FOR A HORIZON IN SPANISH ART

ARNAU PUIG, ART CRITIC, BARCELONA

Jaume Anglés. *Kaos 20*, 1987-2001. Oil on canvas (destroyed). Courtesy of the artist

To go around doing what is simply known as living, is one of the greatest sources of knowledge. It might also be the beginning of artistic awareness. When Baumgarten established the modern concept of the word 'aesthetic', he did so by stating

Jorge de los Santos. *L´Absent* (detail), 2003. Mixed media. 160 x 160 x 12,5 cm. © Galería Llucià Homs, Barcelona

that knowledge that belongs to the realm of the aesthetic is that which is unnecessary, that of whose meaning we are not quite sure, but which has an impact on us and matters to us and which we make our own, although we are not sure why. Are the conditioning factors of art any different? Something has an effect on our emotional sensibility and we acknowledge it as our own: that's all there is to it. We also want what we consider to be art to accompany us, to be within reach, because the sight of it, the feel of it, or the sound that appeals to our ear, brings us at the same time solace, calm and anguish. We need no theories to support it. I am still talking about effect, of course, as opposed to thought. Thought may accompany effect: by analysing the effect, we may increase our interest in whatever produced it and this may even cancel out the impression that caused our state of expectancy. As a result, the circumstance, or object, that caused the impact might even lose its artistic quality and become decoration, merely adorning our surroundings, in the same way that good manners are a pleasant adornment that provides no knowledge, although they do add to our communication skills.

WE EXPECT AND WANT TO BE SENSITIVE TO OUR SURROUNDINGS, BUT WITHOUT THEM DISTRACTING US FROM OUR DUTIES OR MOOD-SWINGS

I am looking at the issue of art as a medium, or setting, which conditions, distinguishes and qualifies a certain kind of *behaviour*. I think contemporary art is not far off from being considered in these terms because, if anything has been a decisive factor in the role of modern art, it is certainly not the fact that it brings us knowledge, but rather that it increases our perceptive awareness and awakens our dulled senses. This was pointed out by Lautréamont back at the end of the 19th century, when he pinpointed the contrast of the unusual as the beginning of a new sensorial horizon. We no longer hang paintings of battles or nudes, or portraits that show off our ancestry or daring, or that increase feelings of respect and admiration, as we did not so long ago. It does not make sense to hang images of this kind on the walls of an institution or a home, because they hold no meaning in terms of the role we have given architecture today, which is to house our businesses and accommodate our projects only as long as they fulfil a purpose or social goal, rather than standing for ancient lineage, and it must also take on board our desire for seclusion and privacy. We expect and want to be sensitive to our surroundings, but without them distracting us from our duties or mood-swings. However, we also want to be able to return to that first impression, just in case we feel the need to take a look at its ultimate meaning. It would no longer be a case of simple appeal to our senses, but would involve setting off a thought process that could end with us feeling the same concern that may have led the author to create the very piece standing there before us. The artwork merely attracts our attention without distracting us - if this is not the right time for it to do

Jorge de los Santos. *L'Absent*, 2003. Mixed media. 160 x 160 x 12,5 cm. © Galería Llucià Homs, Barcelona

so. It would not be out of context to suggest that artworks swing disturbingly between a simultaneous presence and absence, like an *à la carte* menu, always there to arouse our feelings, if that's what we want. Which is – although this is irrelevant - precisely what we can't accept when it comes to a cult image or a fetish, which is meant to be omnipresent and imperative. An artwork does not do this; it steps forward or withdraws, according to who might be wanting it.

Obviously, this is not sociology, merely a few considerations on the role of art in our society today, precisely when it's demise had been forecast due to the fact that what had justified its validity—i.e. the sensitive expression of thought—no longer made sense. Thanks to the work of artists themselves, instead of representing imposed or received ideas, the production of creative art had become the expression of a series of aesthetic concerns—the formalism of a unique profession or job, that goes way beyond good craftsmanship—along with the he need for creative work to reveal artists' own concerns, enabling them to artistically express whatever moves or affects them personally in their natural or social environment. Impressionism and Cubism are examples of formal creative concern and Fauvism or Surrealism examples of attention to personal issues. But Informalism today is an art form that bears witness to the creative artist's feelings about his or her surroundings; It has been said before that Informalism is basically a form of Expressionism that highlights the intimate, rather than the causes of anger or affection for one's surroundings. Needless to say, Pop Art is an attempt to enable everyone's sensibility to benefit from the provocative wealth of feeling in any of the everyday objects that are part of our environment. Art, therefore, has ceased to be descriptive and has become a medium that, at first, shocks, then straight away gives us an idea of particular environment or circumstance. What is more, the reasons why the piece was created may arouse even more interest in it. Hence, the issues that Baumgarten set to one side as intellectual knowledge because of their perceptive confusion, may be incorporated as such on a second, non-aesthetic and thoughtful level. The artwork can return to its decorative status, should it have one, at the consumer's convenience. Art forms have many uses.

If we fail to approach things in this way, what other function can there be, apart from consumer or investor snobbism, for the works of American Minimalism, the creative attitudes of Pop and Op artists, or for any others, such as those who, having used alternative options, return to art because what interests them is the medium, the material, with no other point but the pleasure of making something? Unless we approach the issue from another angle, and ask ourselves if some art might not have become a new way of questioning society, as well as showing us a new possible sensitivity to our surroundings.

I therefore think the essential question is whether or not it is the artist who creates a style, i.e.: the way in which he or she deals with the surroundings and provides his or her own answer, or whether it is social dynamics—as distinct from real life—that decree how things should be portrayed. One can elucidate this point by attending *vernissages* at art galleries; but the complexity of the issue becomes even clearer at art fairs, because these spaces play host to many of the aesthetic attitudes and proposals of art dealers who are, ultimately, those who make the decisions, based on their own taste and the clientele they have managed to accrue along the way. They show what suits them, or what they think they can turn into cash in a more or less distant future, taking into account what has happened in the art world over the last hundred years. We should also never forget, in the current social

Pep Duran
2005
Installation
Variable dimensions
© La Capella,
de l'Hospital de la
Sta. Creu, Barcelona

circumstances, that art, however, subtle or magnificent, is still a marketable asset, subject to the vagaries of supply and demand. This can be clearly seen from art galleries, who are the ones that display what the artist does. They show what they choose, for numerous reasons; and there are a great many of them, all different. In terms of competitive of styles, fashions and interests, this can also be seen at art fairs, which were created to trade in art, not as museum displays - although they have partially replaced the latter in terms of style fashions and procedures. On the whole, the most competitive tend to display the output of those artists most likely to attract the curiosity of spectators who are anxious for novelty, in whose everyday life there is no chance—except in the adulterated form of design and publicity, as is the case today—to see how new, or unusual, ways of capturing our awareness and emotions have been put into circulation by highly the subjective minds so typical of rare personalities, which are one of the sources of art.

I am far from proclaiming social determinism in art, but circumstances—and the sensitivity of those who, with the varying degrees of interest, experience them—are undoubtedly what bring about and motivate formal change. It can begin at first with the subject-matter, to be immediately followed by the formal mechanism with which it is executed. From Jacques-Louis David to Claude Monet, we have seen subject-matter evolve, along with their effect on procedures and media. One can follow the same process with the tales of Victor Hugo to the novels of Zola. In literature, we have moved from the story (descriptive, naturalist or realist), to the text (calligrammes, *chien crevé*, Structuralism). As the 20th century began, the main issue was the support or medium that made the piece tangible. This also meant that with objects from other cultures, their symbolic message was not perceived, but only their actual form. From this moment on, art became universal, and the only thing that was different was the role of the author, who had discarded the models that conditioned their work. The Dadaist approach made evident the primacy of the medium, regardless of function and meaning, which became diluted and dispossessed of any cultural content. Duchamp said that Dadaism was concept art, not retina art; if the intention is not conveyed by what we see or touch, the offering is iniquitous. The subjectivity required to penetrate Surrealism—while mindful of the fact that every piece belongs to its author and that he or she alone can guess at the motives and impulses that led them to that particular representational form—is what makes and enables every Surrealist work to be answerable only to its author, through whom it should be seen. And so on, with every new procedure and new contribution to form.

But here we are, with what's known as the fifth or sixth generation of computers, and with digital imaging. To deny that this new tool for mental assistance is innocuous would be to deny the social evidence of its interference. Particularly when we are being told that new technologies are intelligent, that *they* are telling *us* what we should be thinking, because that is what our very lives are beginning to depend on. Clinical surgery and laboratory pharmaceuticals are good examples of the life-conditioning factors to which we are being subjected.

So far as we know, artists have never rejected any technique that might help them in their work. But now it is not a question of help, but a tangible offer to improve creative performance and to widen the range and examine more closely goals and intentions we had never even foreseen. Why bother with the manual effort of painting or designing a project, if a new technique can provide what we are looking for and maybe even further options the project had never considered or foreseen? If any modern industrialist never hesitates to choose a new business method, how can an artist—a creator, which is something more—remain indifferent to what technology has to offer? Sometimes what happens to certain artists who have a large number of personal commitments is that they withdraw: they avoid technique and their acquired knowledge or know-how, and they settle back into the primitive, the archaic, because that is where they feel they can be most sincere. There are clear examples of this in Klee, Miró, Rothko or Tàpies, who preferred to return to primitive, pre-cultural sources. It is very much an artist's choice, as the end-products are more immediate,

Meritxell Duran
2005
Installation
Variable dimensions
© La Capella,
de l'Hospital de la
Sta. Creu, Barcelona

less able to be verbally expressed, further away from a scientific form of culture that requires precision and avoids the confusion of roles.

These artists are just as much part of the art world as those who focus more on conceptual aesthetics and who work with video, computers and digitalisation. They all aim to create a new awareness, a different way of feeling emotion and perceiving our natural and social environment. Some take a step forwards, others take a step back. The latter, which occurs 'after' something, never means nor replaces going back to 'before' and this is why, in our times, even the archaic or pre-cultural is something new, unusual and unique.

This is what we actually see at art galleries and art fairs. At these events, the producers or creators of sensitive awareness present the conclusions they reach as they gradually increase their knowledge of their new tool or working method. How, then ought we to approach it, when it is presented to our senses in precisely the kind of circumstance that has nothing to do with the prodromes that once made us go to such places to be sensitised? People used to visit museums and galleries to see works of art. We know that what most people wanted to see was what they thought they already knew, not caring in the slightest about what was beyond them. This is no longer the case. We are affected by the work of creative artists, it interferes with our awareness and with the existential concept of what goes on around us, it shapes and defines us. What we hear on TV, what is whispered over the phone or what we see in our e-mails, has a decisive effect on our interests and our physical, political and intellectual health. Perhaps this is the underground contribution of art: the new aesthetics interfere with and modify the archaic ways of connecting with one's surroundings. It is not the same to approach the present from a baroque point of view, or from a modern style. Life should be experienced from these two very different environments.

