

# **A Pitiless Art?**



## A Pitiless Art?

Supermart □ Terrorist and Terrorized □ Disfigured Art □ The Iconoclasm of Presentation □ Colluding with Destruction □ The Voice of Silence □ Making Images Speak □ The Face of the Figureless □ The Arts of Disappearance

*Sylvère Lotringer: You've been trained as a physicist. You can understand science from the inside. Science happens to be your best enemy.*

**Paul Virilio:** Today there are many mathematicians, but few physicists. A friend of mine, Michel Cassé, an astrophysicist, just brought out a book called *Du Vide et de la création* [Of Void and Creation]<sup>1</sup> in which he talks about quantum systems. And he wrote: “Clearly, astrophysics today, the research into the universe, is mathematical: it happens at a highly specialized level. But as to whether it still is physics or not, well, I don't think there is any way of telling any more...” Einstein managed to maintain both, but astrophysicists today have taken off...

*We could say pretty much the same about art.*

About art... You know, I think you're right.

## Supermart

*Art today has become a highly specialized profession. There are powerful museums and galleries, throngs of curators, art critics, art magazines, all spreading the word with an evangelical fervor. New biennales are being born everyday in the most unlikely places. The world is becoming a boundless supermart: “A place where art meets consumerism and where purchasing becomes an art.” No one would dream of questioning art’s right to exist anymore. But whether what’s being produced today is art or not... You recently published an essay, *Le Protocole silence [Art and Fear]* in which you challenged the art of the 20th century. Your book has been harshly criticized in France and elsewhere, just like Baudrillard’s pamphlet, *The Conspiracy of Art*.<sup>2</sup> Both of you are now considered the enemies of contemporary art—and all the more sought after because of that. But I am not sure that what you said has really been heard.*

Actually the French title for *Art and Fear* isn’t “le protocole silence,” but *La Procédure silence*.<sup>3</sup> Yet you’re quite right to use the word “protocol,” because it is not exactly a book. It brings together two talks I gave on contemporary art at the request of Jean-Louis Prat (the book is dedicated to him). Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard had already made an appearance and Prat suggested that I should take my turn. But he told me: “You happen to have known everybody, Braque, Matisse—I worked with them, which is pretty rare—all the abstractionists, Max Ernst, Viera da Silva, Poliakoff, Rouault, Bazaine, etc., so I would like you to talk about art.” I wasn’t thinking about doing that at all. Just look at my books: I’m into speed and other stuff. I don’t discuss art.

*You wrote recently a long catalog essay on Peter Klasen, the German “realist” painter.<sup>4</sup>*

I’ve known Klasen for twenty years, and I have been thinking about writing this text for a long time. I could have written it twenty years ago, but the occasion didn’t present itself until recently.

*You’ve often mentioned the Italian Futurists, but it is true that you’re mainly interested in them because of their enthusiastic embrace of technology and fascism, as well as Marinetti’s aero-mythology. You never talked about the group’s paintings. So this book is a first for you. You’ve written on cinema and war, so it is surprising you wouldn’t have tackled art before.*

So I accepted the challenge. I told myself I could take a retrospective look at contemporary art through my lived experience. These talks are those of an individual looking back on his century at its close. I wrote them in 1999, just after finishing *The Strategy of Deception*<sup>5</sup> on the war in Kosovo, a genuine book on warfare.

## **Terrorist and Terrorized**

*The war in Kosovo, as Marinetti would have said lyrically, was won “from high in the sky.” Actually Marinetti was flying just a few feet over the rooftops in Rome. His Futurist Manifestoes were written on the eve of WWI. It didn’t take long before the planes were used for bombing in Africa and in Ethiopia, and then in the sprawling European battlefields. As for us, of course, we are moving rapidly towards the militarization of circumterrestrial space and orbital strategies, a kind of cosmic panopticon capable of unleashing terror from on high*

*through the electromagnetic ether. There's no more futurist avant-garde, or artistic avant-gardes to speak of, as if the future had already moved behind us. Do you think art has kept apace with the exponential development of war and technology, or has been deeply affected by it?*

Thinking about it all I realized that the art of the 20th century is basically terrorist, and terrorized. And I would say it is both. It has been devastated by the two World Wars, by the Holocaust, by techno-nuclear power, etc. You can't understand Dada or Surrealism without World War I.

*It was the first assembly-line massacre on a cosmic scale.*

It was the relationship to death, the accumulation of dead bodies on the battlefield. The inventor, so to speak, of German Expressionism is Otto Dix—I would call him its certified inventor because he experienced this pitiless century in the battles of the Somme Valley, in the mud, in the shit that he translated in his art. And do you know who he was pitted against in that battle? Georges Braque. I worked with Braque on the Chapelle de Varangéville, so it all hangs together. Braque and Otto Dix, the two men facing off at the mouth of the Somme River: Braque brought us Cubism, which is a form of deconstruction, and Otto Dix brought us German Expressionism. We stepped into an art that already was the victim of war, and which, of course, did not recognize itself as such. When they saw camouflaged tanks, Picasso told Braque, “*We* are the ones who did that.” Yet they did not understand that the Cubists were not the creators of camouflage; they were the victims of the deconstruction of World War I.

*According to you, Cubism then wasn't just a formalist experiment inscribed in the history of art or in the destruction of perspective, as it is commonly envisaged, it was artistic realism, like Peter Klasen's work is technological realism. WWI blew reality into pieces and Braque collected them in his paintings the way people collect pieces of flesh after the explosion of a human bomb.*

No doubt about that. Now onto the Surrealists. Surrealism has been idealized by all these exhibitions, by the advertising slogans of cultural salesmen while I maintain that it was a victim of war through Dadaism. When Huelsenbeck in 1918 said, "There isn't enough cruelty; we want more violence, more war; we were for the war and continue to support it"—somehow that was proof that they were contaminated, alienated war victims.

*Huelsenbeck was just upping the ante on the unbelievable violence that had been unleashed by war technology on the helpless foot-soldiers in the trenches, and it clearly shows that Dada's revulsion toward war remained visceral. It was certainly central to the entire movement. It is not mere chance that Dada was born in Zurich, in neutral ground. The rest of Europe, sold to shoddy patriotism and colonial greed, was becoming a living hell.*

We're really sick of hearing about the Surrealists's dreams and "merveilleux." The Surrealists were war casualties, they were "broken faces." [The French expression, *gueules cassées*, became emblematic of soldiers disfigured by shells.] Mr. Breton and Mr. Aragon are broken faces, nothing less.

