

Good Morning !



Revolution or Bust



Yue Minjun - "The Execution"

One wonders if twenty years from now art from North Africa will have gained the cache now associated with Chinese art. A vogue for post Tiananmen Square works has quickly grown over the past few decades, as fascination with China's politics and economics has been matched with an interest in its aesthetics. Even documents from the Cultural Revolution have been reclaimed – either for their dissident status or as useful documents of “social realism” through which to understand the “cynical realism” and “political pop” associated now with such figures as the Luo Brothers.

But it's not entirely clear what to make of mainstream or dissident Chinese art today. It seems to coincide almost directly with the dilemma of such appropriative art in the west: it risks mere cooptation without affecting the real problematic structure at hand. What, really, is political about Mao, pop-style, with bottles of Coca-Cola floating around? Certainly we should acknowledge the power of belief in the Cultural Revolution, and the necessary disillusionment to follow, but the representation of that disillusionment does not a new revolution make.

For a rarely shown video, Harun Farocki made a documentary about the planning of a mini-mall. One watches for some time as the German executives debate where to place an ATM. Conversations like the following are heard: If we place it here, one planner says, we'll get the diagonal traffic from the shoe store. But if we place it here, we'll get the traffic entering from the food court. With meticulous precision, the developers plan exactly how to extract as many ATM fees as possible, and also to ensure a steady flow of readily accessible cash into the consumers' hands. One might laugh at

or chide the avarice, but it is possible that such goal-oriented precision is the greatest achievement of contemporary capitalism.

One wonders where such tactics are in Chinese – or indeed any – political art today. Sarah Topol's slate.com essay “Revolutionary Logistics” looked in detail at how cell phones get charged, or toilets arranged, or food organized, in the midst of an unfurling uprising. But where have such logistics been since? Will we see in Egypt the logistics necessary for a functioning democracy, or will a loss of precision cede power to the forces that gather?

Perhaps the most striking image in the show Post-Mao Dreaming: Chinese Contemporary Art at the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania, is one from the Grasslands Series by Yue Minjun. The series as a whole features several of Yue's trademark characters with smiling faces in various poses in what are presumably fields in China. The images have variously been



interpreted as about China's youth and frivolity in politics on the one hand, and, on the other, as a serious comment on the difficulty of coming to terms with the atrocities of elements of Chinese rule over the past few decades. (This is most famously seen in Execution.) In the Grasslands image on display, Divine Figure, Yue's character, larger than life, is about to smash into the Chinese countryside. If there is something to fear about the outcome of our revolutionary moment, it is perhaps no longer this “only a God can save us” gesture, which is, of course, more likely to destroy the food subsistence than inspire any great action. Rather, it is that our new network societies will prove as susceptible to failure as the dream of charismatic authority.

-Avi Alpert

Richard Harrod

a.k.a.

A Larger Refrigerator

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SAMPLE



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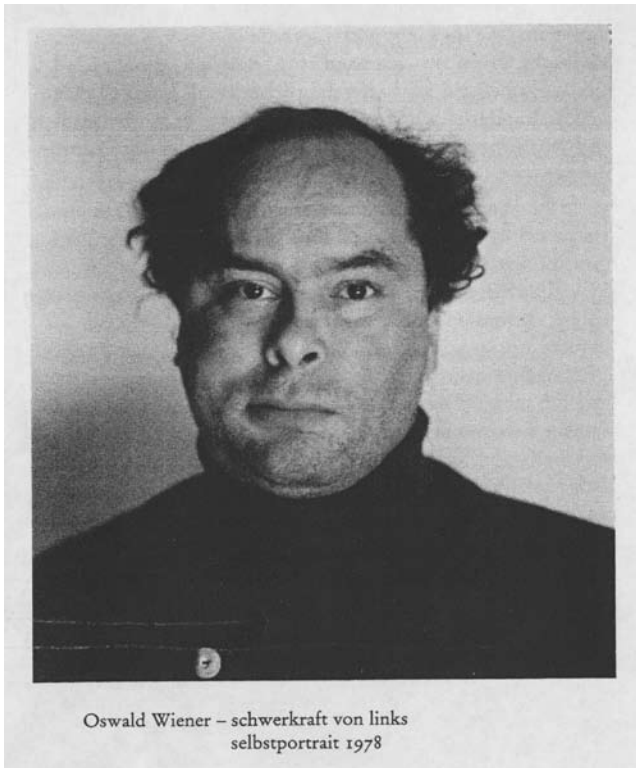
JEROME KLEIN - TWENTY-ONE GUN SALUTE • STUART DAVIS - MEDIUM OF 2 DIMENSIONS