WHILE ALL INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS MAY BE JUDGED ON AN AESTHETIC SCALE, ACTION ALONE CANNOT BE SAID TO HAVE CONTENT AS ARTWORK

It is no mere anecdote that many artists, as early on as Pop Art, appropriated not the transcendental ideas of divinity, sin or redemption, but instead whatever was to be got from urban publicity hoardings, newspapers, magazines and the designs that decorated our consumer products. Any supermarket or department store is an example of what is being done to our privacy by everything that these products are and represent. Artwork and literature is there in order to work on us and turn us into their substitutes. Art is no longer a metaphor for real life. Art and consumerism—which is one of its branches—is the objective embodiment of reality in ourselves. We have seen that many of the pieces produced using alternative media, in particular videos and digital images, precisely because they are promiscuous, easy to manage and fairly immediate, have used impersonal media to try to turn complaints or personal and group dissatisfaction into art. While all individual actions may be judged on an aesthetic scale, action alone cannot be said to have content as artwork. The individual response of a person to their own issues, likes or dislikes, can be considered aesthetic, because it expresses a unique individual form, i.e.: that of the person who produces it. But merely making a statement about a complaint or a social or personal outrage by drawing, painting or digitalising it, is not an aesthetic response.

Jaime de la Jara
Big-suite II, 2004
Installation
180 x 300 x 300 cm
© Galería
Fúcares, Madrid

Publicity and propaganda have done their best to hold onto this apparently personal or individual aesthetic value; their work tries to show us such experiences. What they do in fact show is a substitute for individual desire and, what's more, they expect everyone to share it. The universal message is being issued to everyone individually. But artistic creation is an *individual*, formal action that hopes to be met by an expectant, sensitive and emotional attitude that is, also, *individual*. The boundaries of what is valid in this area are highly ambiguous. The creative fields become blurred.

If this is the real situation, then what should we be looking for in an artwork? For a horizon that enables us to examine ourselves more closely. When images or sounds leave us expectantly, without providing an explanation of what they are showing or referring to, making us suspend rational judgement - that is art.

Of course, each work cannot give the same degree of satisfaction to everyone that views it or thinks about it. Obviously, not every work is universal, and instead responds to the person it has the ability to surprise. The acquisition of artworks, from the classical ones to the most contemporary ones that bow to and express new technology and procedures, has nothing to do with either the number of buyers nor the fashions that encourage certain forms of acquisition. The only aspect that involves the artwork itself is when someone is interested in viewing it, and the artwork refuses to give up its secrets to the viewer. The owner or collector will walk up and down in front of it and make enquiries—about the materials used by the artist, or about why he or she built up and amalgamated these particular expressive skills. Often, only the artist can explain the meaning, providing an emotional micro-explanation, possibly linked to other circumstances, for why they made this particular choice. They never find an exact answer to their questions. The strength of the piece is in its active and obsessive silence.

Human beings, creators, are unfathomable. All technology is able to provide more depth and thoroughness to our research, but, so far, in these mixed-up, bastardised and contaminated times, some creative artists (we must not deny them that quality just because they have withdrawn from new and universally established procedures), miss the sense of touch and muscular effort—although they are aware there is always a controlling

THE SIGNATURE IS NOT THE MAIN ASPECT OF A PIECE, ALTHOUGH IT MAY PROVIDE SOME GUIDANCE IN TERMS OF HOW WE PERCEIVE IT

brain behind it—and they want to return to the media that were set up in 20th-century art. They want to smell and feel the stickiness of pain, they want to struggle endlessly against hard materials and supports which resist their sensuality and encourage them to hold dialogue with sensory perception, above and beyond aseptic, conceptual criteria. Such artists exist. As do those who feel fulfilled by handing new technologies. What happens is the works that take this apparent step backwards should not be accepted or judged in function of the artist who created them. Instead, observers should take a look at the material qualities that made the regression necessary.

It is clear that in the current art market it is impossible to separate the work from its author. But in order to approach the work, the observer, the one who is attracted to the artwork, has to take into account how it is presented, its texture, its element of surprise. The signature is not the main aspect of a piece, although it may provide some guidance in terms of how we perceive it.

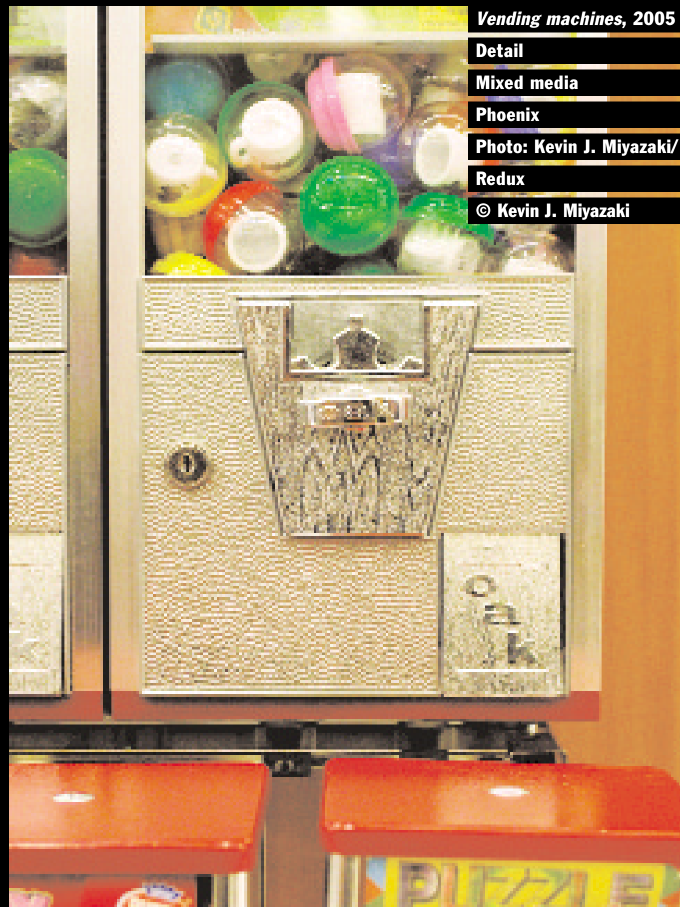
There are a number of good examples of artists who have given up technology and returned to material supports. They have done so because direct contact, working with and on the material, is what gives them their sense of existence, their essence, and they feel no betrayal of their sensibility. The support gives them the means to express and culminate their aesthetic concerns and judgement. Others are able to work on their personal sensitivity and convey their feelings via technology. But the conditioning factor for any artwork is the impact it has on the person who produces it and the person who receives it.

The current market situation means that artworks are circulated like merchandise. Gallerists and art fair organizers, who are supposedly respected professionals, aware of what is going on in the sector—although it is always the artist who decides what his product is or should be and should never accept or be subjected to the directions of an outsider—should possess some cultural project guidelines for circulating artworks, in much the same way as the collectors-connoisseurs have their own preferences or selective guidelines. Establishing these guidelines is no trivial or marginal matter. Anyone who has a social duty to perform must know what they want and where they are trying to go. The dealer should not merely be someone with money to spend on superficial trends. To strengthen their criteria, artists have to be their own best advisors. Critics also help, as do others devoted to art, such as curators, who are able to advise the dealer on the subjective issues with which the sensibility of the artist is dealing. At galleries, owners' cultural guidelines should be apparent. At art fairs, all these different guidelines should be present, as well as keeping an open mind towards the rather unusual kind of sensibility that is being displayed with new technologies and also, paradoxically, towards rejection of them.

ARCO might be wondering whether it should be competitive in terms of established international values or, while not abandoning such a stance, whether it should focus on providing a certain kind of art that, instead, belongs to the accredited core of creative art. How can ARCO be more representative of a particular market? It should certainly not isolate itself from international values, but its stands ought to contain original works from Spain; instead of those by artists who follow trends from other countries and markets, by those who work less conventionally, guided only by their intuition and creativity. This obviously occurs in all areas, media and processes, from the sensuality of materials to the hyper-sharpness of hard-line conceptuality, including even photography, video and digitalisation. What must be rejected from all of these is anything that involves following, adapting or going along with what has already been achieved by the design, publicity and propaganda media, or which has achieved consumer market value. We should not find what has arrived in the supermarkets either at galleries or fairs. At ARCO there should only be creativity, and this is determined by artists. Advice can be provided by dealers who have project guidelines and, therefore a commitment to culture.

P.S. I have put a lot of thought into whether there are any essential or typical features that distinguish art made in Spain from art made anywhere else, as when people spoke of 17th-century Spanish Realism, 18th-century and early 19th-century Typicalism, or a 20th-century Informalism. As far as a native, contemporary style is concerned, there seems not to be one. The current standardisation of culture, media tools and habitats in developed countries has reduced what is typical, or essential, to a strictly personal level of creativity. There is, however, the odd local tinge in terms of setting, but this is true anywhere on the planet. The only thing that remains, and which we should expect, is great curiosity and subtle sensitivity.

Vending machines, 2005
Mixed media
Phoenix
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki



Vending machines, 2005
Detail
Mixed media
Phoenix
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

PLASTIC FANTASTIC: COLLECTING VENDING-MACHINE TOYS

MARILU KNODE, SENIOR CURATOR, SCOTTSDALE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, ARIZONA & PRASAD BORADKAR, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, TEMPE

ying for attention and jostling each other at the entrances of grocery stores in America are banks of vending machines [1] that dispense a variety of toys, stickers, chewing gum, and souvenirs. Inexpensive and kitschy, these little oddities attract children and collectors with an undeniable magnetism. Although vending machines around the globe sell items as diverse as hot and cold drinks, condoms, jeans, newspapers and candy, kitschy, inedible toys seem to be found only in the United States.

When coins are dropped into these vending machines, wheels and gears are set in motion, and a toy packaged in a clear plastic bubble drops out. Although some of these toys may be acquired in a fit of impulse-buying and discarded soon after, many are becoming collectible items and lining shelves and desks around the country. It is clear that practices of collecting have extended far beyond the class boundaries of high-end, handmade art objects, and have entered the realm of objects that are anonymous and mass-produced.