*Both were assigned to military hospitals during the war and that must have been a pretty ugly sight. The first book André Breton and Paul Eluard published was The Magnetic Fields. They could have called it the “mined fields”, or the “killing fields.” It was all about delirium, and the entire generation, those who survived the onslaught, had literally been shell-shocked. Automatic writing became their machine-gun.*

When you look at Aragon’s political history, you can tell that his experience of the war extended into communism. Let us continue: World War II. Abstraction, *disfiguration*. You can’t understand abstraction without war—or rather the two wars. I love abstract painting, don’t get me wrong, but it is a disfiguration. They made the face disappear, which reminds us of other exterminations where bodies were made to disappear. And on the other hand, there was Viennese Actionism, a capital movement. Otto Muehl was a genius of a painter. Hermann Nitsch, Schwarzkogler... and many others. What did they invent? Body art, self-mutilation, self-torture. This accounts for the continual inflation of super-violence in German Expressionism and also the practices of body-art, like those of Orlan and my friend Stelarc, the two best known body artists, the duo. You can’t understand the Viennese Actionists without torture. Joseph Beuys, who was he? He was a bombardier, and I love Beuys. But you can’t understand Beuys if you’re not aware of the fact that he was a Stukas pilot. Beuys was conscious that he was a war victim. And Otto Muehl, what did he do during the war? You can’t understand Otto Muehl if you don’t realize that he was a Wehrmacht soldier and fought against Private Ryan on the beaches in Normandy, etc. Contemporary art has been a war victim through Surrealism, Expressionism, Viennese Actionism, and terrorism

today. Now it is time to recognize that we are the products of major accidents, and war is one of them. But today, accident and war are just one and the same thing. You just have to look at the World Trade Center. Not being an art critic myself I decided that I would try and translate all of that. In essence that's what the book is about.

*Art is war by other means.*

Art is the casualty of war. So don't let anyone bug me with the crisis of contemporary art. The most contemporary thing about contemporary art is its crisis. And we could segue with terrorism in the present. I am willing to show the associations between terrorism and so-called contemporary art. The day contemporary art recognizes itself as a casualty of war, we can start talking again.

*Instead of painting elaborate camouflage...*

Instead of making camouflage. You found the right expression.

*So that is what art would be. Painted faces, broken perceptions, make-up art. In this compulsion to camouflage, there would be no recognition that the wound is bleeding right under the paint.*

That there is a wound, that there are stigmas, that there is trauma. They should reread Freud's writings on death. They should reread *Civilization and its Discontents*. If there ever was a time for that... Mind you, I am not a Freudian, that is not in my nature. I belong to a technological and military culture, not a psychoanalytic one. I am not like Jean Baudrillard, but I still have gone back to Freud, and I must say that it did enlighten me.

## Disfigured Art

*In 1930 Freud theorized that there was an aggressive instinct that keeps threatening civilized society with disintegration. But he acknowledged as well that the external world had a lot to do with it, as it is “raging against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction.” Although Freud saw the death instinct as something innate, a “primary mutual hostility,” death always comes from the outside. Freud explicitly referred to the horrors of the two World Wars.*

It is amazing the extent to which psychoanalysis has not broken away from its beginnings. For me there are two Freuds. The first is the theorist of the unconscious; and then there's the theorist of the death drive. Trauma and the death drive came out of WWI. You can't understand this new dimension without it. Precisely at the time something started to crack; culture and contemporary art were deeply impacted by it. Psychoanalysis turned to the death drive, it had no other choice. You can't really speak of a “huge massacre,” the way French Premier Lionel Jospin did about the “Chemin des Dames,” without invoking of the death drive. [Jospin finally cleared the name of all the French soldiers executed by the military police on the “Dames' Way” for having deserted the front.] In its own bizarre way the War in 1914 already was an insane slaughter, wave after wave of people jumping off from the trenches for an all-out assault against an invisible enemy and each time mowed down by machine guns—two hundred rush out in the open, instantly decimated; they sent two hundred more, trampling on the dead, etc. The army moved a few kilometers at the cost of thousands of men's lives. Generals would say, “Give me three thousand more men and we'll grab one more mile; with thirty thousand, we will take over three.” It already was delirium.

*That's how Voyage to the End of the Night starts: the senseless killings, the insanity of it all. You remember Céline's famous 1934 speech in Médan... "In the game of humanity, the death instinct, the silent instinct, is definitely well-positioned... You would have to be endowed with a truly bizarre style to speak of anything else than death these days. On earth, on the seas, in the air, now and in the future, there is nothing but death." Céline was wounded on his horse during WWI. Later on in Vienna, he was introduced to psychoanalytical circles, and by Wilhelm Reich's wife no less. He saw Germany on the edge of the abyss... Céline got the idea right away, as Reich did, that the masses were not fooled or oppressed; they were throwing themselves eagerly into the jaws of death.*

You can't understand the 20th century without the death drive.

*Still you have to admit that the death drive is triggered by something. You trip the switch and it all fires up, but first something has to trip the switch. Céline fathomed the deep desire for nothingness entrenched inside human beings, but he recognized that the "unanimous amorous, almost irresistible impatience for death"<sup>6</sup> among the hystericized masses was almost always stimulated, provoked and held by stupidity and brutality. It fed all the way into the Führer's "suicidal state."*

This is something that comes out of the War in 1914. Take another war victim: Bazaine, the abstract painter I knew and who also used to make stained-glass—I didn't make any with him. They said to him, "Hey, you've become abstract." And he would answer, "Yes, you could call it that." But he preferred the term "non-figurative." He insisted that "abstract doesn't fit me." So they asked him when did this happen. "After the war," he replied, "my painting diverged all by itself." I wrote it down.

*I assume it wasn't the kind of diverging painters experienced at the end of the 19th century when confronted with the invention of photography.*

No, no. In the first instance, technology made the divergence unavoidable: heliography, or light figured by itself through the stenotype, and later figured on photosensitive substances. In the second, a social trauma caused figuration to diverge. *Disfiguration*—when Bazaine says “non figurative,” that’s what he means. The war is disfiguring art, the way it destroyed and smashed the Rheims cathedral and later on destroyed Oradour-sur-Glane.<sup>7</sup> War does not simply destroy bodies with shells and bombs, it destroys outdoor spaces as well.

*It's land art on a huge scale.*

Just look at the hills in Champagne today compared to what they were before, when they had trees. So there is a disfiguration of war that will move over into art, independently of Cézanne’s or anyone else’s theories. When you read Kandisky and others who invented abstract art—what do you hear about them? Everyone says that they came to it through music, for example.

*Actually Klee played the violin, even came from a family of musicians. He painted for the birds, like Paolo Uccello.*

Of course, music was really important... But that’s not all there is. Disfiguring events happened in the 20th century. Nothing but disfiguring events.

*For those who were disfigured, disfiguration must have been a sort of figuration then. Abstract art would have to be looked at in an entirely different way.*

Yes, Rothko says as much: “I can no longer use the figure without destroying it, so I’d rather be abstract.” I’ve known many other abstract painters, including de Staël, but for me Rothko was the greatest.

*So according to you, abstract art wouldn’t merely have abstracted itself from representation; it would have devised means by which it could be level with the horror. Art running away from destruction, or preempting it retroactively by cleaning the slates.*

Abstract art is not abstract, it is an art of retreat. I was much criticized in the French press for my book. The editorialists said that I didn’t understand anything about art. Get lost, I felt like telling them: you don’t understand anything about the *culture* of art. You’re specialists of this painter, of that style, of this genre, but you’re incapable of articulating what emerges in an entire period.