ETHEL OLENIKOV - MAY FIRST • STEFAN HIRSCH - TECHNIQUES AND MEDIA

On Assignment:

Prolegomena to “I Myself Am Only A Receiving Apparatus,” Joachim Koester at Jan Mot r. A Dansaert 190 A Dansaertstr. Bruxelles, 29/01-12/03

-For Oswald Wiener



Literary jealousies, the vertigo of the infinite, mental woes, the insults of poverty: Poe fled all of it in the darkness of the grave. For he drank not as a lush, but as a barbarian...

*-Baudelaire on Edgar Allen Poe
The crux of Dandyhood, of all self-observation without a theoretical interest, is the barren infinity of this inward turn.*

-Oswald Wiener

I stepped off the train to Brussels a little later than expected. No bother, the assignment could wait. There was a light drizzle. The grey of the city was protected by a misty gauze. I had the distinct impression that if I cut the city, like thought, it would ooze grey. I made my way to the Archiduc.

Generally I find two or three glasses of Lafitte suffice to soften the brain. A fourth jostles it from its stupidity. As it ripens, it becomes more attuned to the singular, the idiosyncratic. A delicate balance must be struck. Like a well-cooked egg, the tissue of the synapses should remain runny while the meat remains firm. Nothing too viscous. No gelatinous muck. But nothing of the magma should be lost.

The brain too has to be cured. Its machinations slowed, so that a slice from its bulk can be shaved off and digested. I prefer Iberico ham. In such brine, the mind akin to a wax mold becomes a fine recording apparatus retaining a singular imprint of the sundry impressions that regularly assault it. Sobriety ensures that these impressions are harmless, fitting them into the habitual schemata that orders the world and makes it possible for us, with mechanical precision and little to

no thought, to place one foot in front of another. If too drunk impressions bleed out in a blurry mess.

Although I confess the prospect of pickling the brain in Lafitte holds its appeal. When one is tempted to let the universal mud swallow up all distinction and relax as the last gasp is wrung from a lung engulfed in quick sand—for temptations of this ilk—there is Poe's Angel of the Odd. “Mein Gott, den, vat a vool you bees for dat!” Life attains an elegant precision when the strings of the marionette haven't been fully clipped. In these rare circumstances, the mind assumes a bluish tint, cooling the illusory glow of consciousness and enabling, if only briefly, its unsystematic meanderings to be charted. One becomes the idiosyncratic observer of one's inner and outer surroundings. An ad hoc theoretician. Or is it a theoretician of the ad hoc?

I ordered a fifth Lafitte. A conversation caught my attention. There are a rash of incidents in which homemade saunas unwittingly serve the purpose of entombing their makers. It seems that the amateur miscalculates, failing to factor in the degree to which the door swells when heated. Thus it is not untypical for the makers to be cooked alive by their creation unable to escape the confines they erected.

After the fifth Lafitte, the mind is an

icy mass. Aloof, cold and resistant. Distant. The world refracts through its layers. Consciousness loses its sovereignty and the mind locates itself elsewhere, expressing everything and nothing. Not a self, but its gesture. A gigantic mirror which reflects, in the other's incomprehension, its disgust with life, the penury of existence, and the baseness of the human animal. I paid up and left. Jan Mot was only a short distance. The drizzle chilled my flushed cheeks.

As I entered the space, my eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness gently illuminated by the projection of two 16 mm films. For the exhibition, Joachim Koester selected two recent works, presented with the utmost Geschmack. I found the hum of the projectors soothing. I remained transfixed by the central figure in both films, the poet Morten Soekilde, as if struck by an apparition of an impenetrable form. In both films, his gaze remains steady but vacant, inscrutable and obscure. I knew what I would write. I wrote my name in the visitor's book, the void heavy as each letter was awkwardly etched. Not to be a dandy, but to play at it. As I left, I had the sudden impression that the world could end. Not tomorrow or the next day, but the day after the next, at 25 minutes after 10.

-Ludwig Fischer



• **Joachim Koester**, *I myself am only a receiving apparatus*, 2010, 16mm film, black & white, silent, 3 min. 33 sec. (looped)

Dollar-Book Void

Enter The Void. A bold, unabashedly philosophical title from a filmmaker always eager to announce his own boldness. One suspects that Gaspar No  , who alluded Nietzsche in his controversial previous film *Irreversible*, imagines himself as a filmmaker who philosophizes with a hammer. However, for No   this seems to mean taking a few vague ideas and smashing the audience in the face with them repeatedly and mercilessly. If this approach makes No  ’s Nietzschean posturing somewhat embarrassing, it can nonetheless be bluntly effective. *Irreversible* took a few banal ‘ideas’ (“The desire for vengeance is a natural impulse”, “Time destroys all things”) and managed to make them powerful and affecting, if excessively unpleasant. This was due in large part to the effectiveness of No  ’s two simple structural and formal conceits: the scenes are ordered in reverse chronology, and each scene is (or appears to be) filmed in a single unbroken take, which are often breathtaking technical achievements. These combined with the simplistically brutal events and emotions – rape, murder, jealousy, rage, horniness (which No   seems to consider an emotion) – to make for a viscerally, if not intellectually, stimulating experience, which, to my mind, was not entirely without merit. Though No   employs even more novel formal and structural conceits in *Enter the Void* and displays even more impressive technical inventiveness, here these fail to inject the vague ‘ideas’ explored with any interest; in fact, the overwrought aesthetic only highlights the emptiness of the whole exercise.



‘Dollar-book Freud’ was how Orson Welles characterized his use of psychology in relation to the search for ‘Rosebud’ as *Citizen Kane*’s structuring gimmick. In *Enter The Void*, No  ’s gimmick is dollar-book Buddhism. The structure of the film is foretold in an early scene when a character crudely summarizes the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*: when you die, first your whole life flashes before your eyes, then your spirit drifts around trying out different consciousnesses in order to decide how you want to be reborn, then once you’ve decided you are reincarnated. And this is how the film unfolds. The protagonist is Oscar, a young American living in Tokyo, selling and experimenting with drugs while negotiating a near-incestuous relationship with his stripper sister, Linda. The opening section of the film is shot entirely from Oscar’s ‘first-person’ perspective: we see and hear only what he sees and hears (including flashes of



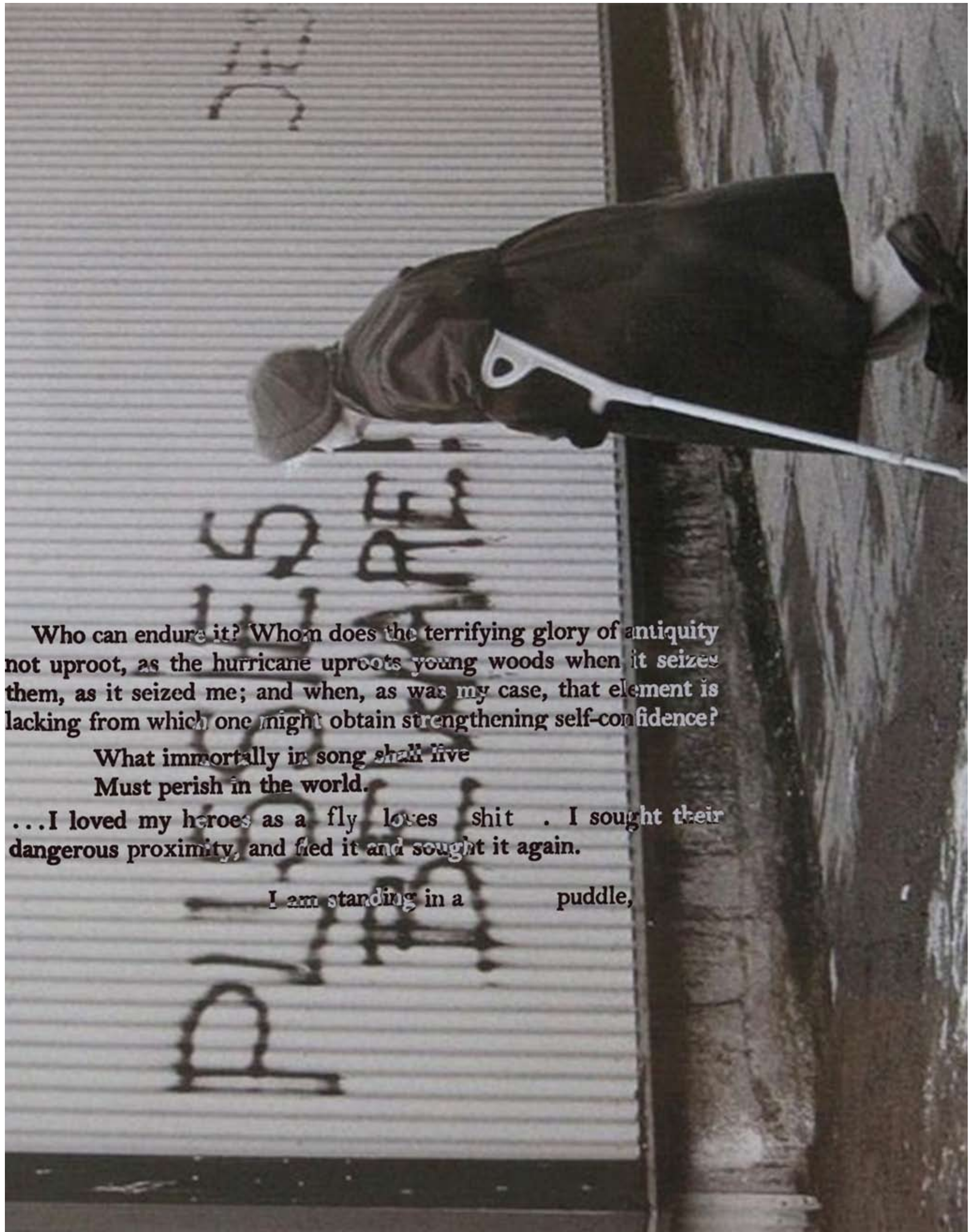
black when he blinks, and ‘trippy’ colors and shapes when does drugs). His thoughts, such as they are, are articulated in sotto-voiceover (after he takes drugs he thinks “Whoa, it’s starting to kick in”). This section continues for 15 minutes or so until Oscar is shot dead in a drug deal gone wrong (he thinks, “They shot me, I’m dying”), at which point the camera pulls out of Oscar’s consciousness and assumes a floating bird’s eye perspective. The rest of the film alternates between this overhead drifting-spirit mode, in which Oscar’s consciousness floats around watching over his sister while occasionally trying out different consciousnesses, and a memory-mode, in which we observe flashbacks from Oscar’s life from a camera positioned directed behind his head.

Give credit where it is due, No   manages to construct an entire of the film switching back and forth between these two unconventional perspectives (floating-spirit-mode and memory-mode). That this works at all is due to No  ’s technical brilliance and bravado. Years in the making, *Enter The Void* looks and sounds like no other film ever made. No  ’s camera shows us angles we’ve never seen before, performs moves we never thought possible, and forces us to inhabit points of view we’ve never imagined (including not only moment-of-death-POV and floating-Buddhist-spirit-POV, but also vaginal-canal-being-filled-with-semen-POV, sperm-in-search-of-an-egg-POV, and newborn-emerging-into-the-world-then-burrowing-into-an-ample-breast-POV). This is all as absurdly impressive as it sounds. However, No  ’s virtuosic technique and inventiveness become tedious when offering only new variations of the same tricks. For instance, scenes repeatedly end with the camera descending into some kind ‘void’ (a sink drain, a lampshade, anything circular really). This motif, not exactly subtle to begin with, becomes laughably predictable the more it is repeated. Even when trying his hardest to provoke and shock, such as forcing us to watch a graphic abortion, the contrivances of No  ’s aesthetic render his images dead on arrival. His camera hovers insistently over the disposed fetus, but we are already looking around for the next hole.