It is estimated that in the United States alone there are over 200 million collections, 80% of which include everyday objects and souvenirs, such as bowling balls, lunch boxes, the vending machines themselves, and miniature reproductions of monuments such as the Eiffel Tower. [2] Other commonly collected mass-produced items include snow domes, floaty pens (ballpoint pens filled with objects floating in liquid), stuffed animals, neon signs, smiley face tchotchkes, and vibrators (the last three subjects of specialty museums in the United States). Like high-end objects, these less expensive obsessions are found in the department and specialty stores, tourist shops, and sex emporiums that pepper the commercial landscape. Some of the qualities of these quarter-machine toys that make them worthy of study are their invisible ubiquity, their incredible variety, their non-utility, their fetishistic quality, and their promotion of novelty consumerism.

Here, There, Everywhere

Bulk vending machines came to the United States in the late 19th century from the United Kingdom. Selling gum for a penny, machines were found in subway stations in large American cities in the 1940s. Today, quarter-machine toys are the strongest segment of the coin-op business in the USA, with annual sales of $360 million. [3] Quarter machines are found in an odd array of public places, in higher-end grocery stores as well as street-corner bodegas, toy and electronic stores, occasionally on the street, and in some restaurants, as well. This makes them democratically available,

Anonymous
Ninja, c. 1998
Mixed media
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

Anonymous
Bugs Bunny, 2005
Mixed media
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

and odd targets for our promiscuous collecting lust. They are placed at entry points to mollify bored kids, giving them that quick shopping fix adults get while spending money.

The name 'quarter machine' is factual if a little misleading. The quarter is the largest of the small coin denominations in the United States, predominantly used at locations such as car washes, laundromats and highway pay stations. Inflation has hit quarter machines; since the late 1980s, toy prices have gone from 25 cents to $1, although always in quarter increments. The typologies of quarter machine toys include the banal and the surprising. Cheap jewellery, magic tricks, action figures, key chains, fancy rubber balls, stickers, temporary tattoos, sticky/stretchy goo, alien figures, Ninja turtles and—a new category—ceramic cups are only some in a mind-boggling variety. It is the newcomers to the field that are typically $1; these include syndicated cult characters such as Bugs Bunny, SpongeBob SquarePants, Scooby-Doo, Lord of the Rings, spin-off characters from numerous Disney films, and even miniaturised football helmets of American football teams. Big business has found a way to commercialise this hidden site of pleasure for kids.

On Collecting the Mass-Produced and the Everyday

Collecting art and popular collecting, the work of art and the everyday commodity, the connoisseur and the packrat are practices, products and people distinguished by ideological, social and economic divisions in society. However, Pop artists such as Andy Warhol made significant inroads into bridging the gap between the invaluable one-off and the worthless off-the-rack item.

> *A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good.*
>
> Andy Warhol [4]

This profound statement about the monotony of mass production underscores the inherent democracy of standardised goods. Being rich, privileged or a member of the elite does not give an individual any power over mechanical reproduction. Warhol (and other Pop artists) elevated mass produced objects to art, acknowledging the glut of objects that swamped the globe in the 1960s, partly as a result of new modes of production, the rise of advertising and the post-war boom in the American economy. Warhol's work has been critiqued as a social commentary on the evils of mass consumerism, but also as a celebration of the classless equality of standardised goods.

WARHOL'S WORK HAS BEEN CRITIQUED AS A SOCIAL COMMENTARY ON THE EVILS OF MASS CONSUMERISM

The art world specialises in collections of handmade objects where human labour is measured in dollars and cents, and multiples such as photographs continue to command lower prices. Yet collections are routinely built around manufactured objects and vending-machine toys are no exception. Artists have sporadically used vending machines to make art democratically available and to evade the elaborate marketing forces that create a buffer zone between the arts and a wide public. Artists such as Sylvie Fleury and Vanessa Beecroft explore the fetishistic elements of shopping and collecting, commenting on their own contribution to this hypermarket.

The practice of collecting is an ancient and time-honoured one. Although the bulk of historical works passed down through time have come from rulers and the aristocracy, the impulse of collecting is now more broadly practised. Within the realm of high-end collecting, objects are carefully tracked: their provenance is well documented, their resale value

Anonymous
Snow White from the
Disney Perfect Princess
Mug Collection, 2005
Ceramic, paint
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

Anonymous
Rubber Band Gun, c. 1993
Mixed media
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

speculated on, their pedigree increased by association with their stablemates and the notoriety of the collector. Yet mass-produced objects can also gain value and significance in their rarity. An untouched, still packaged Star Wars figure is highly collectible; a baseball card set, if complete, sells for amounts exponentially higher than its original price.

Museum studies scholar Susan Pearce classifies collection behaviour into three major types: souvenir collecting, fetishistic collecting, and systematic collecting. [5] In souvenir collecting, the objects become means by which the collector is able to narrate a form of romantic life history, but in fetishistic collecting, the objects assume power over the individual, leading to an obsessive desire to find and acquire as many of those objects as possible. Systematic collecting relies on a specific rationale, and the collector seeks complete sets to aid understanding. Pearce also adds that these modes of collection are not mutually exclusive, and may often operate simultaneously. As quarter-machine toys are typically found in a stunning variety, they lend themselves well to souvenir collecting, but definitely hold the potential of being heavily fetishised and systematised.

THEY ARE TERRIBLY MUNDANE BUT BEGUILINGLY MAGNIFICENT, AT TIMES DREADFULLY BANAL, BUT AT TIMES FULL OF AN INEXPLICABLE AURA

Ubiquitous and Invisible

If our culture, as anthropologist Daniel Miller has suggested, is becoming progressively more material, [6] vending machines become surreptitious vehicles in this process. In spite of their utter ubiquity in public shopping spaces in the United States, the machines and their toys are rarely a part of any discourse, popular or academic. Always in full frontal view, they are ignored by most of us. As proud totems of consumption, they stand at attention in stores and malls, waiting for the child in search of a miniature football helmet or an adult looking for the last piece to complete a collection. They are mere material incidents of the quotidian, they are means of entertainment and expression for the volatile caprices of youth, and they are fetish objects with which we placate our incessant lust for things. They are replete with several layers of meaning—they are terribly mundane but beguilingly magnificent, at times dreadfully banal, but at times full of an inexplicable aura.

The Aura and Fetish of the Mundane

That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.
Walter Benjamin [7]

In his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical*

David Gonzales
Romo and Julia from the series *Homies*, 2005
Mixed media
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

Anonymous
Dice Shaker, Las Vegas Machine, c. 1995
Mixed media, quarter
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

Reproduction, Walter Benjamin ascribes the aura of authenticity only to the handmade object, a quality that vanishes in mechanical reproduction. In the case of mass production, differences between the original and the copy do not exist, but the objects may still have an aura. While Benjamin's aura relies heavily on ritual, tradition and the labour of production, the aura of the quarter-machine toys relies not on the labour of production, nor in the sweat of the unionised factory workforce, but in rituals of consumption and the distinctive practices of collection. The 'unique existence' of the work of art is replaced by the unique experience provided by the work of anonymous production. It is in the process of buying that the object is validated, and this is how Benjamin's 'domain of tradition' is transferred from the realm of production to that of consumption. [8] The aura is in the possessing, not in the making.

Fetishism, or the obsessive attachment and devotion to something, is very often attributed to objects that have more symbolic than utilitarian value. The collector's item is therefore easily fetishised. In his discussion of commodity fetishism, Marx classifies the worth of products as use-value (utility) and exchange-value (tradability), and notes that it is exchange-value that is responsible for fetishisation. These toys, valued at one dollar or less, hardly have much exchange-value, but they have enough potential to create substantial collection-value. 'Fetishism is the removal of the object from its historical and cultural context and its redefinition in terms of the collector.' [9] Invisible to the non-collector, these 'terms of the collector' are clearly visible to the manufacturer and therefore a source of tremendous exchange-value. To the collector though, the little toy becomes a signifier of a desire to own, a statement of affiliation to a subculture, an expression of a fetish, a drive to own every possible variation and the last unit of an incomplete set.

IN THE CASE OF MASS PRODUCTION, DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ORIGINAL AND THE COPY DO NOT EXIST, BUT THE OBJECTS MAY STILL HAVE AN AURA

Bringing Home the Homies: A Case Study

As quarter machines have increasingly gone corporate, selling toys related to television and movie characters, the series *The Homies* came from the opposite direction—from the street up, developed in 1998 by artist David Gonzales for Low Rider, a hot-rod magazine. Gonzales wanted to counter the negative stereotypes of Mexican youths in California. [10] He describes these young men and women as 'a group of tightly knit Chicano buddies who have grown up in the Mexican-American barrio (neighbourhood)... located in East Los Angeles.' [11] The Homies caught fire, however, only after members of The Los Angeles Police Department incorrectly labelled them as gang-member figures. These little plastic characters, with Chicano/a names and elaborate stories, have become incredibly popular as collectibles in spite of their easy availability and low cost.

The story of Romo and Julia is a standard narrative of love against all odds, complete with a disapproving father, economic hardship and racial stereotypes. But Romo's love of writing lands him a movie deal for

Anonymous
Deck of Cards, c. 1995
Paper, ink
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

Anonymous
Selections from the *Las Vegas Machine*, c. 1990
Mixed media
Photo: Kevin J. Miyazaki/
Redux
© Kevin J. Miyazaki

his screenplay and Julia's hand in marriage...the plot shifts away from the traditional tale of a young Chicano burdened by insurmountable pressures to a moral tale of the success of patience and hard work. The 'I'll make it at any cost' narrative of this particular pair of Homies is not unique within the annals of collected American myths.

What is unique about these characters—in the quarter-machine realm—is that the artist is identified, efforts at official suppression failed (and had the salutary effect of creating a market) and that a big budget, commercial venture did not precede them. The Homies represent an alienated and ghettoised cultural group in the United States, not the 'precious princesses' of Disneyland. The aura of these figures is clear in their collectability.

Conclusion

In tracing the life trajectory of an object from the earliest stages of production, through distribution and to the last stages of consumption, it is clear that the meanings associated with it change with relative fluidity. Often, the objects adopt surprising new meanings and give rise to unexpected practices of collection and display. The low economic value of these toys only hides their high symbolic value. As they are collected and coveted, these quarter-machine toys start transforming into art objects for their owners. As collectors and fetishists scour shopping areas and malls for objects of their desire, the vending machines become museums of the everyday. They guard their treasures in clear glass cases beckoning you to look, to search and to purchase. Only for a quarter. Or maybe a little more.

NOTES

[1] In the US, these vending machines are also sometimes referred to as quarter machines because they accept multiples of 25-cent coins.
[2] Scott Craven, *The Collection Connection: What We Gather Says Much About Who We Are*, The Arizona Republic, January 21, 2005, section E, page 1.
[3] Street Beat, *Prosperity in Bulk: Bulk Vending Is Still a Winner for Operators and Locations Gale Group*, 2002.
[4] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 101.
[5] Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition,* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 32.
[6] Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
[7] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 221.
[8] Ibid.
[9] John Windsor, *Identity Parades* in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p.50.
[10] Alejandro A. Alonso, *Homies Figures-The Original Homies,* Streetgangs.com, May 23, 2002.
[11] The Homies are some of the most popular toys found in vending machines in the southwestern part of the USA (California and Arizona). See www.homies.tv for more details.