*There’s the culture of art as there’s the culture of death, and in the 20th century the two came together.*

Anthony Blunt is a great art critic. (He is one of those English spies who defected to the Soviet Union, him and his two friends, Burgess and MacLean.) When Blunt deals with the Renaissance, he gets inside the art in an extraordinary way. But he doesn’t do criticism on Fernand Léger, he does *art* criticism. My book isn’t art criticism.

*In terms of criticism, your claim is pretty extreme. You're bringing all these disparate strains down to a single traumatic factor. It is certainly a powerful one, but is it sufficient to account for the whole range of the century's art?*

Yes, I maintain that it's art as the victim. You can say that human beings in the 20th century were impacted because they had certain political opinions, because they belonged to particular races, etc., and it is true, I'm not denying it. But they were victims in one way or another and *without exception*. Paul Celan, one of the last great poets I loved, is the perfect illustration. Art was mortally wounded like the rest, and we haven't recovered from this wound; on the contrary, we're wallowing in it under the pretence of Actionism, protest. We haven't recovered from this victimology. Contemporary art is victimological, and it doesn't acknowledge the fact. It is beginning to enjoy its situation in the world instead of screaming in pain.

*Artists and writers who came before WWII, "high modernists," as they are usually called, like Antonin Artaud or Simone Weil, bore witness of the catastrophe ahead of time. They attempted to ward it off by putting themselves on the line. The exhibitionists came later.*

Curiously, they showed up after World War II. For my money, the Viennese Actionists are exhibitionists who have nothing in common with Artaud or Otto Dix, those who suffered. They're playing with the detachment of a dandy—just like the SS.

### **The Iconoclasm of Presentation**

*At the beginning of Art and Fear, you cited the remark made by Jacqueline Lichtenstein after she returned from a visit to Auschwitz.*

*She saw the glass cases with the piles of suitcases, the mounds of dentures and eyeglasses, and she wasn't overwhelmed by them...*

No, she wasn't. She felt like she was in a contemporary museum.

*And you made this devastating remark: contemporary for whom?*

She has some excellent things to say.

*Her observation is interesting in several ways. First there's the obvious: Christian Boltanski, the clothes installations, shoe boxes stacked on rows and rows of bunk beds, etc. The drugstore of death. But in some way the reference here is being reversed. The Auschwitz installations can be seen as a template for contemporary art. Nowadays, whenever you pile up objects, you seem to be referring to the Holocaust, documenting the devastations of the century. A heap of objects, like Arman's pile of suitcases in front of the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris—in front of a railway station, no less—instantly suggests inhumanity. And I'm sure Arman didn't see it that way, being a humorist of sort. It must have been for him a modern version of the Egyptian needle. And yet the gruesome reference imposes itself. Recently they had an exhibit inside the Gare du Nord with the pictures of all the families rounded up at the Vel'd'Hiv in Paris in July 1942 and shipped by train to Auschwitz. Recently I arrived there by train from the Charles de Gaulle Airport and by the exit I suddenly saw hundreds of pictures lined up on panels with the people's name, ages and addresses. I was devastated. I could have been there. Accumulation is the art of the assembly-line—Heidegger's celebrated sentence (the only one he consented to say) on the factory-camps. Museums also are assembly-lines.*

It's concentration, in the sense of concentration camp.

*More recently Rebecca Horn elegantly figured a pile of corpses by stacking a dozen violins at the end of a piece of railroad track for her Holocaust memorial in Weimar. On the other side of a plate glass behind the track you could see heaps of sawdust of different colors. It was exquisite, and deeply obscene. I wish she had extended the tracks all the way from Goethe's House nearby all the way to Buchenwald, scarring the lush German countryside. The Nazis went all the way, why stop short at these guarded metaphors? What is missing from contemporary art is that it does not recognize death and suffering. Consequently it ends up being dead itself.*

It is dead, and above all, it has forgotten tragedy. Art is not free from tragedy. It is extraordinary to see to what extent accident was censured in the name of the cult of happiness, the cult of success. Comedy has dominated to the point that tragedy was erased. What remains of tragedy today, especially in France? Nothing. There are no tragic authors. They are considered to be pessimists. Consumer society demands optimism. When Beckett came to France, what did he write? *Waiting for Godot*. What did the French do with it? They turned it into a comic play. What we're seeing now is the return of tragedy. The first text I turned to when I started writing was *The Birth of Tragedy*. And what is so wonderful about it is that Nietzsche reveals that democracy was born in the face of tragedy. He says it: the tragic choir is the birth of democracy. In the face of the heroes' madness, Creon, Antigone, Oedipus, etc., the tragic choir debates. It is high time we reinvented a relationship to tragedy in painting, literature, philosophy and politics, all at the same time. At present everyone is talking about dirty wars, the dirty Chetchen war, Bush's dirty war in Iraq, but at the same time, terrorists and martyrs are idealized. We did the same with our

soldiers in 1914. But no. The terrorists are not pure. War must be waged against them. This does not mean that I agree with the war in Iraq, not at all. The terrorists are one thing, and the terrorized another, but what is extraordinary is that the terrorized are beginning to resemble the terrorists, like the victim resembles the executioner. It is the victims' way of protecting themselves. The victim sees himself or herself as an executioner.

*Does this apply as well to the attack on the World Trade Center? Baudrillard called it "a terrorist situational transfer," the terrorist response to the terrorism of global power—terror against terror.<sup>8</sup> Would you consider this a case of "a victimization situational transfer"—victims against victims?*

With the World Trade Center, we have an iconoclastic phenomenon and no one foresaw it. There are two types of iconoclasm, at least the second one has just appeared. There is an iconoclasm of representation. Just as there was the auto-da-fés and the destruction of statues and cathedrals during the French revolution, there was the iconoclasm of destroying the Buddhas of Bamyán. The Taliban and Bin Laden did the same thing, first with the Buddhas and then with the World Trade Center. The World Trade Center was the icon of capitalist representation: Wall Street. There were two of them. There was an iconoclasm of the representation of capitalism after the representation of Buddhism.

*The twin idols of the two world religions standing tall. The religion of money and the religion of the cosmos.*

Right, but a second was created: the iconoclasm of *presentation*, the constant, worldwide replay on every channel of the impacts on the

Twin Towers. We were not informed, we were frozen in front of a single message generalized on a world-wide scale. This tele-presence in reality is an iconoclasm of real presence, because we only saw one thing. Everyone knows that we need two eyes in order to see anything in relief and make a choice. Anyone who aims a gun knows this. In that case, we only had one eye, a “big optic” on the global scale. The *single* big optic. Solitary vision is an iconoclasm of presentation.

*But isn't that what tele-presence does anyway, even if it doesn't focus obsessively on one solitary event? It's the illusion of "being there," the mirage of the live image.*

To go from representation to presentation is to lose distance. All ancient art, whether they are primitive, civilized, savage or naive, are arts of representation. The end of representation has happened in the press and the media, *and it's going to happen in art*. Let me explain: the essence of the press is its being old news a day later. The day after, a newspaper from the day before is totally devoid of interest. The Daily is today. Of course, with live coverage, in real time, thanks to the speed of light, presentation replaces representation: now it's webcams, it's “reality-shows.” Art today is doing the same thing. It no longer plays off distance. It's one of the levelings I am bringing out when I talk about the world: it's the pollution of distances, temporal distances and not simply spatial distances.

