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Communication by Aude de Kerros
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Art and the ‘Very Great Crisis’

Mister Perpetual Secretary,
Ladies and Gentlemen Academicians,
Ladies and Gentlemen of the audience,

Today’s global crisis is the outcome of a series of events that occurred over half a century. As most of us experienced those 50 years of metamorphoses, rather unprecedented in the history of Art, we found it difficult to understand their nature because of their rapid pace and novelty.

Something took place that changed our lives as artists: Paris, which used to be the capital of art, suddenly lost its reputation. Paris used to attract the whole world, eager to take part in its *milieu de l’art* which had been bringing together, since the 18th century, artists and free-minded people with the widest array of opinions, religions, social backgrounds or levels of wealth. It was an environment relatively free from what art theorists call today “the all-inclusive” (*l’englobant*), that is, the economy, the market, and the dominating power. This space of freedom, diversity and nonconformism, was unique in social life, and fertilized creators who would carry out a body of work expressing their individual personality. This, arguably, is the moving force of modernity.

What happened exactly?

Until the Sixties, all the intellectual and artistic life was taking place under our eyes, in coffee shops, in living rooms, or in workshops. The press echoed of the smallest dispute and published manifestoes, and art critics were curious for discoveries.

After WWII

After the Second World War, this world of art, so free and diverse, was considered to be a danger and a political stake.

In Western Europe, the world of art was strongly allured by communist ideas. In France, as in Italy, the Party is very active in the world of art, offering networks, exhibition venues, access to the press. It is an important thread of recognition in the absence of a cultural administration.

The United States had understood since the 40’s that to win the Cold War it should become in turn the artistic reference of the entire world. To achieve this, it had to provide an international circuit of recognition for artists and intellectuals worldwide, just like the USSR had been efficiently doing since the Twenties.

The task first appeared unachievable: Europe in general, and France in particular, were at the same time the place of transmission of millennial knowledge and the place of innovation. America thus had to accaparate from Europe the capacity to transmit “high art” and to produce “avant-garde” – as it had neither by then.

American elites, via their Universities and their Foundations, thus implemented strategies designed to take over from Paris, in an invisible and painless process.

First they cast an improved image of an intellectual, cult, tolerant and avant-garde-minded America, diffused by Hollywood and through European tours of exhibitions and concerts. They would exhibit work by abstract artists,

translate authors likely to be liked by European intellectuals, even though at the same time these “export products” were seen in McCarthyist America itself as “communist” or even “degenerated”.

In 1955, a problem emerged, as all the abstract expressionists had died. America was in a shortage of avant-garde for export... **Additionally, it was not the moment any more to tour American artists in Europe – from then on, one should rather attract the artists and the avant-gardes in New York.**

Where can they find a non-communist avant-garde? They spot some English artists – the inventors of the pop art movement – and a narrow circle of American artists around Breton, Duchamp, and Cage. They set about fetching one by one the American artists settled in Paris to encourage them to return to New York – where galleries are supposedly eagerly waiting for them.

One heard for the first time the rumor that “There’s nothing going in Paris any more”... The rumor returns with punctuality every two years, maintained by subtle press campaigns in *The International*, one of the latest to date being the article by Donald Morrison in *Time Magazine* in November 2007.

It is impossible to create a *milieu de l’art ex nihilo* – but it is quite possible to replace the always slow and complex recognition process of the *milieu de l’art*, as in France, by recognition by the market. Gallery manager Leo Castelli invented a method to socially engineer commercial rating and celebrity within two years: the core of the method consists in networking with friendly galleries, foundations and collectors, both in America and worldwide. But he still had to figure how to gain French legitimacy.

Around 1958, each and every conceivable current is present in Paris, in competition and effervescence... But one also feels in the air a feeling of wear and soul-searching, a kind of crisis of modernity in art. What could be invented that would be really new? Political discourse on art, very prominent then, brought more confusion than cure... The critic Pierre Restany designed a theory and gathered various artists to illustrate it. He proclaimed spectacularly his manifesto in Milan in the form of a neo-Dadaist happening. Quote:

“Easel painting had died... It has been replaced by the enthralling adventure of reality perceived in itself... Sociological reality is being summoned.”

An erect penis set up on the place of the cathedral exploded in a pyrotechnical bouquet: New Realism was born.

The event did not go unnoticed in New York. Restany’s proposal contained neither political message, nor aesthetics... Rather, he changed the definition of art. How opportune! The problem of avant-gardes – to find something, at all costs, to keep the recognition machine spinning – was solved. One did not need any more **to have some art to question in order to have a new avant-garde. Avant-garde became permanent. Paris was impeached.**

In 1962, gallery owner Sydney Jaris organized in New York a retrospective of New Realism which acted like a trap. Pierre Restany brought his theory, his avant-garde aura and his artists – but he did not know much about networking. Without telling him, several local artists were slipped into the exhibition, including Warhol. Then Restany was kept aside. This performed a smooth transfer of legitimacy.

In 1964 Warhol had his solo exhibition at Stabble Galery around an accumulation of Brillo boxes. A philosopher, Arthur Danto, was invited... He was angered by this sight... While he was ruminated over his disappointment, he started to the type of reasoning of analytical philosophy (his specialty); was of the opinion that what he had seen was undoubtedly art, considering that he had received an invitation card, attended an inauguration, looked up a price list and seen other visitors like him; and concluded: “Art is what is considered as such by society”. Upon which he wrote a landmark paper.