NEGATIVE ADAPTATION AND CRITICAL ALLIANCE: MODERN MUSEUM COLLECTING IN AUSTRIA

THOMAS TRUMMER, CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART, OESTERREICHISCHE GALERIE BELVEDERE, VIENNA

Gelatin. ***Untitled*****, 2002. Private Collection, Vienna**

Contemporary art, especially of Austrian origin, cannot be understood without considering the history of the museum. In a certain sense, the museum is the characteristic institution of Modernism. The artists of the historic early 20th-century avant-garde movements—and not only in Austria—had a heatedly controversial relationship with museums. This is widely known. But now, the great art collections are also criticised, with demands for an authorised representation of the *other*, of the oppressed and the marginalised. This protest was not and is not always aimed against the institution as such, but rather against the exclusive and excluding right of the museum to select, collect, and present art objects. It is fundamental to bear in mind that the Modernist artists did not want simply to be collected; they also felt that they had the right to be able to make decisions which had always been the province of museums. Principally, it was a matter of the idea of history and hierarchical rankings that went into museums' assessment of artworks. In order to define their own importance, these artists tried to take on the role of art dealers and curators. They even wanted to become collectors.

Surprisingly, Austria's Belvedere Gallery, the museum where I work, had its origins in a situation of this kind. The best artists in the city around 1900, those of the Vienna Secession, were fighting the hegemony of the officially sanctioned imperial collections. Their intention was to create a museum of modern art. The new museum should be an art centre for the future, since the Secessionists, like all of the Modernists, considered the present as being already part of the past. However, it was not easy to attain this objective, because, to begin with, it involved the need of dusting off the concept of the museum in order to create a new kind museum. The Secessionists thought that the foundation of a museum of new international art could cause this decisive dual impact. A provisional venue was chosen in Belvedere Palace. Once installed in a place imbued with such prestige and history, what had begun as an artists' protest movement became the *protégé* of their royal adversary: the imperial cultural doctrine. It was the beginning of an unusual alliance between the avant-garde and the political establishment, which would become typical of Austria. According to a verbal agreement, the paintings were to remain there until the future museum, designed by Otto Wagner, could be built. The museum of modern art was built nearly 100 years later, using a different blueprint. Now, it forms part of the so-called Museum District. It is a grey cube with rounded corners, and indeed, it establishes a kind of dialectic with Leopold's collection, a discreet, private collection spanning every era which, in its day, was a catalyst for turn-of-the-century art.

Likewise, just as remarkable as the story of the installation of Modern art in an imperial palace is that of the very special way in which it was acquired. The Secessionists (among them Gustav Klimt, acting as their leader) found that public donations were an economic formula in which they could participate both as producers and as consumers. They not only created a new art, an art for the future, but also a new kind of market. It was something circular, since it not only existed for itself, but also *through* itself. This unusual acquisitions policy would probably be criticised

today, and with reason, from any independent financial viewpoint, but that economic structure was responsible for many of the masterpieces we can enjoy today. The Secessionists' acquisition policy gave to the Austrian state and its collections some of its major works. Van Gogh, Monet, Munch, and—no less important—Klimt's *The Kiss* found their way into the imperial collections through this route.

Another characteristic of Austrian Modernism is the approximation of art collecting and art promotion, which from that moment on became the same thing.

ECONOMIC MECHANISMS IN ART AND AESTHETIC DECISION-MAKING ARE NEVER INDEPENDENT FROM EACH OTHER

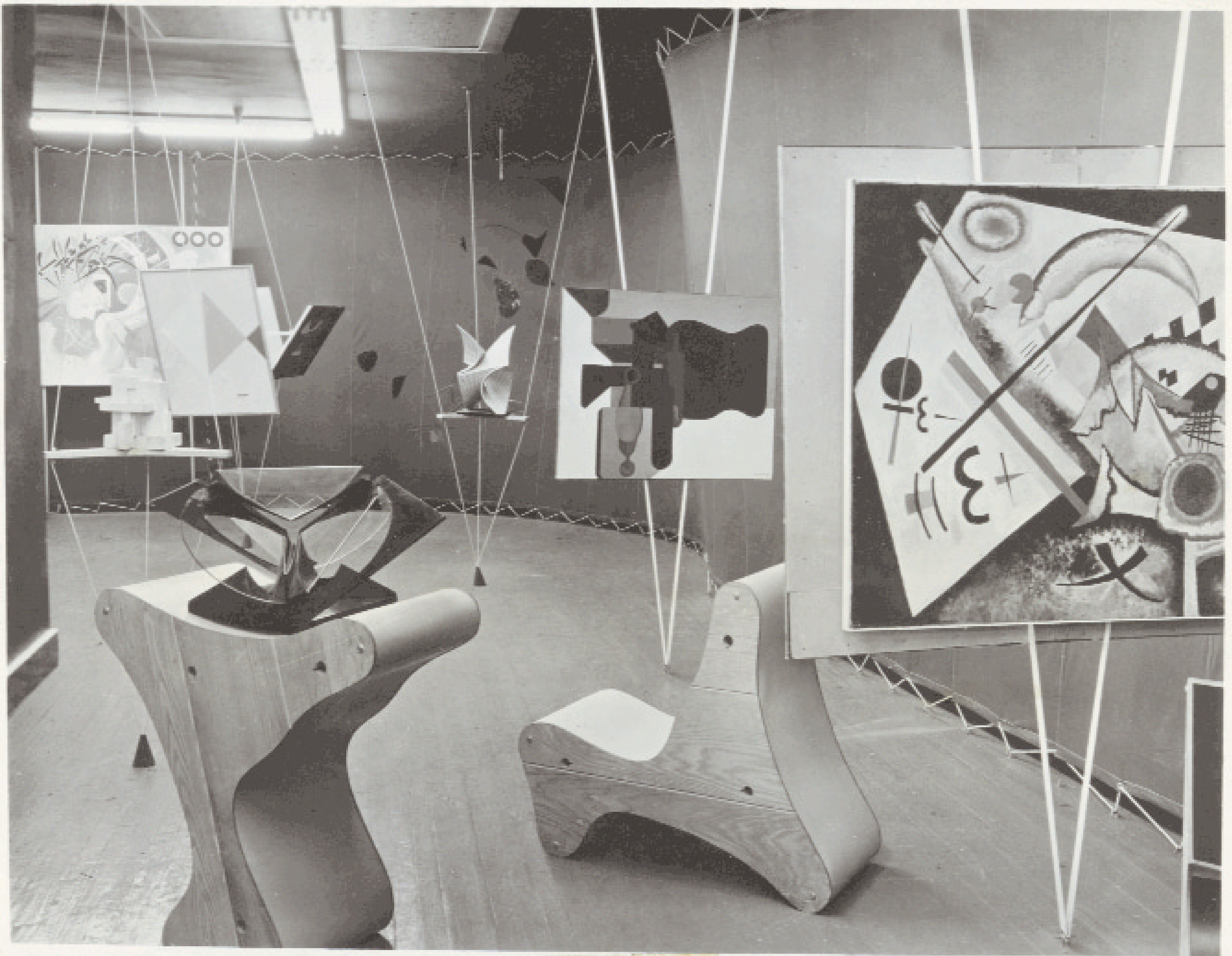
Collecting oneself is typical of this kind of Modernism, becoming almost an artistic category of its own. The ready-made is a well-known aspect of this. Ready-mades were not adopted in Austria as early as they were in France—a country whose approach to promoting culture was quite similar. The idea of the ready-made, which apparently enables the artist to subjectively make decisions regarding what is and is not art, does nothing other than to follow the logic of collecting itself. A decision, such as affirming that 'this object is a work of art', transfers the demand for innovation from the object to the decision itself. Simultaneously, the decision regarding which artwork is to be incorporated into a museum becomes an aesthetic decision. And this leads to the infrequent and, in itself, tautological conclusion: the question regarding what is aesthetically valuable thus becomes, in itself, an aesthetic question.

Economic mechanisms in art and aesthetic decision-making are never independent from each other; rather, they are determined by the shifting distribution of roles in the art world. This should also be considered in light of criticism of the museum. Artists distance themselves from the museum in order to achieve, in the long run, the acceptance of—and a place in—the museum. The history of the relationship between artists and the museum is, therefore, only at first sight one of confrontation; it is, rather, a kind of negative adaptation, an adaptation preceded by a separation. The word 'Secession' means nothing else. Only those who separate themselves loudly from the conventional are marking, with this separation, their objective of ultimately transforming that from which they have separated into the centre. To put it another way: the old collecting must be aggressively denounced now in order to ensure its continuance, although somewhat reformed, in the future.

In the 1960s, this internal contradiction, these tautologies, became even more pronounced. Since then, there have also been artworks that did not want to be collected. This did not mean that the art of the 60s did not want to survive into the future. It was simply that, from then on, artworks could also be created which cut off their own access to collections; for example, those that classified themselves as perishable, existing only ephemerally. In Austria, this was mostly confined to Viennese Actionism, which consciously situated itself in a confrontation with the museum and with its entire audience. In basements and cramped studios, performances were staged featuring a self-destructive *mise-en-scène*. To document these individual actions, focusing on colour, the body and its injury, the Actionists (Brus, Mühl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler) used the media of photography and film. These methods enabled their truly uncollectible works to be conserved, in spite of that. For museums, the situation changed fundamentally, since after the fact they were limited to images which were no longer originals. Museums became documentation centres, and their historical right to exclusivity was no longer valid.

These attacks against museums, which as we have seen intensified after World War II, were not necessarily harmful. On the contrary, from today's point of view it seems that the deficits inflicted on museums by the artists often sparked productive crises. For example, the dialectic structure of negative adaptation (the fact that the Secessionists collected themselves and that the Actionists documented themselves) was brought entirely out into the open. To this we should add that, since the 1990s, art has behaved differently towards museums—always adopting a critical stance, but also an attitude of solidarity and co-operation. Artists from the so-called Institutional Critique no longer rejected the museum, but struck up an alliance instead, and thus for the first time also situated the Modern as an aspect of history. Heimo Zobernig, who defines himself as historical, is the most important representative of this trend. Zobernig's downsized works are very similar to museum elements, and sometimes are barely distinguishable from them. The artist, a friend and follower of Franz West, shows wainscoting, half-finished walls, and other auxiliary elements of exhibition. Along with this, he fabricates simplified printing styles, like those used by museums for their own promotional material, such as posters, catalogues, and invitation cards. He creates an immanent critique, referring to the requisites of aesthetic presentation. The untreated white square is an evolution and reproduction of the painting, even having almost the same title, by Kasimir Malevich, but not with the aim of implanting in this canvas an 'experience without an object', but rather of making experience visible *with* the object—and therefore, integrating it into the art world. Regarding this painting, fabricated industrially, it is difficult to determine whether it is a document or an original; whether it is an autonomous image, or an image that merely shows another image. Thus, it vividly evokes the question of why it was collected, questioning the basis of this aesthetic decision.