### **Colluding with Destruction**

*And even art today is threatened by this pollution. It just presents itself.*

This is a major philosophical phenomenon. I have spoken with Jacques Derrida about this; he contested the term “presentation,” telling me it isn’t that, etc.

*No wonder: Derrida’s entire work involves the deconstruction of the “metaphysics of presence” in speech from Plato to Claude Lévi-Strauss. The claim that there could be such a thing as “real presence” as opposed to real-time simulacra goes against his very argument.*

I am not a philosopher, I don’t give a damn about philosophers. I am an essayist and I am working on my own turf. I say that telepresence is a presentation. So, there you have it. I gave the first talk of the book, which is called “A Pitiless Art,” by way of reference to Albert Camus—whom I discovered after WWII, during the occupation of Germany. I read *The Stranger* in the barracks at Freiburg, in the 50s, all in one shot. And what did Camus write? “The twentieth century, this pitiless century.” So I went for the pitiful/pitiless side of things—*pius*, impious, in the sense of piety, since the two words are related. When someone tells you that you’re impious, it doesn’t mean that you’re profane, it means you’re pitiless. The words are inseparable. The word “pitiful,” you’ll notice, means pathetic or shabby, whereas to be pitiless is to show some character. So there you have yet another perversion. The Latin word “pius” is what gives some popes their names: Pope *Pius*. It doesn’t mean holy, it means “he who takes pity on.” It means that you show or have pity. So you will invoke the Inquisition, alright. But what I mean is that it is a criterion of what we analyze, just as it is for the sublime. They are the criteria that allow us to reflect on situations, objects, etc. In my opinion, the terms pious or impious are of the same nature as good and evil, beautiful and ugly. For

me, the beautiful and the ugly are the basis of aesthetics, and the true and the false the basis of philosophy—to keep things simple. The pious and the impious are a dimension we cannot get beyond. And I believe we can no longer broach the questions of art, the questions of politics, the questions of mores without saying: this is pious, this is impious. Today it is something that has been swept aside... Precisely, the art of the twentieth century is an art that shows no pity, including toward the artist.

*This was a century that backed away from nothing. It's no surprise that art, too, would have gone to extremes.*

It's a century without pity. At first I put a question mark on "A Pitiless Art," then I took it back.

*You don't seem to give contemporary art much of a chance. Did you show more pity for it in the second talk you gave? It is called "La Procédure silence" [Silent Procedure] and you gave this title to the entire book. But why silence, and in what way is silence a "procedure" that qualifies art?*

The second part takes up again the question of pity by using the Silence of the Lambs as its theme. Today art is the silence of the lambs. I took the title from the war in Kosovo, NATO's war. Just read *The Strategy of Deception*: during the war in Kosovo decisions were made through a procedure of silence. Given that there were a dozen countries involved in the war, the American commander-in-chief of NATO presented the strategic targets, and the others weren't going to argue for three hours before bombing a bridge or the Chinese embassy, therefore silence—saying nothing amounts

to consent. I took up this expression because in my opinion the silence of art, the fact that the visual arts are silent, has become the equivalent of the Silence of the Lambs: a conditioning, a dumbness.

*Visual arts obviously don't speak, so you can't literally reproach them for being silent. So I assume you're talking about another kind of silence. Remaining silent at a time of emergency. The visual arts have remained by the wayside as the entire culture is now being threatened by the extermination of space and the instantaneity of time. Instead of looking for ways of offsetting creatively the danger, art is looking away, or looking at itself, even nodding silently, colluding with the ongoing destruction.*

Yes. Note that what I am saying mostly concerns art in the 80s-90s, that is to say the last twenty years. Everything we have talked about came to a stop in 1990. In my opinion, that is when things changed. And contrary to what people are saying now, they haven't come back together. *Finita.*

*The 80s was the period neo-conceptual art allegedly started opposing media and advertising, turning it into an ironic art, a critique of commodity, a radical take on consumer culture. Richard Prince, Sherry Levine, Barbara Kruger, etc. were all busy reframing the Marlborough Man, rephotographing classical photos, rephrasing billboard clichés, reappropriating or recycling images. Gary Indiana, with a twinkle in his eye, called it "market art." It wasn't an oxymoron, it was what art in whatever form or shape has become. Any other kind of art by then was becoming impossible. As Jack Smith used to say (but, of course, he was a crazy man) "What is done with the art—is what gives it meaning... If it goes to support Uncle Fishhook, that's what it means." This is Uncle Fishhook time, and art is remaining silent, or making empty*

*gestures and statements against “powers-that-be” so that everybody can feel good about themselves. Art got reborn “critical” at a time criticality was no longer possible in an art world thoroughly bound for the market. Baudrillard had brilliantly demonstrated that fifteen years before in The Consumer Society,<sup>9</sup> but the message never sunk in. No one drew conclusions from it. Even his “simulation” was taken as a critical stance. It was much worse. By then critique had stopped being the point and art, merely looking from new “angles” and quick-fixes, stopped trying to reinvent itself as art. No wonder critical gestures or critical signals were immediately given credibility and promoted to the status of great art. We’re beyond good and evil. Art today is thriving because it is entirely besides the point. I guess this is what you had in mind by this silence.*

The infinite repetition of Duchamp and Warhol can be nothing else but academic art. I can’t stand Warholism and Duchampism anymore. It’s not a consecration of their modernity. On the contrary, it’s the cessation of it. We’ve buried them.

*Abstract art was a flight outward, pop art a flight inward, now there’s nowhere to go except questioning the status of art itself. We’ve reached a point where all the distinctions are being leveled, public and private, science and art, not to mention the distinction between sacred and profane.*

Art has become uncultivated. And that means profane art has somehow disappeared...

*Uncultivated, I imagine, in the sense that cultivation is no longer possible.*

Yes, the cultivation of the absence of cultivation. Myself, I used to love the Impressionists: they were the profane par excellence. In my day as a painter, I loved Cézanne, After all I am an architect. Now I would say it's Giacometti—but the more I think about it, the more I am sure that the Impressionists were the real revolutionaries.

*You consider that the Impressionist revolution is still ahead of us?*

They're the ones who opened the widow in the wall of official art, who exploded its sacred side, because official art is always a sacred art. There are plenty of great painters: Poussin painted marvelously, and Chardin, too; Corot is a good painter; but the Impressionists went off the deep end. They were the first relativists, the first to use Steiner's relativity, the light and all of it. I feel really close to them. They reintroduced a profane vision in all the official arts of the French Republic, not just in Saint-Sulpice art [bland religious art] but also in the painting of war. So, whether we're talking about Degas' or Monet's paintings—in my opinion, between Turner and Monet—we're dealing with a great revolution. The other revolution is Nihilism, Netchaiev, which announces totalitarianism through the October Revolution and through Fascism. In my view, you can't understand Impressionism without this nihilism. But today we have returned to Nihilism, to a nihilism of another kind.