New York had just produced its first theory of art...

The last obstacle to take over from Paris had just been removed.

In 1964, at the Venice Biennale, the prize, usually awarded to a French painter until then, went to a New Yorker, Rauschenberg, in fact more a conceptual artist than a painter.

The recognition machine was in motion. It prompted the sudden appearance on the international scene of artists who were unknown in Paris. It took hardly two years for the networks to endow a co-opted artist with international fame... This system was enhanced during the Seventies by initiating large international exhibitions, the first of which took place in Basle.

Ten years after, in 1974, commercial treaties are negotiated in Moscow between the USSR and the USA. The USSR is experiencing a wheat shortage! During the negotiations, dissenting artists exhibit non-official installations and other works on a vacant lot. Bulldozers come and crush the rebellion. Informed journalists film the event. Their images are diffused around the world and prompt consternation. The US, to save those persecuted artists, integrates two conditions in the negotiation: allowing protestor artists to exhibit in the famous Ismailovo area of Moscow, and allowing emigrate for those among them who want it – against the clause of the most favored nation. The USSR, which must feed its population, accepts the deal.

On this day, America won the cultural cold war.

At this time, the term ‘avant-garde art’ disappears and is replaced by the term ‘contemporary art’, along with the suppression, on the international scene – though not in France – of the bond between art and the political discourse of the left. Contemporary art wants to be art of a new society without past nor future – the art of a permanent present.

Since this mechanism of recognition remains obscure with the actors of the market of Art, anything is possible.

The great period of the speculations of the 80’s is all set to start.

In France, what occurred between the 50’s and the 80’s?

After World War II, Paris experienced an omnipresence of the Communist Party, which seized the power in the cultural domain at the time of *épuration* (post-war repression).

In 1958, General De Gaulle creates the Ministry of Culture. He associates, in a controlled way, the Communists in this endeavor through the *Maisons de la Culture*. In May ‘68, radicals (*gauchistes*) call into question the power of the Communists and try to inflect it. At the height of the crisis, Georges Pompidou takes the advice of some of his American friends from the world of finance: “*Work in a network with us, push the Communists aside, feed the radicals well, and the uprising of intellectuals will not reoccur*”. So Georges Pompidou decides to build the Beaubourg Centre [now the Pompidou Centre] and organizes the exhibition titled “72-72”.

The Seventies are especially remembered in France for an internecine war in the art world between artists and intellectuals who will mine this formerly free and open society. It is a sectarian phenomenon dominated by ideological and political confrontations.

The opening of Beaubourg in 1977 will create an additional rift: artists who traveled to New York and earning visibility, and others who still do not understand the rules of the game.

Lang-ism: State control and alignment on New York

In 1981, Jack Lang, taking charge of the Ministry of Culture, **does not want to be restricted to managing culture to making it more democratic and closer to everyone. He wants to channel creation**, to rescue avant-garde, to protect the public from provincialism, to assist the artists right from their entrance in the *École des Beaux-Arts*, to decide on their school curriculum, to weigh on their recognition at the international level... in short, to exert control on all aspects of artistic creation.

Thus, within a few months in 1982, he launches 72 initiatives, in order, in his own words, to “save visual arts”. To this end, he creates: CNAC, FNAC, FRACs, DRACs¹, all of which will need new, special staff: “creators of creation” – future inspectors of creation, to a point, as he thinks that historians of art or existing civil servant in the Ministry are not up to the task. He wants people of the underworld of contemporary art, who will be massively co-opted. One still remembers the memorable day when the 23 directors of FRACs were recruited in one afternoon.

The large budget increase of the Ministry endowed it with the financial clout and power to decree what is art and what is not, and to consecrate whomever it pleases, without having to provide any justification or criteria, and out of reach of the usual controls over the monies of public administration.

Immediately, this takeover has major consequences:

1) **First of all, it causes the destitution of Paris by the “civil servants of creation”.** Indeed, from the start, the artistic orientation of the ministry was hardline Conceptualism, called “Contemporary art” by reference to New York. Very quickly a peculiar trade appears between the Ministry’s agents and New York networks. Our civil servant fly there to buy works by high-profile artists. For 30 years they buy in New York galleries works by artists “living and working in New York”, absorbing 60% of the budget earmarked for purchases from living artists.

¹ Centres National d’Art Contemporain, Fonds National d’Art C., Fonds régionaux d’Art. C., Directions Régionales d’Art C.

With this systematic practice, our administrators of creation dismantled the Paris of creation and legitimated New York, even though in the 80's, US artists still needed legitimacy and European recognition. Moreover, to finish destroying the *milieu de l'art* which was the basis of Paris's legitimacy, New York galleries were not long in requiring that artists from anywhere in the world hold the label "Lives and works in New York" to claim access to the networks that controlled international recognition. As a consequence, artists worldwide did not choose to settle in Paris, but in New York.

2) The civil servants of creation have a second responsibility in the visible consequences and possibly irremediable: **the destruction, for ideological reasons, of the transmission of knowledge in the art schools under their control.** This is their most radical and durable action, ruining the aura which, for centuries, had attracted in Paris artists from the whole world, both for its artistic skills and its avant-gardes.

3) