylight, read it as an anti-modernity plea advocating a "return to order." One touchingly naive hack put me down as hankering after the eighteenth century.

But "the death of Art," in its post-Hegelian sense, has reigned as a pervasive theme in academic theory since at least 1980. It has simply taken rather a while to reach the papers, the sole source of information for any number of "experts." Be that as it may, if even the mass media now upholds this idea as "the truth," we can assume the cliché has ripened to a state of falsehood that invites reappraisal and fresh thinking.

One quick example: in May 2002, the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia* devoted a feature to the question "Is fine art dead?" A poll of art-world bigwigs elicited a crushing majority of replies in the affirmative. Following Catherine David, the feature-writer advanced the view that as soon as the contemporary arts were able to break free of their introspective funk, they ought to venture into the arena of the political. As usual, poll respondents routinely conflated "the arts" and "Art." If anything has died here, surely it's Art. The arts, on the other hand, have never been more alive.

To say "Art is dead" is to say that that concept has ceased to play the sovereign, transcendental and metaphysical role that German philosophy, from the Schlegel brothers to Adorno, had ascribed to it. *That Art*, a synthesis of all the distinct arts, an Idea of Art or an Absolute Art, defined by Hegel as one of the essential embodiments of the Spirit and dismissed by Marx as a symptom of economic structure: *that Art* is dead, crushed under the weight of responsibility thrust upon it. *That Art*, revered as a secularized religion for the middle classes and the bearer of timeless values, has cracked under a pressure it could not withstand.

Late Marxian and *avant garde* theoreticians—the conservative wing of contemporary thought, one should say—continue to argue for the moral responsibility of art, hence the cliché that art needs to be “more political,” when in fact examples of genuinely political art would include Stalinist art, and art as imposed by the Vatican. “Political,” as a term applied to art today, can only mean “the spectacle or simulacrum of the political.” But Christian morality is hard to evade entirely; it lives on today in the most unsuspected forms, under a veneer of juvenile Leftist liberalism.

The death of Art needn't be a funereal occasion. It sets us free to do all kinds of stuff, stuff which may turn out to be spectacular, stupid, playful, political, surprising, moronic, pretentious, clever, forgettable, deep, moving, derivative, imbecilic, sublime, boring, commercial, curious, trivial or sensational. And people engaging in the arts are still putting all of these sorts of things out there. The catch is that that output no longer yields to dissection by some causal scheme, like Hegelianism, Marxism or Greenberg's formalism, according to which an artist, however unknowingly, lends voice to the Spirit, which in turn means that some artists have taken the correct, progressive path (that's Art) while others, deaf to the Spirit's bidding, are mere reactionaries (that's non-Art). In fact it's the other way around. When artists cast off the heavy mask of “the Artist” and agree to be no more than what they really are-- craftsmen and women in a countless variety of guises hoping to earn a living by plying numberless materials, myriad media, and all in an utterly irresponsible way, of course—that is when they stand the best chance of coming up with work that might carry some resonance for the public at large. That's how American movies got made, before you could major in film studies.

And there's more. Behind that mask of the Artist—in particular, the mask of the Engaged Artist—you are liable to find a strike-breaker, a spy, a traitor, a con-man or a cynic, although admittedly you might even find a wonderful human being. The Engaged Artist has adopted an aristocratic self-definition so as to remove himself

from the world of work, claiming that he can help liberate the oppressed by means of his “creative oeuvre.” The enormity of this pretension is compounded by the prior argument that he is entitled to take this path by virtue of his uniquely original and creative nature. The implication is that these virtues are absent from the labor involved in, say, extracting a wisdom tooth or keeping a row of bricks nicely even. When the Works of Art of the Engaged Artist display the markers of consensus (formerly the hammer and sickle, nationalistic emblems today) or instantiate some recognized form of moral grandeur (denunciations, urgent advocacies, impassioned accusations), the Artist is purchasing his exemption from service-sector drudgery, and he secures it further with a pledge of his soul, catalogued as unique and uniquely valuable. His soul is a *hapax legomenon*, but because he’s a man of the people, it also purports to represent the oppressed masses. Which is rather like a platypus claiming to stand for the entire mammalian order. This fetishism surrounding “the Artist” should henceforth be confined to the Sunday supplements. As Fabrizio Caivano says, what we must do is take serious steps to expropriate the ideological real estate of Art from its landed gentry, the Artists.