*We could call it consumerism, or the technological revolution.*

Also, you can see the joy, you can see the feeling these painters had *before* the war—before the wars which we just discussed, before the

pitiless period. When you look at impressionist paintings, you say: this is incredible, this is different. What is this? The war had not yet happened. The Paris Commune was still too early.

*Still, Impressionism already moved art towards decomposition.*

Yes, but an analytical, conceptual deconstruction through optics, the laws of optics. Pointillism is pixels. Monet's series are already cinema, and in color too. When Kandinsky was a child—around twelve years old—the windmill series came to St. Petersburg, I believe. Kandinsky went there, and didn't see anything. He told his father: "What's that?" His father says: "I dunno." He didn't even recognize the windmills. And then Kandinsky said: "I went back because it was unusual—a painting that resembles nothing." It was like cinema, only in slow motion...

## **The Voice of Silence**

*In a nutshell, your opposition to the visual arts now is that things no longer appear; they disappear without even appearing.*

They disappear to the point of being totally eliminated. And there we have the metaphysical dimension of the phenomenon. Contemporary art is contemporary with all of it: the loss of bodies, the deterritorialization and disembodiment Deleuze analyzed. That's all science does: eliminate. Eliminate bodies to the point... Well, that's the question: *to what point?*

*The paradox is that art over the last twenty years has tremendously emphasized the body, as though it had to show it one more time before*

*it disappeared altogether. It wasn't a rediscovery, or a post-modern resuscitation, it was post-mortem before the fact. Freud also insisted on the symbolic power of the family at the time it started it disappearing. And Lacan merely doubled it up by casting the symbolic (and the Father) into language. There is a kind of...*

...exhaustion.

*Yes, but it's like a flush on the face of a consumptive. Sickness parading as health. There is an exacerbation of genders and sexual differences, not to mention of sex itself, just as they all are on their way out. We've never trumpeted so much crimes against humanity now that science can no longer tell what is and what is not human.*

You have to have fireworks before the end, including the return of woman now that she is being eliminated. My greatest fear is that contemporary art has become an *optically correct* art, an art that can no longer permit interpretation.

*To my mind art doesn't need interpretations. It has enough problems proving that it exists, that it still is legitimate. It's all voracious cannibalization, cross-references and cryptic connotations crying to be interpreted. It's become some kind of a con-game. Art history fronts for art, and often replaces it altogether. Everything is being historicized now that there is nothing left that's worth historicizing, and the same goes for the pollution of exhibitions, "Kassels of cards." Artists themselves become the historians of their own impossibility to survive their art. You anticipate the accident of science, but have you thought about an accident of art?*

Yes, you bet.

*Is it of the same order?*

The accident of science induces the accident of knowledge, and art is a branch of knowledge, there's no question about it. Here we touch on something that interests me very much: the accident of knowledge. Through mathematical precision, through the experimental method, we have built a structure for science. But there are branches of knowledge without experimental methods, in the mathematical and scientific sense of the word—and that's what art is. Experimental science is the opposite of story telling, chimeras and myth. The rational position of science has gradually broken away from alchemy and magic. The experience, the experiment of art can't be mathematized, and so, yes, in my opinion, the accident is total. We are entering the period of the *total accident*: Everything has been damaged in the accident. Knowledge has been mortally maimed. This is not the apocalypse, forget about it. This is not catastrophic in the sense that everything is going to stop and we can finally cross over into the world beyond the world—not at all. No, everything that constitutes the world has experienced an accident, and this *without exception*. This colossal dimension of the accident surpasses us, and that's why I am so passionate about it.

*The accident of art could be that art no longer has any reason to exist. This doesn't prevent it actually from growing exponentially more than it ever did before. Quite the contrary, the more it is defined by extrinsic conditions—by its position in the market place, in the art circuits, as part of the monstrous museographic inflation—the more it will have to look inward for justifications. Its existence is guaranteed to last ad*

*infinitum in some kind of suspended animation. No one would dare take off the plugs. It's too good for everyone to keep going in that happy comatose state of the arts. The end of art has been so much discussed everywhere (most brilliantly by my friend Arthur Danto) because it's already behind us. The end is becoming meaningless. We may be at the past-recovery stage. This brings us back to the silence of art.*

This is no longer André Malraux's *The Voices of Silence*,<sup>10</sup> quite the opposite. I'm trying to explain that silence is a voice. I'm obviously paraphrasing Malraux, but mainly the *Old Testament*, especially Psalm 18: language without speech. God speaks without speech before the Prophets. Before Israel. God speaks in Creation: the sun speaks to the night, the night to the day. Clearly, the language without speech is the language of Creation. And Creation is nature. It's the sun, the beauty of the sea, etc., but it is also the creation of humanity. It's the silence of painting, the silence of the Impressionists. This silence was thwarted, and definitively in my opinion, by the arrival of the talkie—not by the arrival of cinema, but by the *talking* cinema. Painters were already doing shadow pantomime; the camera obscura was a camera with shadows that you would see almost photographically. Athanas Kircher's magic lantern was also something of a shadow. So, in my opinion, the cinematograph did nothing but continue painting by other means: the crank or electricity. On the other hand, when the image began to speak, to call out, we entered a world in which Plato's cave and the Sybil's cave were superimposed. What could the visual arts do against the birth of the audio-visible? Plato's cave is extraordinary, but no one talks about the Sibyl's cave. It just so happens that I was at Como, to the north of Naples, I went to the Sibyl's cave; it was the place that touched me the most, even more than Pompeii and Herculaneum.

And the Sibyl's cave, what do you think it is? It is a place that speaks and asks questions. It raises questions...

*... to which there're no ready answers.*

It doesn't give answers, but nowadays you do have answers...

*...and no more questions.*

So here we have an important revolution. Video images, infographic images, they are all *images that speak*. It's similar to what I said about the vision machine—giving sight to a machine without a gaze, sight without seeing, and giving speech to an image without humans: we are faced here with developments that can only disturb art's voices of silence for good. And beyond, the voices of silence of every kind, and whatever they are. Never again will there be a sunset, never again will we enjoy the beauty of the mountains. Do you remember the beginning of that novel by William Gibson: "The sky was the color of TV." That's the only thing I remember of it, but it's perfect pitch.

*So the talkie is a hybrid, a monster. A cinema that is fatally maimed because it relies on verbal crutches.*

It's the end of art, yes. Afterwards it was just *bricolage*. In 1927, the jazz singer Al Johnson, who was white, painted himself in black-face. And the first word he said was: "Hello baby, hello Mom." It's really extraordinary. Hi Mom!

*A new art was being born. It was a farewell to silence.*

They should remake this film, or show it again. There were others, but this one sets the standard.

## Making Images Speak

*So this is the second part of your book. It deals with the impact of the talkies on art.*

Yes, on art. It's an impact which has been rather neglected, in fact totally overlooked. The impact of silent film on art is banal. Curiously enough, no one has really discussed the impact of the *talking* film on art, including the best critics. Not even Gilles Deleuze in his books on cinema.

*There has been, of course, many discussions about film's impact on politics. The talkies not only killed the expressiveness of the body, it also silenced the audience by erecting linguistic frontiers between nations. Jean-Jacques Abrahams, "the man with a tape-recorder" celebrated by Jean-Paul Sartre in Les Temps Modernes, brilliantly defended this thesis in a delirious essay, "Fuck the Talkies."<sup>1</sup> Silent film, he wrote, used to speak to everyone. It raised the possibility for mankind of finally "rediscovering in itself a common language, the principle for the unification of humanity." And the talkie shouted it down to the ground. It triggered the unspeakable devastations of WWII. Hitler's film propaganda, the muting of the masses, started just after the talkie began. But yes, I don't recall any discussion of its effect on the visual arts. People generally assume that visual arts don't talk, hence the need for interpretations, commentaries, theory to supplement them. Making art must be a dumb activity...*

There are a ton of books which have been written on the cinema as setting the image in motion, animating it at the expense of the fixed image; but in my opinion, the denaturing effect of talking cinema has a far greater responsibility for the terrorism, the upheaval, the disaster of contemporary art than cinematograph itself.

*Artaud raged about the effect of the voice on film. He saw it as the negation of cinema, and he quickly dropped it for the theater. Actually most of the features of his theater of cruelty come straight from his previous involvement with silent film.*

The talking cinema happens from 1927 to 1929. This was still the great critical period in the United States.

*And you believe that the talkies could be held responsible for ending that period more so than the 1929 crash, as Abrahams also alleges?*

Yes, by synchronizing vision and audition, just the way action and reaction recently have been coupled in a process of simultaneous interaction through “tele-action.”

*So there's no more need for the audience to say anything, or even think for themselves, let alone dissent. The talkie does it all for them. Actually it doesn't even need an audience. It is one onto itself.*

Yes, it's a ventriloquist's art.

*What's left is silence, but of another kind. It is not conducive to reflection or contemplation. It's a silence filled with empty words.*

It's "keep your mouth shut"... As George Orwell said, the screen satisfies in advance every one of our desires...

*It's Mom and her autistic child. Silence used to scream, the talkies silenced it.*

Yes. First Munch's scream and then Beuys' silence. If someone ever worked on silence, and deliberately so, it's our Luftwaffe pilot with his fedora. German expressionists of the 1920s and 1930s anticipated mass communication because they tried to make images speak like the screen. You can't make walls speak without endangering frescoes, or painting. When art starts shouting its fear or its hatred, there can be no more dialogue or questioning. I touched on all that in the book, and of course I also discuss the aftermath of the great massacres, Cambodia, Rwanda, etc.

*You could well see conceptual art as a way of preserving this silence of art, but at the expense of painting. In conceptual art the idea is more important than the way it looks, and it may be discovered intuitively rather than being articulated. The form this idea takes is not really essential, sometimes a mere approximation. Planning and execution are what makes the art. You can see that, for instance, in Sol Levitt's work.*

In my view, conceptual art was an attempt to bring art closer to philosophy. It's true that art and philosophy have always been close, you can't separate them. Marcel Duchamp is more a philosopher than a painter, even if the "Nude" is a beautiful thing, independently of everything they say about it. The *Big Glass* is really extraordinary. I wouldn't say as much for many of the other things he did.

*Conceptual artists viewed their work differently than philosophers would, but it is true that conceptual art had philosophical implications. Joseph Kosuth, who invented it, definitively conceived it that way.*

Yes, I believe something is really at stake in this aesthetics of disappearance. Conceptual art tried to transfer the silence of art into the language of the concept. What spoke was the concept, a speechless concept, speaking in place of speech. There was something extraordinary there, something that went well with our research. Conceptual art was one moment, a really great moment. Now it's over. Now anything goes.

*Conceptual art was poor in means. It often was a non-object art that resisted, often successfully, to the enticement of the art market.*

It was a poor art, but of a different poverty than *arte povera*.

*Now even diagrams, notes and sheets of paper from conceptual artists like Dan Graham, let alone Fluxus, have become quite valuable as well. Conceptual art cultivated the art of disappearance, just like Mallarmé...*

Just like the great modern architecture. An architect like Tadao Ando, for example, independently of his Japanese culture, had a conceptual dimension, and I could cite others. Now they're all becoming manufacturers. Frank Gehry is no longer conceptual art; we're back to formalism...

*Yes, I agree. Conceptual art is mostly devoid of formalistic or aesthetic content.*

It's speech, the concept is speech. I want to say: the way to resist the talking image is the conceptual image; the concept speaks. It speaks silently. But loud enough for us to hear it, whereas I see many painters, including narrative figuration, where you don't hear anything. The long piece I wrote on Peter Klasen, a beautiful book, came out one year before *Art and Fear*, so the two are connected. It's called *Impact Inspections*.

### The Face of the Figureless

*Klasen is a German artist, a neo-realist painter.*

He was born in Lubeck, and he was in Lubeck during the bombing.

*He was a victim, you wrote, of the war of time, of this century which has seen the ruins of cities, Germany's year zero.*

Peter Kasen witnessed the conflagration in the cathedral where the Virgin of Membling disappeared. He's someone who lived through the war.

*Klasen's art, you said, is the art of the accident. But there's no outward accident there. At least nothing that one could identify as an accident. His paintings seem caught in slow motion. They are about smooth, frozen machines, or present cutups of technological equipment. He breaks it down so we see it for what it is. It's like pulling a gun apart before using it. The impact can only be inferred from the display of the parts.*

He simply focuses on the technological object. What interested me is that he did portraits of techniques, technological still-lives.

When he paints a grid, or a reinforced door with the words: “Warning: High Voltage,” he makes us see the face of the technological *dasein*.

*There’s no distance in the image. It’s completely flat.*

Yes. Like a fly against the window. Splat! What I like in his work is the large screens. They’re like “instrument panels” of a machine with warning lights studding the control panels. His images are stereotypical and iconoclastic. The threat is omnipresent in his work.

*You consider his work a deliberate act of resistance to the delirium of acceleration. It’s everything but expressionistic, and yet the violence can be felt everywhere. Klasen reveals the cold-bloodedness of technology through an excess of cold-bloodedness. It’s a technological nature morte, death made present through the ominous stillness of the machine. His work seems to be some kind of visual equivalent to what you’re trying to suggest on a more theoretical level. You often offer striking quotes in lieu of analyses. His work is just one big quote for what you’re trying to suggest.*

Klasen reveals the face of technical beings. The face of the figureless. It’s the *Silence of the Machine*.

*There’s nothing human in it, nor inhuman either. It’s just there, it doesn’t need you. The surface becomes kind of abstract. It’s not painting, more like a photograph. But it isn’t one either.*

No. He has this airbrush technique. It’s extraordinary. He borrowed the aerosol from the world of advertising. When I was a

child, I also painted advertisements and film posters for Giraudi, then a big paint firm in Paris, using the same techniques. He paints like a publicist—but it's not advertising. In my opinion he diverted the figurative through advertising. So, on the one hand we have pop art, and on the other advertising techniques. He has a foot in each camp.

*He certainly didn't celebrate consumer objects, as pop artists did. He was consumed by technology. It doesn't address anyone. He refrains from touching the canvas, as if there was something diseased in what he describes, something invisible and deadly, like radiations. His paintings radiate fear. He uses airbrush as if to remain at a safe distance. No colored pigments either. It's all monochrome. There's a sinister feeling of imminence. Something is about to happen. It's stillness in the eye of a cyclone. And this kind of eye doesn't see. It engulfs everything.*

I couldn't have written that about any other painter. On the other hand I don't think it is an innovative text. I try as best I can to stick to the career of this man whose work I appreciated, but it also corresponds to another period. I refer to some contemporary issues in it, but what is happening right now really is beyond its scope. The book has had some commercial success and the publisher asked me to write another one on Poliakoff. "Are you familiar with Poliakoff?" he asked. And I said, "I have one of his works at home." But I refused. I have nothing to say about Poliakoff, except that I love his work. But Klasen, I am totally wrapped up in it. Not about everything he did either. In his latest paintings there are neons with cries, words inside. I think it's a mistake to make them speak, to subtitle paintings.

*So you're not necessarily against painting, as people generally assume you are.*

It's an aberration to say such a thing. With Klasen, it's the first time I wrote on a painter. But I've been a painter myself, as you know. I did photography for ten years, so you could say that art is in my life. You could put Peter Klasen with Paolo Uccello. These screens have such an evocative power. There's something so cold-blooded in them.

*It has a clinical look. It opens up technology to exhibit what's inside. It's like an autopsy. The autopsy of an entire culture.*

This cold-blooded gaze used to belong to doctors and nurses. They used to be called "the men of art" before it belonged to artists. Prior to the modern period, surgeons, all those researching on corpses, including painters like Leonardo da Vinci, didn't brag about it though. It wasn't a sign of professionalism as it is now. If they happened to mention it in their notebooks, but they didn't make it sound heroic. They even showed some remorse.

*You have criticized cinema because it talks and the visual arts because they're not silent enough. Now we're talking about the body of technology replacing the human body. You've always been preoccupied with the body and the possibility of preserving it from the encroachment of technology. The kind of architecture you devised in the early 1960s, the "oblique principle," was essentially trying to do that. It was meant to turn human dwellings into some kind of permanent training ground for the body.<sup>12</sup> Buildings would be entirely made of inclined planes that required a special effort, and would make sure that we would remain*

*conscious of our concrete corporeal existence through obstacles in everyday life. Consumerism was beginning to make everything abstract and insubstantial—merely comparing signs—and you were rushing in emergency remedial features. The Situationists started drifting through the city; you built up resistance at home. Oblique architecture was a soft version of Artaud's theater of cruelty, a modernist strategy meant to counter people's increasing absorption in a universe of signs and images. A spiritual antidote to the Society of the Spectacle. Your post-1968 realization that speed was the main culprit turned you towards physics and theory. You analyzed the dissipation of space in instantaneity and the reversion of live time into inertia. Most people, bedazzled by your dizzying anticipations, didn't realize that the presence of the body remains at the center of your preoccupations. And this certainly holds true for what you think about art.*

I still very much believe in arts that involve the body, dance, theatre, etc. That's why I think the plastic arts have gone terribly astray, not to call them totally obsolete. I believe the line of resistance no longer runs through them; it moves through dance, theatre, land art, which need a place and work with bodies. I gave up on painting a long time ago.

*With you the body always comes first. That's the root of your attack on contemporary art.*

I can't be myself part-time, by half-measures. I just can't. It's not easy to say it, but I love bodies, and bodies are always painful. They tell me the body is pleasure, and I say: you must be joking! Get old and you'll see. Bodies are pain, and pain is love. You can't separate them. I can't hide the fact that I converted to Christianity, so something in

me is attracted to the sinner. For me, a person only exists through his flaws. I have always been fascinated by assassins, prostitutes, etc. I feel like I'm one of them, because if you get rid of original sin, there's nothing left. You have no more humanity. My Christianity is connected to that. It's Jeremiah, not Isaiah.

### **The Arts of Disappearance**

*You said that resistance runs through the arts of representation. But dance and theatre require presence and immediacy.*

I mean that the latest contemporary art is a presentation rather than a representation. Representation has a cult dimension, so to speak. They are liturgical ceremonies. That's why dance is so important. But today dance is no longer dance, so what is it? A presentation that has no other value than in the moment. It doesn't seek to endure. It doesn't deal with the past, since we broke with it, nor the future.

*Modern dancers tried to break away from the classical ballet repertory of movements driven by a story or structured by a musical score. It was the breakthrough in dance and music that made New York so exciting in the 70s, from the Judson Church, Yvonne Rainer, all the way to "contact impro" and the combined performances of Merce Cunningham and John Cage. They got rid of a rigid vocabulary that didn't give the body a chance to reinvent itself in real time without being subjected to any contrived narrativity.*

Exactly. These are arts in the present tense, arts in real time. We're coming back to the "live." It's live art, and the only thing that

counts is its instantaneity—its “instantaneism,” as they say nowadays. This goes hand in hand with speed.

*Does it really? In modern dance the body is continually present on the stage. It's a total immersion in a singular experience, with no external crutches to peg it on. Granted, it is difficult to memorize or remember because the disjointed series of movements create their own logic along the way independently of the music itself. Chance connections prevail. But Artaud may have perceived the Balinese dancers in that way, as rigorous algebraic ideograms unfolding on the stage, not like a rush of images past the screen. He didn't know the script, and there was one.*

It's a spectacle. In my opinion, all art today is a spectacle. Whether dance, exhibitions, theatre, video-installations, or certain kinds of presentations like those sponsored by Satchi, it's only performances.

*Performance is contemporary art insofar as you can't repeat it. It's rigorous, constantly inventing its own logic. It stands all by itself and this is the beauty of it.*

I won't deny that. But, remember, I say: *contemporary with what?* It's contemporary in the sense that it isn't modern, or ancient, or futurist: it's *of the moment*. But it can only disappear in the shrinking of instantaneity, because the instant is constantly being reduced. We know it all too well: from microseconds now we've reached nanoseconds. So, in some way, the instant is what does not last, what disappears. A fixed moment would make no sense...

*I could argue just the reverse: that it is an attempt to extract from instantaneity a form capable of preserving the singularity of its existence, the*

*way buildings in California integrate structural mobility in order to absorb devastating earthquakes. It's very insightful, though, that you would make modern dance part of the overall "real time" electronic environment. This wouldn't have crossed my mind since they seem to belong to such different series. And yet dance participates in its own right to what the Situationists used to condemn as the "decomposition" or auto-destruction of the arts. But they may also be more apt to resist the powerful shake-up of all the codes. But it is true that Cunningham felt the need to record his dances on video to prevent them from disappearing altogether. Artaud insisted on the algebraic character of the Balinese dance, the mathematical rigor of the performance. He knew it was steeped in a powerful tradition, even if he himself didn't have access to it. These kinds of traditions have mostly vanished by now in our culture and we've got to experiment with new codes in order to find what forms could still hold.*

Choreography needs scenography, as does theatre, and this is fundamental. The *in situ*, the *hic et nunc* are everywhere disappearing, and this is leading to the elimination of the visual arts of representation while giving back to the body, once again, its power. I don't see how the failure of the visual arts can be overcome. On the other hand, there has been a transfusion of the visual arts in the corporeal arts...