Franz West
Untitled, 1993
Private Collection, Vienna

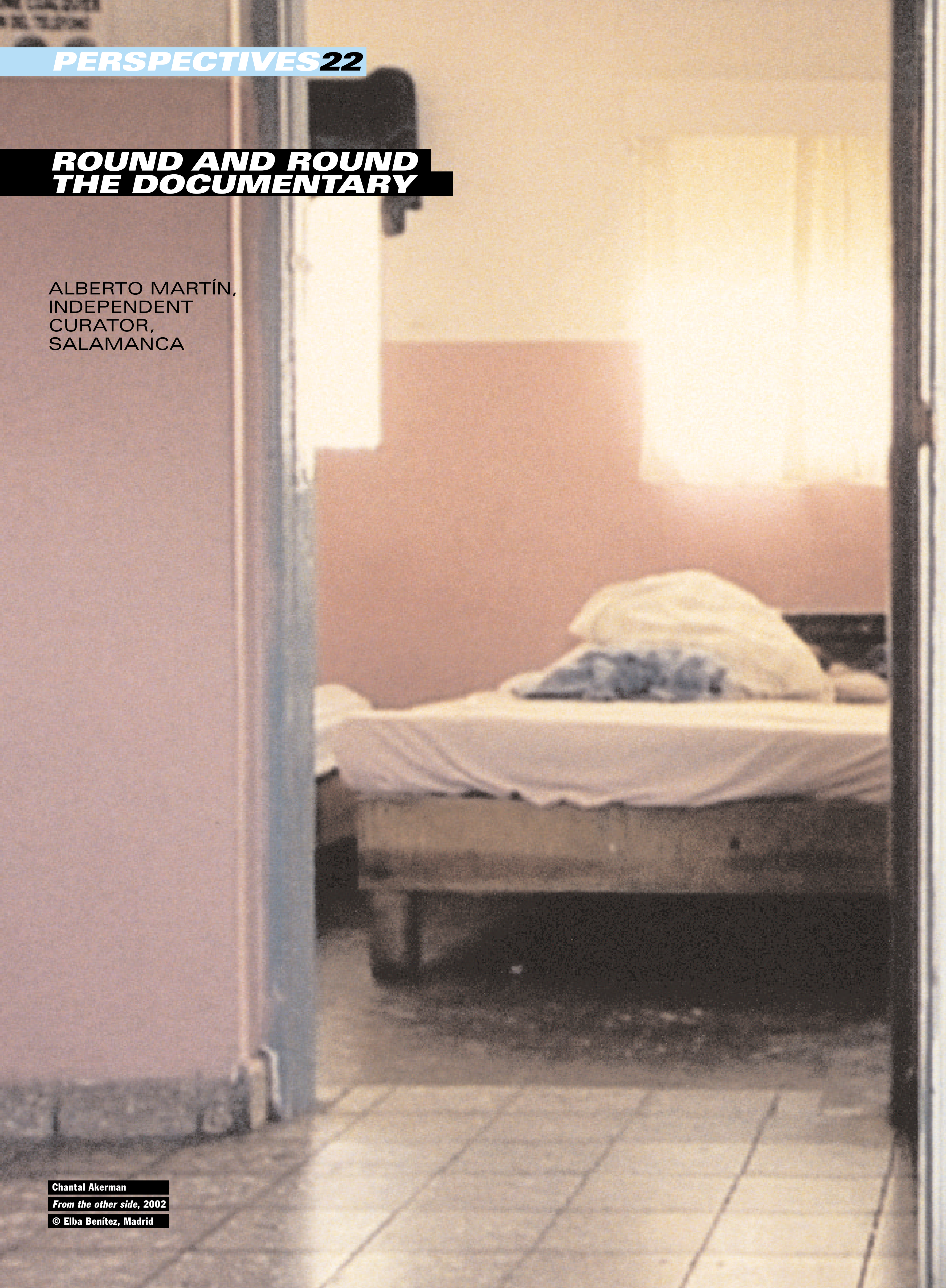


Friederich Kiesler. Abstract Gallery, Art of this Century, New York City, 1942

A processing of the modern, of the vocabulary of forms, their rhetoric, and their ideological underpinnings can also be found in the next generation of Austrian artists. Florian Pumhoesl, Marko Lulic, Mathias Poledna, and Dorit Margreiter are artists whose work points towards dimensions that were not revealed, or were even hidden, by Modernism. Their work is conceived as an exploration, in which they principally create and make manifest the roots of design. When, in summing up an exhibition, Pumhoesl refers to 'historical material', this highlights how these artists are committed to interrogating history, especially the history of Modernism. The self-reference of these pieces, mostly installations, expressed through their questioning of the exhibition itself, indicate a clear reference to Zobernig, but also to Friedrich Kiesler, an architect and designer who left Austria in the 1920s and emigrated to America. Kiesler made his name thanks to his use of a platform that could be seen from all sides, and the excellent design of his exhibitions. For Peggy Guggenheim's collection, now installed in Venice, Kiesler designed in 1942 a display for exhibitions featuring concave walls, curved seating, and paintings hung from cords. Kiesler's idea of space was that it should not be clear and uncluttered, but should, rather, be shot through with uncertainty and uneasiness, an idea which came back in the work of Hans Schabus and the Gelatin group. Gelatin and Schabus create prolific forms—which often use the maximum amount of material in the minimum amount of space. These particular constructions cannot be adequately depicted, except for on site. The chaos of these designs harks back to the performances of the Actionists. Therefore, Schabus often also depicts these spatial impressions through the narrative medium of film. The Gelatin group uses photography, collage, and Surrealist-style drawing as its documentation materials. Their strange spatial constructions are also, however, a reference to the conditions in which art is created, and its current situation within the context of the museum. Thus, the museum is replaced, and these spaces act as transferred workshops, studios, and quarries which show art before it was even created. It is as if they were documenting something that has yet to be declared art. Therefore, these spaces are pre-made ready-mades, and another example of the contemporaneity of the artistic appropriation of museum collecting in the Modernist spirit. Whereas Gelatin's strategies are more playful and hedonistic, Schabus, Paul Petritsch/Nicole Six and Markus Schinwald go back to the dimension of the existential. Questions about issues such as bodily experience, fear, or feelings of misfortune provide a narrative thread and evoke the trends launched a century ago, approximately at the end of the Secession period. Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka and Rudolf Gerstl were opposed to beauty, and also to salon exhibition, personal risk, and the open depiction of suffering. The art of Expressionism arose out of the deeply subjective thought of a wide range of collectors, and therefore took a long time to be incorporated into the museum, and when it happened, it was only reticently. Today's artists are not as drastic as all that. They have also renounced pathetic gestures, but in art today, there are also psychological obstacles. In Schabus, they are highly reduced spaces; in Petritsch/Six, infinitely wide open spaces; and in the great films of Markus Schinwald, one can see how Austrian art has once again broken away from observing history and harking back to Modernism, in order to return to another grand theme: the observation of the human being and the human psyche, free to a large extent from the influence of the museum and the complex logic of collecting.

ROUND AND ROUND THE DOCUMENTARY

ALBERTO MARTÍN,
INDEPENDENT
CURATOR,
SALAMANCA

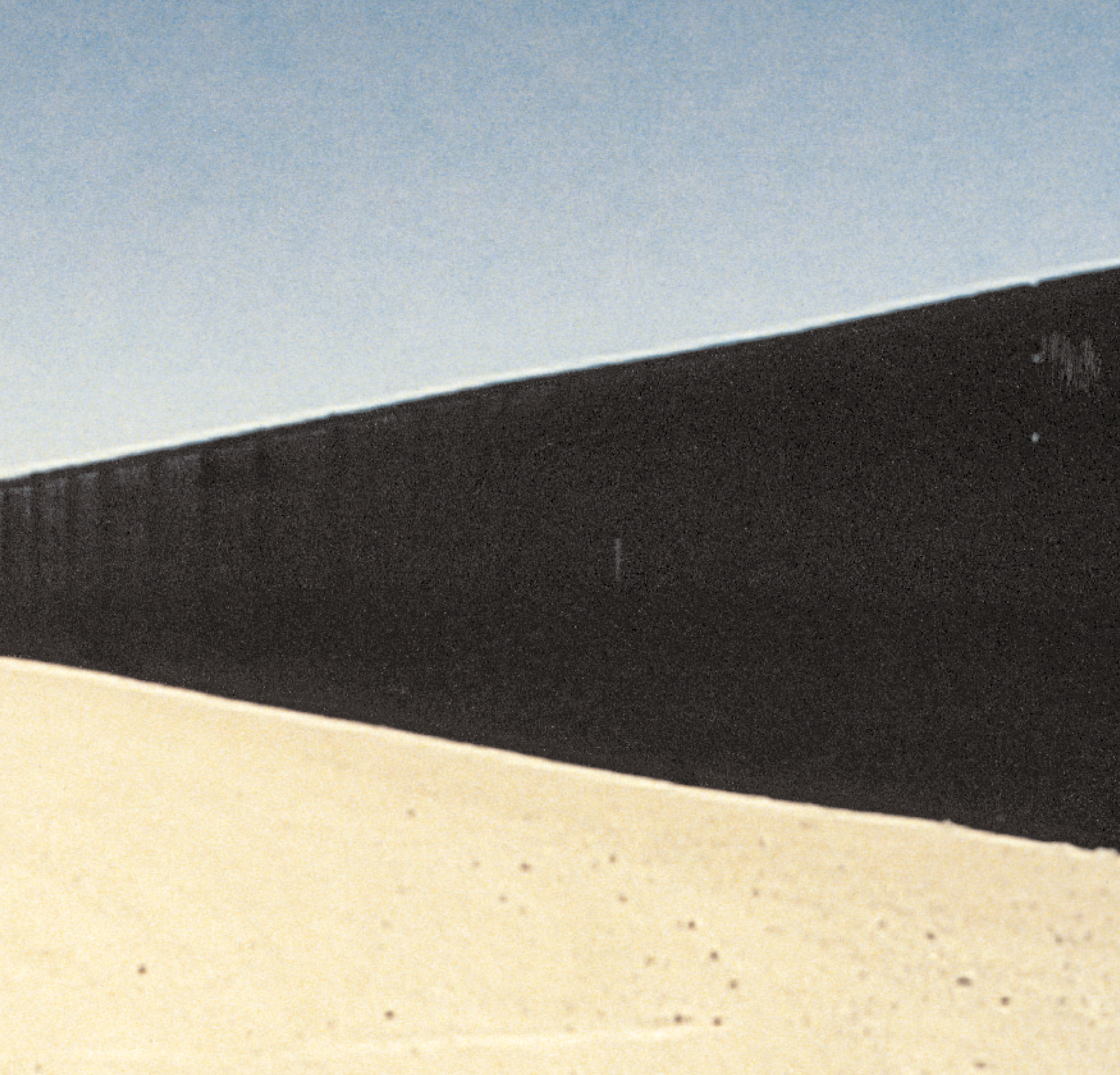


Chantal Akerman
From the other side, 2002
© Elba Benítez, Madrid

We have recently witnessed the emergence of a major presence of documentary work, or pieces with documentary references, on the art exhibition circuit. This development is noteworthy to the extent that one of the characteristic elements of this renewed interest in the documentary resides in the fact that art spaces have become much more open to work from the realm of film and television. Thus, a good number of documentaries that have experienced difficulties in finding cinema or broadcast distributors have found their way to art centres and galleries, once the limits of these exhibition spaces have become blurred. Likewise, it is striking that in recent years, a good number of artists have been approaching, or assimilating, cinematic tools, both insofar as their production methods are concerned, as well as the narrative procedures employed. And this involves not only works dealing with moving images, but also a good part of the production falling within the category that we could, generically, call staged photography.

This blurring of each medium's territory, accentuated in any case over the past few years by the rapid advances of new technologies, has also led to an unstoppable expansion of the documentary category, a label now applied to works of a highly diverse nature and consistency. It is one thing to use technical procedures or methods identifiable with the documentary (in its most classic sense), and another to develop a true documentary practice today.

In the absence of in-depth reflection on the documentary nature of art, the response to the growing demand for reality has mainly come from media historically linked to documentary formats or formulas: photography, film, and video. It is precisely due to this close relationship between the documentary tradition and certain media that now, when an entire series of practices or works are



Chantal Ackerman. ***From the other side***, **2002. © Elba Benítez, Madrid**

denominated as documentary, in a generic way, we are seeing the union under this same category of so many proposals clearly stuck in an old-fashioned, outdated concept of the classic, self-affirmative documentary, along with others that consider the exhaustion of certain formulas and the need to explore new languages with which to reformulate these media's relationship with reality. In an attempt to facilitate identification in the midst of this growing tide of documentary work in recent years, some have resorted to renaming certain documentary practices, presenting differential traits, calling them 'new documentalism' or 'post-documentalism', thus referring to what would be the emergence of a new phase in their evolution. But perhaps here, the art world has moved forward a bit more slowly than the film world, or perhaps the reflection on this issue from an artistic perspective has to acknowledge its debt to, or dependence on, decades of theorising and study concerning filmic narrative and counter-narrative, or on the nature of the documentary.

The fact that there is a renewed interest in 'real-world signs' (I refer here to the panel discussion of the same name moderated by Régis Durand at ARCO'04) is evident. However, what is probably happening, as J.L. Comolli pointed out a few years ago, is that every era has its own documentary practices, and different, renovated documentary modes succeed each other in accordance with whatever is appropriate at a given moment. Our own time, marked by a generalised questioning of information, by critique of the image's transparency, by hypertrophy in the production and circulation of images, postcolonialism, and so on, demands new practices for approaching reality through new languages. We should go back to stressing the interrogatory capacity of the image, as well as the spectator's position and the dynamic of image perception, and, once again, the relationship between document and story, between

Pere Portabella. *Umbracle,* 1971-72. © Colección MACBA, Barcelona

reality and fiction. There are still too many technical archetypes linked to the documentary image, both in film and in videos made for cable television, or in photography; and there are still too many works in which the truth, or if one prefers, transparency, is still the only node articulating its construction.

The most interesting documentary practices today are eminently reflective. Above all, they question their own nature and make explicit their relativity. The basis of their construction is no longer a theme or a subject, but rather the different strategies for approaching one. In sum, it could be said that the agents mediating between reality and the spectator have taken on importance and depth, operating above all upon the same mechanisms as the construction of a story, of narration. Because what has come about in recent years is the self-conscious awareness of how reality can only be given back to us as a constructed reality, as a story that accepts its ficionalising condition, a complex story, a mixture of voices, viewpoints, and materials, both new and pre-existing. This has accentuated the historic process of breaking with the stereotypes of the documentary gaze, that is, with those conventions that lead the documentary to stagnate in indifference, in the comfort of making pronouncements.

It is this intermediate territory between external reality and fiction in which this creative field is delving deeper, a field for

THERE ARE STILL TOO MANY TECHNICAL ARCHETYPES LINKED TO THE DOCUMENTARY IMAGE

intermediation, fragmentation, and recomposition of our everyday image-filled environment, the articulation of new ways of looking at the always complex attempt to reflect on the human condition or to look beneath the trappings of the everyday. Thus, today's documentary practices revolve around the work of re-elaborating residues—the residues of history and of memory, as well as the 'residues of experience' (Victor Burgin).

Paraphrasing Lars von Trier, in his documentary manifesto, in order to see clearly, today as never before it is necessary to 'BLUR'. To oppose the fetishism of image clarity and transparency with a gaze that is not limited by the obviousness of a viewpoint.

CELESTIAL ARCHITECTURES: THE ARCHITECTURAL CAPRICE IN WESTERN ART

PEDRO AZARA, PROFESSOR OF AESTHETICS, BARCELONA SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

Hans Vredeman de Vries. *Arquitectura fantástica con personajes*, 1568. Oil on oak board
Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao. © Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

An accidental archaeological finding changed the history of art in the late15th century. By chance, a shepherd fell into a hole that opened beneath his feet on Rome's Celio Hill, spotted with weed-covered ruins. When he managed to get out, he fled as if pursued by a flock of demons. And indeed, there were creatures from another world living within the dark galleries winding into the hillside: the horrified man had discovered strange, tiny figures writhing on the rocky surface of the passageways' walls. Without knowing it, the shepherd had discovered the celebrated *Domus Aurea*, the doomed palace that Nero had built and which, after his death, was completely buried by his successors in order to erase from the face of the earth anything that could remind them of that notorious emperor.

The walls of the 'Golden House' were not only adorned with *grottesches* (fantastic beings, hybrids of animals, humans, and plants), but also with small-scale vistas showing gazebos, villas, and even entire cities, with a dreamy look to them, as if they had been built of ephemeral materials or bits of clouds, manifestly unreal. These images of buildings were, in fact, images from the beyond. They represented the dwellings and cities of the underworld, in which wandered the souls of the dead. These ancestors looked back through painted windows to the present, to watch over the lives of their descendents in the rooms of the palace. The vignettes were like a plane marking the break between the mortal world and the world of those who had achieved immortality.

The news of this discovery spread like wildfire. Great Renaissance artists, such as Raphael or Fra Filippo Lippi, immediately set off for this involuntarily subterranean palace to see, and copy, fauna and scenes that had nothing to do with reality. This meant the end of the High Renaissance and the arrival of a new era in art, that of Mannerism, marked by the depiction of forms and beings belonging to a nocturnal world, far from the clarity of known beings, of everyday life. Meanwhile, a new art genre was created, undoubtedly a minor one: the *capriccio*—or depiction of impossible beings and objects created by a fevered imagination—and its subgenre, the architectural caprice.

The principal European schools of painting dealt with this genre from the early 16th century to the late 18th century. It produced few celebrated artists; only the refined Mannerist Monsú Desiderio (creator of nocturnal images populated with spectres inhabiting palaces of ice or bones), and in general, the School of Fontainebleau and, later, the Venetians Marieschi, Bellotto, Guardi and Canaletto. However, some of the its most interesting representatives, such as the Flemish master Vredeman de Vries, during the mid-16th century, and Piranesi, in the 18th, were, as well as painters, architects—responsible not only for designing buildings, but also theatrical sets and gardens filled with water games—and architectural theorists; in other words, they created images of constructions made out of materials as unstable, and perishable, as dreams.

Thanks to the *capriccio,* architecture came to the foreground, no longer merely relegated to the background, as a major theme in art. Until then, buildings and cities barely ever showed up in painting. If they did, they were only used as an architectural backdrop for a scene, whether religious or, after the 15th century, mythological.

True, Renaissance painting showed vistas of ideal cities, always deserted—without any urban hustle and bustle to disturb the stony quietude of the façades—in which all that stood out was the harmonious composition of nonexistent classical buildings. But these were set forth as models. Real architecture had to aspire to looking like these immaculate constructions. These paintings presented visions of the cities of the future, in which men could live in peace after the divine imposition of an Age of Grace. On the other hand, Baroque Dutch painting was largely views of interiors—churches, palaces, and bourgeois homes—which did not always reproduce real spaces, either. However, in these cases, the painter sought to convey the maximum verisimilitude. Although these constructions did not necessarily exist, they *could* exist. These paintings did not evoke a sense of strangeness. Their viewers could imagine themselves living in these settings, so close to the homes in which they actually found themselves.

On the contrary, the architectural caprices were not presented as models for an architecture of the future, nor as evocations of everyday life. Rather, they were imaginary creations, in which the painter highlighted the unreality of his motifs. They were set apart from reality. There was no attempt at proclaiming how cities ought to be—pure crystallised forms, free of imperfections and alterations.

The architectural caprice enjoyed a certain prestige in the classical period thanks to the support of the Emperor Rudolph II, defender of art as a medium for changing the world. In the early 16th century, his court at Prague attracted a large number of painters. Standouts among them were capriccio artists like De Vries, personal guests

Francisco Gutiérrez. *Capricho arquitectónico con Moisés salvado de las aguas, c.* 1655-1665. Oil on canvas. Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao. © Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

of the monarch. Artists were not the only ones attracted and seduced by him. Magicians, alchemists, Neoplatonic philosophers, authors of treatises on mnemonics, and esoteric writers were all specially favoured by Rudolph II. He aimed to transform his court into an image of paradise, in which man, under his protection, could return to a Golden Age. Alchemists bragged that they could change lead into gold, and this process, during which a leaden mass metamorphosed into gleaming splendour, was a metaphor for the purification of soul as it escaped from the prison of the material world. For this reason, the emperor was fascinated by, and collected—perfectly classified in large cabinets open to specialists—real curiosities and unusual objects like fossils and rare stones, as well as unreal ones, like supposed unicorn horns or feathers from the fabled phoenix, precisely because these pieces attested to the origins of the world, the era of myth, and could hold secrets only within the grasp of the initiated. He conceived his entire court as the image of a perfect world.

In this context, architectural caprices were another fantastic piece in his project. These paintings showed complexes of buildings—castles, sanctuaries, and temples—that were manifestly unreal. The columns, the walls, which looked more like basketry than stonework, were too thin to support the weight of the storeys above them; the towers were higher than Babel, whilst resting on foundations that in reality would never have been able to hold them up; there were no clearly marked boundaries between interior and exterior space, between the rooms and the gardens. It is hard to know where the few human figures that appeared would be able to stay. Moreover, their internal organisation was excessively complex, more like that of a labyrinth, run through with multiple passageways and stairs that seemed to lead nowhere, than to that of an inhabitable space. Through these multiple doors, windows, and galleries, the inner space opened up to the outside again and again. The hypothetical inhabitants of these rooms would

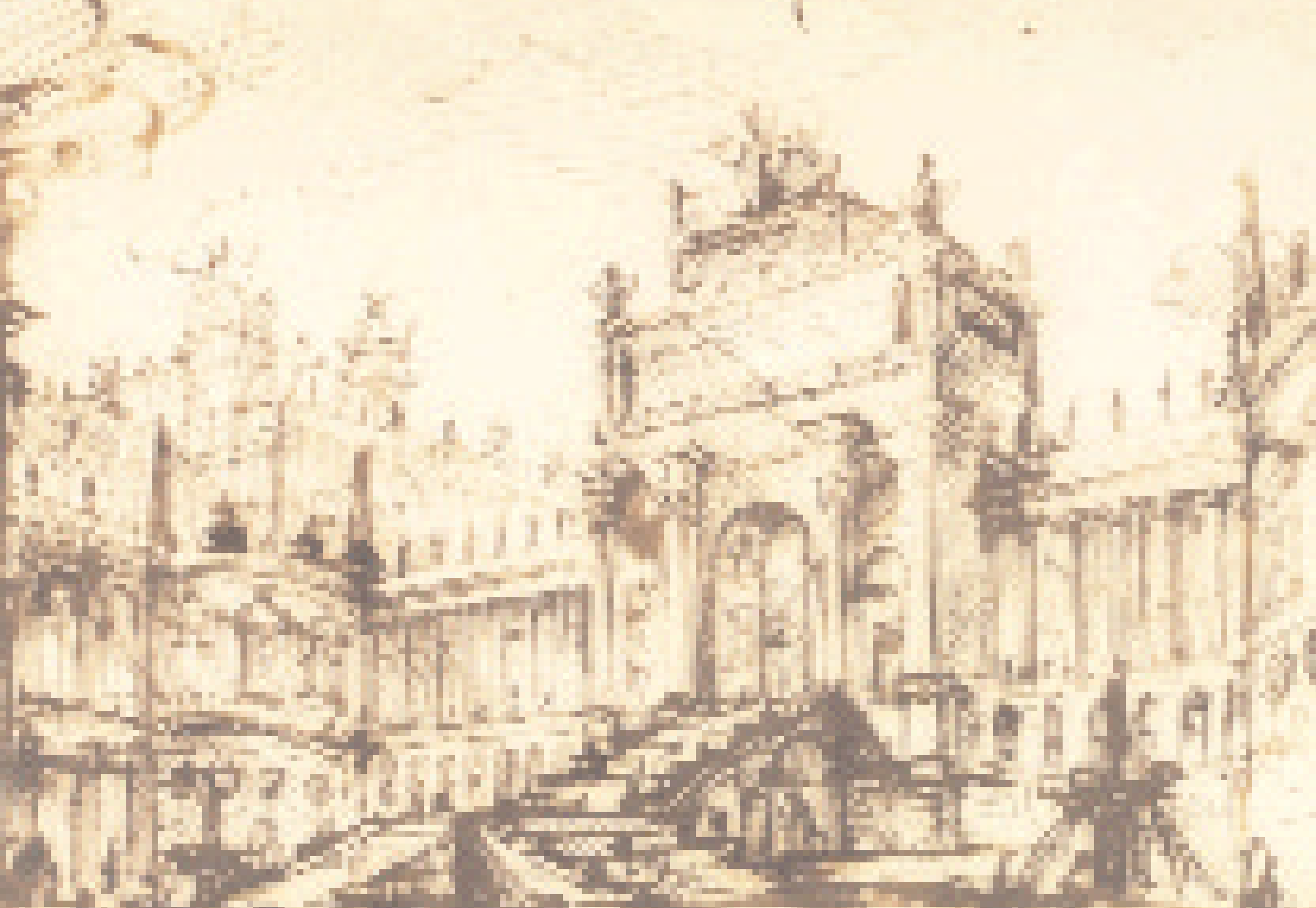
THE BUILDINGS IN THESE CAPRICCIOS PRODUCED AN UNCANNY SENSATION OF FREEDOM

***Architectural Capriccio*, 45-50 a.D.**
Pompeian fresco
Courtesy: The Bible Lanas Museum, Jerusalem © David Harris

have become disoriented very quickly. These buildings were not real; the artists could never have seen anything like them, except for in their dreams.

The buildings in these capriccios produced an uncanny sensation of freedom. Their lightness and multiple openings kept man from feeling enclosed within four walls. Meanwhile, the passageways that opened in all directions, the wide-open windows, the galleries, the almost translucent walls, invited the visitor to wander around the space towards the four cardinal points of the compass, the four regions of the universe, and to escape if he wanted to. These buildings were like golden cages, cages with open doors. In no way did they resemble dark households looking like oppressive dungeons. On the contrary, they helped the soul to lift itself up, easing its ascension far above the materiality of the visible world, 'edifying' it.

The Mannerist capriccios were views of heavenly cities. Here, their inhabitants could chat, stroll, court, play music, surrounded by



Giovanni Battista Piranesi. *Architectural Fantasy,* 1720-1778. Pencil and watered brown ink on paper. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City. Donated by Janos Scholz, 1974

greyhounds and birds of paradise, in a sweet and oneiric world. They depicted the world before the Fall, or after the advent of Grace. They looked ahead to the end of time, creating a setting that had nothing to do with reality. Whilst the ideal Renaissance cities were shown to be a better version of reality, an improved, cleaner one, the architectural caprices were not reality-based at all, but showed celestial architectures resting on earth, after the opening of the seventh seal on Judgement Day.

Rudolph II, like all Central European millenarians, was trying to accelerate the end of time and to favour the replacement of the Age of Darkness for an Age of Grace. To a certain extent, he presented himself as a prophet announcing the imminent coming of the Spirit.

This conception of architecture as a means of strengthening the soul, edifying it and preparing it for the times to come, was taken up again by 18th-century Masonic painters, such as Hubert Robert and Claude-Joseph Vernet. Masonry was founded, precisely, during the Enlightenment. Even though they sprang partly from esoteric sects like the Rosicrucians, founded in the 16th century, and claimed to be based on the secret knowledge acquired and jealously guarded by the medieval builders' guilds (who supposedly knew the mysteries, written on tablets, found by the Crusaders in the foundation of the Temple of Jerusalem, which God had entrusted to Solomon), the Masonic lodges were—and are—interior spaces which appeared at the end of the classical period, through which initiates had to pass in order to reach the truth. In these places, architectural elements such as columns, gazebos, and chequered floors—all of them supposedly taken from Solomon's Temple—served to mark the initiate's path. The architectural caprices by Hubert Robert, thronging with giant domes, enormous bridges, and pyramids whose zeniths were lost in the heavens, were imposing scenes that overwhelmed the soul. It seemed impossible to cross them without putting one's life in danger. Massive, superhuman volumes sprang up on all sides, putting to the test the strength of a soul terrified by the grandiosity of the scene. As Hegel wrote, the pyramids, beyond any kind of human scale, seemed to place the increasingly enigmatic and inscrutable gods farther and farther away from mankind. The pyramids were raised up to the sky, conceived for giants. Only those who were prepared enough could contemplate them without becoming faint of heart. They were edifications which tempered the soul and only revealed their secrets to the initiated—the Temple of Solomon was a celestial construction set on the earth, whose forms and whose compositional laws revealed, to those who knew how to decipher them, the destiny of humanity which had been fixed by God, the most intimate secrets of the Spirit. Of course, they were not constructions conceived for mortals sunk into the darkness of ignorance.

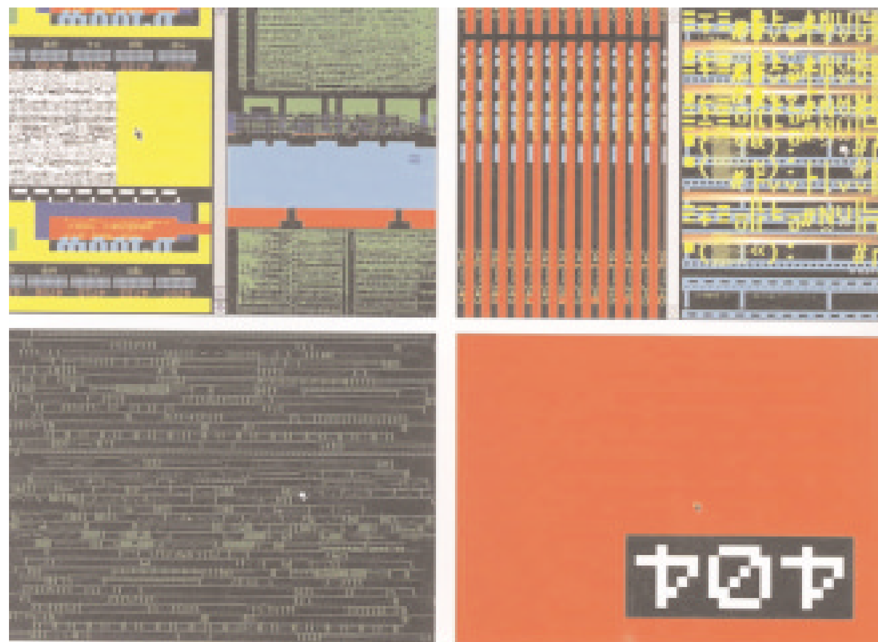
The complex structure of these architectural caprices, which often defy the laws of gravity, the norms reigning in the material world, was aimed at educating and fortifying the soul. Far from being gratuitous and decorative compositions, painted only for the pleasure of the senses, these caprices were conceived to shake up the mind and temper the soul. Thanks to contemplating them, after having untangled the complex mathematical laws that sustained these constructions, the soul became illuminated, preparing man for the times to come in the light of grace.

To a certain extent, all of the classical caprices have recreated the Temple of Solomon, a construction planned and designed by God which evoked Paradise, and which was destroyed by man's greed. The Temple of Solomon was the new house of paradise, the symbol of paradise on earth, the image of heaven incarnate in the visible world.

The Renaissance artists, inspired by the visions of the beyond discovered in the Roman capriccios—visions of the dwellings of pure souls, as Plato put it in his *Phaedrus*–tried to recuperate this mythical building, so that all men, knowing its secrets, could prepare for the end of time, for the desired—and feared—return of grace.

ANNA MARIA GUASCH, CONTEMPORARY ART PROFESSOR, UNIVERSIDAD DE BARCELONA

MUST-READS

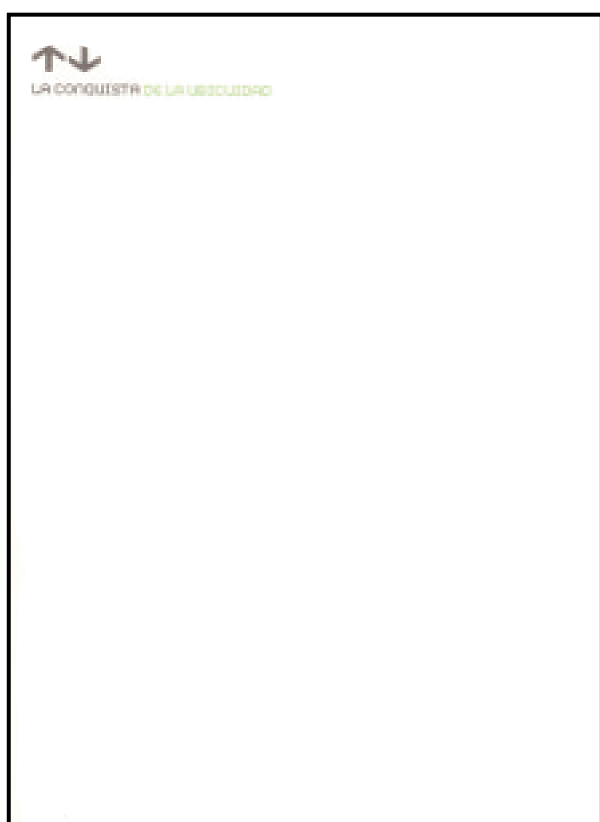


JOSÉ LUIS BREA
La conquista de la ubicuidad (The Conquest of Ubiquity)
Centro Párraga. Murcia. Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea Fonoteka. San Sebastián, 2004. 190 pages.

The history of net art has also been the subject of international meetings, historical revisions, and thematic exhibitions. An example of the latter is art critic José Luis Brea's selection of artist known for their online work—Jodi, pavu.com, Olia Lialina, Dora García, Mark Amerika, Antoni Muntadas, Antoni Abad and Yuc Cosic—in his show *La conquista de la ubicuidad* (The Conquest of Ubiquity), displayed on a website as well as a museum installation at the CAAM (Atlantic Centre for Modern Art) in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria Island, where, through its presentation via a 'physical interface', a 'private' act of navigation (on the Internet) was transformed into a public one.

Starting with the ideas set forth by the French writer Paul Válery in his 1928 essay *La Conquête de l´ubiquité*, in which he discusses the possibility of being 'supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand', and how art could no longer be seen or approached as it was in the days of the 'ancient craft of the Beautiful', Brea presents the paradoxical and unresolved situation of joining the concepts of exhibition and museum with those of the screen, the computer, and the virtual artwork. According to Brea, the auratic gaze, one derived from an 'individual viewing' of the different online projects, is no longer relevant. The public experience of contemplation thus becomes the real protagonist of this 'ubiquity' that is such an important part of net art, and which also serves as a point of departure for reflecting on other aspects of this field, such as difficulties in adapting these media to the conventional strategies of the white cube and the museum show, as well as their inaccessibility as merchandise within an economy of commerce and collection. Is it necessary, Brea asks, to have a museum in order to show, or to sell, knowledge—in this case, the history of net art? Or is a computer screen enough for each and every one of us to become 'knowledge proprietors'? Does the right to broader distribution in the 'art field' necessarily involve presentational strategies similar to those used in film? Given the expansion of macro-industries of visuality at a time when cultural capitalism is at its height, there is a need to reinvent new conditions of visibility for these new media (digital and interactive media, telematic networks, cyberspace, telepresence), which are neither more nor less artistic than video installations, or than painting and sculpture.

These strategies, says Brea, will involve the 'reinvention' of a vision of the individual and subjective gaze, which is constantly engaging in power relations arising out of both institutional circles and the public sphere that is not mediated institutionally.



JULIAN STALLABRASS
Internet Art. The Online Clash of Culture and Comerce
Tate Publishing, London, 2003, 165 pages.

This book by the British writer and critic Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*, begins by highlighting the contentious relationship between the art world and activist online culture with an incident that occurred at the 2000 Whitney Biennial in New York, during which the online activists RTMark (pronounced 'art-mark') made fun of its own participation in the event by changing its webpage, chosen by the Biennial's organisers, for another page featuring documents sent by the public, openly questioning corporativist behaviour. Members of the collective also sold four tickets to a private reception hosted by the Biennial on the online auctioneer eBay, earning $8400 which they used to finance their subversive projects.

This clash of interests between the realms of culture and commerce is what, says this English critic, best illustrates the relationship between Internet art and the art world in all its facets—amongst them, the commercial side. It also explains the attempts by art institutions to 'co-opt' some of the hypermodern, democratic ingredients of this marginal culture, elevating it to the category of 'art' beyond elitist and archaic material praxis, as well as

their obsolete systems of communication and exchange. Using these arguments as a starting point, Stallabrass sketches out his own particular history of 'net art', defining its specific reality not so much as the crossroads between material and immaterial cultural, or sitting on the fence between highbrow and lowbrow art, but also in relation to those components linking it to commerce, both the online and mainstream varieties. According to this author, net art represents a project of 'synthesis' between the modernism associated with new technologies of production, and the postmodernism associated with new technologies of reproduction. 'To write about art on the Internet,' he says, 'is to try and pin down in words a protean and highly unstable phenomenon—an art that is inextricably united to the development of the Internet itself.' A project that, although it requires the analysis of a good number of emerging technologies and bodies of knowledge—from genetic manipulation to sciences of the mind and in general theories relating to the fusion of humans with their digital creations—is approached only from the viewpoint of its present and immediate past.

Using a tone that is more descriptive than polemical, contrary to other publications by the same author (such as *High Art Lite*, an analysis of 1990s BritArt and the impact of the *Sensation* show and the art patron Charles Saatchi), this book's different chapters discuss, with enormous clarity, aspects of the new challenge that is the Internet. These include the nature of the Internet, which is not a medium, like painting, engraving, or video, but a data-transmission system potentially able to simulate all over reproductive media; the analysis of art forms within this vast category, which is more hypertextual than visual in nature; the implosion of time and collapse of space; the potential of online politics; and even new collecting formats, involving both institutions and individuals.

In this new model of online culture, there is also an important place for such major artists and collectives as RTMark, I/O/D, Alexei Shulgin, Vuc Cosic, Maciej Wisniewski, Heath Bunting, Rachel Baker, Jodi, Thomson and Craighead, Olia Lialina, Mark Napier, and Anna Best, whose alternative discourse is closer to anti-art than to the canonical discourse of art history. Far from describing in depth the contributions of each particular artist, the author provides useful but concise and barely conceptualised information for readers not versed in this subject. And always moved by the conviction that thanks to net art, art will be able to emerge from its marginal status through embracing reproducibility.

JESÚS CARRILLO
Arte en la red (Art on the Net)
Ensayos Arte Cátedra, Madrid, 2004. 262 pages.

Although not enough time has passed since the new reality of art on the Internet came about in the mid-1990s, it is, in any case, very nice to see this work of the art theoretician Jesús Carrillo which takes on the issue in all of its historico-theoretical complexity, without overlooking any of the aspects integrating this complex network, presented as an interdisciplinary field closer to the fluid and chaotic idea of the rhizome than as an arborescent structure. Thus, more than a history of art on the Internet, Carrillo proceeds to sketch out a genealogy of how, in a basically 'informational' society, another chapter is being written in the convergence of art and science.

In this sense, one of the Carillo's main vantage points, which surely differentiates his book from other similar texts (such as the one reviewed above by Stallabrass), is that Internet art cannot be understood solely and exclusively as an 'advance in new technologies', but rather, above all, as a cultural event, and that the catalyst for this entire process is not, therefore, Bill Gates, but rather the confluence in a series of thoughts and reflections on the impact of reproducibility in the realm of auratic and autonomous art: that is, putting Benjamin up against Adorno. This is why Carrillo devotes the first chapters of his book to establishing the 'epistemological bases' that justify and explain the shift from the real to the virtual, from production to information, from symbolic aesthetics to the aesthetics of disappearance, in synch with a postmodern thought that embraced the progress of digital culture and which has done nothing but legitimise its acceptance as the status quo. Therefore, he constantly alludes not only to the Walter Benjamin of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, but also to such writers as Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel de Certeau, Marc Augé, Paul Virilio and Pierre Lévy. Without excluding the literature specifically addressing this new digital culture, including works advocating the ideas of Timothy Druckery, one of the fathers of digital studies; of Norbert Wiener, creator of the term 'cybernetic'; of the Société Anonyme, an entity that has made reflecting on the social dimensions of new technology the driving force of its artistic praxis; and of Knowbotic Research, whose projects promote a heterodox use of informational structures.

It is under this aegis that we must consider the appearance of a new prototype of the artist ('the artist as producer in the telematic era') which, thanks to the Internet and net art, would mean the consolidation of Benjamin's old dream of an immersion of the artist within society's productive framework, whether this artist produces his work solo (as in the cases of Jeffrey Shaw and Antoni Muntadas) or as a collective (indisputable highlights here are the collective Jodi, *nom de guerre* of Dick Paesmans and Joan Heemskerk, and the British group I/O/D and their reinterpretation of the Situationist idea of creating alternative maps which reveal what official maps hide).

It is within this context of plural authorship and collective creation, in synthesis with Michel Foucault's theory about the 'end of man', that Carrillo's work situates the activist practices best connecting the concept of 'agency' with the anti-commercial work of the virtual, deterritorialised, and interactive environment of net art (examples include the collectives RTMark, Technologies to the People, and Las Agencias). The book concludes with a chapter on websites for art production and distribution, an excellent appendix to the preceding sections on cultural categories and theoretical concepts, as well as an enlightening and useful reference.