The vastness of the world of contemporary art, its capital flows, its governmental and bureaucratic ventures, the huge crowds flocking to artistic spectacles, the miscegenation of art with advertising and the mass media, art’s dependence on the leisure industry, the globalization of art: all this demands that we enact said expropriation. Never before in human history has there been so much well-paid art biz... and so little Art.

Naturally this means it is pointless to adopt a moral stance of disdain for contemporary art. It is futile to take melancholy shelter in the view that Titian is so much more interesting than Andy Warhol. Like it or not, the world we live in is a one-way trip. And if we don’t understand how to imagine ourselves now, we won’t be getting a second chance later. However unwelcome our own image may prove (or perhaps precisely because it is unwelcome), a mirror held up by Rembrandt provides no escape.

## THE ABSTRACTION OF MATTER

The art world's evolution towards the depletion of Art runs parallel to a ceaseless global drift towards an unaccountable and invisible form of economic power. The formal decomposition of the arts in the second half of the twentieth century has its counterpart in the disintegration of all those economic media that were in any way bound to the physical world. The shift from enterprises headed by visible figureheads to supranational corporations having no fixed abode, no permanent face, is of a piece with the gradual decline in the physical warranties of wealth.

Our grandparents owned gold coins you could clink together. Our parents were at least aware that, stashed away somewhere in secret government vaults, there were piles of gold ingots that kept the value of money secure. We, however, realize that today's billions fly along virtual highways restrained by no guarantee at all; or, rather, money is whisked along by the only guarantee it ever had—faith. Wealth and power, consisting at one time of the tenure of land and the possession of precious things, are today but an “instant” of economic flow, a Brownian motion of pure signifiers untethered to any signified. This, too, can be said of the arts, which have finally slipped out from under the Work of Art's responsibility as a precious being, and now survive in the form of vaporous conjecture about their own nature.

Let's compare the state of artistic and economic institutions with that of the education system, the machine built to extrude a replacement labor force. Global democracies no longer need to preserve traditional culture (memory) except in its nationalistic sense (a sort of national merchandising). Today's working masses, though better dressed and fed than formerly, leave high school and university in much the same state of ignorance as the Mancunian proletariat of Engels' day. And, just like then, the cliques destined to take the helm are separately schooled. This is not a weakness in the system; it is its strength. It's not something that “needs to be improved;” it will inevitably worsen. For two centuries, industrial societies required widely read, thoroughly trained citizens able to make their own decisions and apply

critical judgment to straighten out whatever might be awry. No such citizens are wanted now.

Culture, art, and education were spheres that as recently as the 1950s remained the preserve of an elite—in Spain this was the case even until the late 1970s. Institutional figures like Clement Greenberg in the United States were vested in an authority that emanated virtually from the government, and exercised it mostly unopposed. Their authority, moreover, was expressed in written form. That scheme of affairs is as long gone as gentlemen's felt hats and young ladies' parasols. Art, culture and education are now democratic—or apt for mass consumption, which is the same thing; they are commercially plausible from the outset, subject to mercantile conventions, administered by managers, accommodated within the economic system. The new economic order admits no lasting visible authority in business or in politics; it sustains only short-lived simulacra, like the people “responsible” for the Enron and WorldCom debacles and their mirror images in the United States government.

Furthermore, the markets have taken root in the old strongholds of the art-world hierarchy, such as the Venice Biennale or the Kassel Documenta show, turning them into theme parks. The circulation of artistic goods is directed by the fluctuating interests of the mass media of commodification, just like that of any other industrial product. The symbolic world that underpins global democracy cannot afford the qualitative and antidemocratic scheme of art, education and culture of the bourgeois era, in which the criterion of excellence took precedence over volume.

If this broad-brush sociological account of mine holds true, it will surprise no one to hear that today's artistic output cannot be political. At best, politicization helps divulge the democratic platitudes which at any given moment are agreed upon as “current issues.” One year it was AIDS; another year, gender (but only the female gender); later it was oppressed or postcolonial peoples, or the invention of a

simulacrum of the human subject. And so on. The arts ennoble the clichés that television and the mass media coin as their currency of exchange. And if the arts should happen to be a few months ahead of the emergence of a new simulacrum of moral correctness, their role is simply to clear the way for political marketing outfits, who will forthwith bundle the new issues into their candidate's campaign package. The surfeit of abstract (and hence ineffectual) morality in today's arts is a continuation of the time-honored artistic function of domesticating anything potentially dangerous. The depletion of Art involves no change in function; only the intended clientele changes. Twenty years ago, that clientele was a select few; now it's all of us.

The fading of Art as the "expression of an original soul" (which occurred in the 1960s or thereabouts after the shakeout wreaked by the minimalists, the conceptualists and the other poststructuralist movements) has done nothing to minimize the commercial role of the "Artist;" it has merely shifted it into the tightly controlled domain of the "expert in artistic performances." As Hegel foresaw, this drift has meant that theory predominates artistically over the physical, creating one of the more interesting features of modern art: its dependence on academic philosophy departments. This phenomenon alone merits a brief digression.

#### THIS DICTIONARY'S LITERARY STYLE

Global democracy is indissolubly tied to the principle that all things can be bought and sold, which leads us to an increasingly instrumental use of critical language. Anyone acquainted with the experts and professionals of the art world instantly realizes that their currency of exchange is a wholly novel store of value: philosophical jargon. When an exhibition curator evaluates the candidates for a show, he lends a finely tuned ear to the aspirant's choice of words. Words like "rhizome," "schizo-analysis," or "*objet petit a*," place the candidate at one end of the esthetic scale, whereas "allegory," "aura," and "obsolescence" point the other way. The concepts of beauty and excellence having disappeared as governing principles, absolute artistic value now flows from aptness for the qualifiers

“meaningful,” “fresh” and “interesting.”

In a process reminiscent of the response to Lukacs’ theoretical wares, philosophical jargon has become fetishized. One is thus excused from the rigors of understanding it; it functions much in the same way as a portfolio of brand logos. To say “*plateau*” or “*jouissance*” (as brands rather than signs, many of these terms are untranslatable) at the wrong moment is as big a faux pas as wearing Adidas in a setting that calls for a pair of Church’s. This is no trivial question of fashion, but an essential code book of signals you must memorize if you intend to navigate the bizarrely knotted highway interchanges along which artistic vendibles are kept in motion. If you have no map, or your map is out of date, you will lose your bearings in a most bewildering and exasperating fashion. Philosophical terms, packaged as fetish signifiers, are now code-words brimming with a magical charge.

Each of those terms, when first coined by its inventor, held an enlivening, thought-provoking energy, but once adopted as jargon by the original author’s followers, it serves no further purpose than to dress up dead language, like an architect pretentiously invoking Le Corbusier’s *brise-soleil* to conceal his lack of imagination and borrow light from another’s glow. These terms are crooked quartermasters bedecking their chests with medals plucked from the battleground dead.

One striking consequence of all this is that you can use the jargon with aplomb yet not have the vaguest notion of how it fits in with any broader intellectual frame. Bluntly put, you don’t need to have read Kant to make effective use of the word “sublime” in the manner of Lyotard; you need only have paid attention to who’s using the term, in what context, and to what effect among its hearers. The elegance and distinction that have always characterized the professionals of the art world are now circumscribed by a code of conduct far stricter and more inscrutable than anything practiced by the connoisseurs of Henry James’s day.