Perhaps in a more unassuming context, such as a low-budget horror film, the tedium and absurdity of No  ’s trick shots could potentially be forgiven and enjoyed, novel as they are. However, the pomposity of their presentation combined with the inept narrative and the shallow philosophical pretensions, both of which No   seems to want us to take seriously,

suck all joy from the proceedings. Welles’ dollar-book Freud was a gimmick used to tie together the complexities of his fragmentary narrative, his aphoristic insights, his diverse cinematic experimentations, and his inventive showmanship. No  ’s gimmick functions more as an attempt to make inanity seem profound. If the structure is dollar-book Buddhism, the basic narrative turns out to be sub-dollar-book Freud. In the flashback scenes we learn that as young children Oscar and Linda witnessed the violent deaths their parents in a car crash. Though Oscar promises Linda that they will always be together, they are soon separated and sent to different foster homes. As a young adult Oscar moves to Tokyo, and earns enough money selling drugs to bring Linda over to live with him. However, her yearning for him has turned dangerously incestuous over the years, and the joy of finally reuniting with him manifests itself in a variety of inappropriately expressed affections, enacted in various states of partial undress. The basic plot of the film becomes Linda’s struggle to cope with Oscar’s death as he (and the viewer) watches over her as a floating spirit. For No  , coping means mostly deciding whom to sleep with. (He uses Paz De La Huerta’s enticing nudity as an antidote to her poor readings of his bad dialogue by alternating embarrassing scenes of Linda emoting with pallet-cleansing scenes of her pole dancing or getting fucked.)

With unintentionally comical bluntness, the film presents all desire as the blatantly disturbed Freudian variety, a doomed search the lost bliss of the maternal connection, which was still powerfully sensed in the innocence of happy early childhood, though not as powerfully as when sucking on a nipple as an infant, nor of course, as when inhabiting the womb. The temporary satisfactions of sex and drugs owe their appeal to their approximation of the numb bliss of pre-natal nothingness – which in No  ’s cheap Buddhism represents the true void of being (or something). The schematically Freudian narrative gets resolved when an appropriate substitution is found for Linda’s incestuous desire (Oscar’s big-brother-like friend Victor). This resolution is signaled by the fantasy sequence that occurs when Victor and Linda finally couple. As they enter the aptly named ‘Love Hotel’, No  ’s camera (in its sprit-Oscar-mode) leaves Linda and Victor for a while to shows us various characters from throughout the film fucking happily in hotel rooms – the first time in the film sex is presented as unproblematically joyful (we know it’s



Who can endure it? Whom does the terrifying glory of antiquity not uproot, as the hurricane uproots young woods when it seizes them, as it seized me; and when, as was my case, that element is lacking from which one might obtain strengthening self-confidence?

What immortally in song shall live
Must perish in the world.

...I loved my heroes as a fly loves shit . I sought their dangerous proximity, and fled it and sought it again.

I am standing in a puddle,

joyful because glowing translucent swirls of light flow from everyone's orifices). The sequence culminates in a scene of Linda and Victor making glorious love, which climaxes, literally (Noé's idea of wit), with the aforementioned vaginal-canal-POV shot and ends in a white-out as Victor's spurting cum blissfully blinds us all. This, in turn, resolves the schematic *Tibetan Book of the Dead* structure: Oscar chooses to be reborn as Victor and Linda's love child, which then leads to the aforementioned birthing-POV shot.