*But this also means the spread of "body art"...*

Oh yes, with the frightening risk it entails. The continual inflation of super-violence in German expressionism, and then the practices of body-art, like those of Orlan and my friend Stelarc. I was very proud that Stelarc came when I was made Emeritus Professor at the Ecole

Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris. This man is incredibly intelligent. And at the same time our ideas are opposed in any possible way.

*Stelarc is a futurist.*

Yes, Stelarc is a futurist. Marinetti said: man must be nourished on electricity, not just protein. Stelarc and others have this idea that to survive humanity has to mutate, but mutate voluntarily by its own means. This, I think, is a delirium of interpretation on the nature of earth, which is one of the big questions of ecology. Ecology has not yet touched on it. It hasn't made much progress there.

*You find a similar idea in William Burroughs. The idea that the human species is in a state of neoteny and is not biologically designed to remain as it is now. And he envisaged the possibility of an "astral body," a lighter body meant to fulfill our spiritual destiny in space.<sup>13</sup> In the beginning art was premonitory, it was prophetic. Now, the futurists were also prophets in their own way. They anticipated the technological leap we are experiencing now. The same goes for Stelarc and Orlan, with whom you seem to strongly disagree. Orlan's "performance-interventions" are silent. And her videos of surgical operations often compel the audience to close their eyes. There's something obviously cruel and ritualistic about them, her "operating theatres" owe a lot to artaud's theatre of cruelty. Her work on flesh—she calls it "carnal art"—deliberately uses new technologies (hybrid images of Greek goddesses produced by morphing software) to call into question the status of the body in our culture. She went as far as inserting implants in her temples, or having a very large nose constructed surgically: these are questions addressed to the fragility of the body, and to the future of the human species.*

Many years before her physical transformations, Orlan invited me to her studio—it was behind the La Coupole brasserie in Montparnasse—to show me some photo-montages and installations (in which, as if by accident, she figured the Virgin, Madonna; and they were baroque too). Before I left she told me she was planning to have some aesthetic surgery done on herself. And she asked me, “What do you think?” Obviously I wasn’t in favor of it. I didn’t think that putting her own physical integrity at risk was such a good idea, but she insisted that artists have the freedom of expression. “Listen, Orlan,” I said, “you’re free to do whatever you want, even commit suicide. Anyone can commit suicide, all it takes is a window. But *I* am not free to tell you, ‘Go ahead, jump.’ You see what I mean?” She didn’t get it. That’s intolerance. I met a professor of contemporary art history who told me, “When I get to a class on self-mutilation, I’m at a loss to teach it...” Can he tell his students, “Take this razor-blade and go do your homework?”

*I have taught the Marquis de Sade occasionally and the class didn't turn into an orgy. De Sade was an enlightenment philosopher, except that he used fiction to exterminate any certainty about mores. I would say he was a great satirist, like Swift. Do people eat their own babies after reading Swift? Now the Actionists are an entirely different story. There's no distance whatsoever, and no humor involved in their orgies. They invite repulsion, which is a category of the sacred. Repulsion goes together with attraction. Hasn't shedding blood or tampering with one's body always been part of sacrifice? Originally art had to do with the sacred. And it seems obvious to me that Orlan, like you, is steeped in the Christian tradition. Self-flagellations and martyrdom were highly valorized among early Christians, and celebrated by the Church for centuries after that, not without a certain relish for cruelty....*

You can find violent practices in certain religions—I'm thinking of the mutilation of women's feet in China—but these practices were still connected to precise rituals. I believe there have been three periods of art. At the beginning, and it can hardly be denied, art was "sacred," in quotation marks. Sacred art includes cave painting or animism as well as the Sistine Chapel. Then we went from the sacred body—whatever body it is: saint, Messiah, angel, etc.—to the profane body. And today we are beginning the third stage in which we return to the profane body.

*One symptom of this return was the extraordinary interest accorded to bodies in the visual arts in the 1980s—even when wrapped up in an elaborate ideological or psychoanalytical critique. It was much less a rediscovery of the body than a sort of farewell to any permanence it once used to have. Now the body is not dismembered exoscopically in psychotic dreams, fragmentation has become a new reality and the body a mere logo game: changing parts that no longer seem to make up a whole. Dead bodies, in that respect, seem to hold together much better. They have taken over some of the attributes living bodies had to relinquish. This may have been an important factor in the scandal that surrounded the exhibition "Körperwelten" [The Worlds of Bodies] in Mannheim in 1997.*

It was held in the "Museum of Work," which was a little much, don't you think? Mannheim is in Germany.

*Dr. Günther von Hagens, the German anatomist who "prepared" the corpses for some kind of posthumous performance, was accused at first of being a "grave robber." But it may be the living, in fact, who had robbed dead bodies for at least a century by making them disappear*

*publicly. Today it is only fair that the dead would return from death alive. During the Baroque period, they had no compunction about displaying dead bodies anyway and it was both artistic and clinical. People were genuinely interested in what the inside of their bodies looked like.*

Mantegna, Paolo Uccello, the perspectivists: it was already science...

*And science which questioned itself in the best of cases. Science was coming out of the body in the open, as is happening right now. People like Günther von Hagens are just making it in a more spectacular way. Since that exhibition, millions of people all over the world hurried to see recapped cadavers perform some kind of still art, or flesh sculptures. Why? Till recently we thought we had lost the experience of death. Now that we no longer know what life is, or where it stops, we may feel the need to put death on display. Thanks to plastification—the substitution under pressure of fat in tissue by silicone plastic—and an uninhibited choreography, the dead become actors in a living drama of the flesh. Where we expected some creepy nature morte, what we have is “authentic” tableaux vivants. Do you believe the profane body could reclaim something of its sacred status through similar practices?*

Not really. The profane body reclaims the sacred through the *Homo Sacer* and the sacrifice. What was grand in sacred art, whatever the religion, becomes monstrous in profane art. But it is a sacred art. The return of satanic cults among children is a return to the sacred. The sacred in reverse, but sacred nonetheless.

*What would characterize art then, according to you?*

What characterizes art is creation. They can say what they like, but here we come back to pride, to the Bible. There's a demiurgic impulse in art. Sacred art *idealized* it. What is sacred art? It makes the demiurgic impulse official—taking oneself for God. The demiurgic impulse today is no longer sacred, it is profane. And ultimately the demiurgic impulse has been profaned. The problem is no longer the profane body, it is the body which has been profaned. In my opinion, the demiurgic impulse of sacred art has moved into genetic art, and into other sectors as well. And it means going *all the way*. It's thumbs down for the gladiator. We're finding ourselves face to face with a world that has been forgotten, and we no longer have any idea what it means. We'll have to read Augustine's *Confessions* again. He was a big fan of the games at first, and then he recoiled in horror at the sight of the atrocities. I don't want to say more. I don't have a theory of art, and have no desire to invent one.