To discourage the fetishistic use of jargon in service of ulterior motives or as a form of currency, we must know it intimately and yet keep our distance. Reams of

essays, criticism and inquiry about current artistic issues, almost invariably produced in academia, boil down to mechanical permutations of jargon terms paired at random or, for bolder spirits, thrown together in foursomes. These pieces are admirable exercises in intellectual mimicry; they reach no conclusions, betray no sign of original thought, venture no opinion of their own. The genre revives the old tradition of Latin as the language of erudition, lending a distinguished air to the crudest dunce.

However, if what you would rather do is give the academic industry a wide berth—as I did when I wrote this dictionary—then you must seek harbor in the classical literary models of the essay, and accept that failure will be your reward. Thus, this is a book meant for everyone. Its aims and intentions are both literary and mainstream; it is deeply enmeshed in the constraints of the market, but unashamedly so. How can one discuss the arts if not in a “personal” way? I think Walter Benjamin had this very question in mind when he said, “Poetry can be criticized only through poetry.”

We should note that the only language still looked upon as “truthful” is the language of science, in which you can say the most outrageous things and not get so much as a blink by way of reaction, partly because not even scientists can move beyond the boundaries of their miniscule linguistic domains without feeling they are treading the brink of a void. On the plane of the arts, then, scientific language is simply a cluster of jargon picked up here and there in an exercise of cheerful *bricolage*, as I outlined earlier. Straying from commercial highways always feels a bit like a reversion to the days of the pack-mule. Sadly, there were no other options.

As the reader will readily perceive, this essay disguised as a dictionary wavers back and forth between the hope that Art was more than just a Romantic invention, and the grim belief that the age of Art as dreamed into being by the Romantics has long since ended. This book, in fact, is a sort of prelude to a not-yet-extant *Introduction to Contemporary Art* which in all likelihood I shall never be bold enough to write,

because any discussion of contemporary art is a discussion of the modern world in its symbolic guise, and you need to be very young to take something like that on.

The chilling thing about contemporary art is that, though holding no promise for those clinging to the bygone bourgeois democracy, it remains a revealing phenomenon as to what human beings *could be*. The output of the past fifty years has destroyed our notion of Art, bringing about a profound shift in artistic practices and so casting a more truthful light on that which we know about ourselves.

That enterprise, operating almost exclusively in the negative, has been the source of still greater strength, power and popularity for a range of pursuits which, if one listens to their practitioners, aimed solely at suicide. This lends a twist to the phrase “a victim of one's own success.” The corpse of Art is one of most revered and influential sources of power on the planet, and also, I firmly believe, the best place for field experiments in our evolution towards some form of post-humanity.

Baudelaire was first to sense that commodities would replace works of art. The locomotive on show at the Exposition Universelle held for him the angelic power of an Assyrian frieze. And the vast dialectic cycle of that process is now over. The work of art has at last usurped the place of merchandise as the system's central fetish.

Now that the Global Guggenheim exhibits Harley-Davidson motorbikes and Armani clothes alongside the artifacts of Richard Serra and Jenny Holzer, what we hear are the dying gasps of a process that wrong-footed any number of Marxist fellow-travellers, including Walter Benjamin. Fifty years on, the commodity remains triumphant as sole effective symbolic product, insofar as the work of art has laid its own truth bare. It has thrown off the mantle of a metaphysical object laden with moral responsibility—a mantle it wore throughout the period of bourgeois preeminence—so as finally to display its commercial, fetishistic essence. Free of its religious mask, a work of art in the age of global democracy commands the heights from which it can exploit all available markets, and is far better able to compete *as an item of merchandise*. So far, it hasn't done too badly.