This is the sum of the film's philosophical posturing, Noé's hollow notion that the void of desire and the void of being

are more or less one and the same. Whether this is meant as New-Age consolation (the troubling void of desire need not be so troubling since it accords to the void of being), or nihilistic provocation (the comfort of accepting the void of being should not be so comforting since it only condemns us to endlessly re-experiencing the void of desire) is unclear, and the vacuousness of both options does not compel one to spend much time reflecting upon either. Indeed, it is slightly embarrassing even to expel the energy necessary to articulate film's the awkward, pseudo-ideas. It's tempting to simply take the film as an empty exercise in style – the title beckoning us to abandon our

minds and give in to the film as we might to a new drug. However, such a generous approach would require the aid of further stimulants, since the tedious contrivances of the film's aesthetic are an insufficient distraction from its underlying inanities. With *Enter The Void*, Noé not only wields his over-confident hammer in the service of dubious purposes, but the hammer itself turns out to be ineffectual, unable even to conjure the blunt force required to stun us into temporary acquiescence with his sham-philosophizing.

-Mike Vass

What is the end of art?

The 'end of art' argument, once prominent among at least a certain cadre of critics and artists, rings as hollow now as Lyotard's opposite diagnosis of the death of grand narratives. If the end of art is going to retain any critical or explanatory force after the exhaustion of a whole series of monolithic histories of progressive development (modernism in art, Marxism in politics, positivism in science and philosophy), then we need to reconsider what this rather catchy phrase entails.

To reactivate the relevance of 'the end of art' we should first insist that it is not a descriptive statement about the current state of artistic production. The evaluation of such a descriptive claim would require a careful consideration of its accuracy, its ability to capture contemporary aesthetic practices more or less globally. Such an evaluation would, I think it is clear, prove less than favorable for the theoretical veracity of our critical claim. If the end of art is not a theoretical description of artistic practices, then what is it?

We should understand critical claims concerning the end of art to be a part of the constellation of practices that determine the current state of art. That is, critical diagnoses and interventions should be recognized as a part of the field of activities that contribute to the determination of the contours of the art world, the works it produces and identifies, the artists it lionizes, and the ideas it develops. If art is autonomous (an important claim whose validity demands careful evaluation), it is not autonomous from art criticism. Art critics determine the contours of contemporary art at least as much as the productions of individual artists do, and it would be wrong to look on the critical contribution as an external intervention unjustly narrowing the scope of legitimate art practice.

If art can be identified as an intellectual endeavor (and if it cannot, we ought to abandon it to the superficialities of interior decorating), then the task of the critic is not to distill the ideas animating works of art but to intervene in the production of those ideas themselves. Sometimes in collaboration, more often in tension, artistic production and critical analysis do not stand in an external relation, and so it makes little sense to reject the critical diagnosis of the end of art because it is false. That would be something of a category mistake.

The end of art does not signal the death or exhaustion of a set of artistic practices; it rather identifies something about the constellation of artistic productions, critical reflection, and curatorial goals as a whole. What has come to an end is the conceptual unity of this constellation. The artist and critic are no longer engaged in a collaborative pursuit of some common aesthetic project (realistic representation, formal reflection on the limits and conditions of media). The formal unity of art, prized since its elevation by German idealism and romanticism, has given way to the kind of embarrassment that leads us to only very hesitantly talk about 'art.' Art has ended inasmuch as artists and critics have abandoned the previous majesty of the conceptual unity

of art. The end of art is a reflexive position in a critical-artistic theoretical practice, and not a theoretical description of artistic practices.

Once seen in these terms, the end of art is no longer a rather quaint theoretical declaration, but a critical intervention that polemically insists on the necessity of abandoning previous critical conceptions of the art. Such an abandonment requires a reconsideration of the theoretical practice of criticism and artistic production. In particular, it calls for a reconsideration of the end, or now more properly, the ends of art. The end of art demands a reorientation of art and criticism toward new and diverse ends. The articulation of such ends is what is immediately contained in claims about the end of art. And such a reorientation is of the utmost importance if art and criticism are to contribute intelligently to a current economic, political, and intellectual disputes.

-Mike Olson



Rembrandt and Saskia: A Wedding by Arthur Danto circa 1964



Good Night !

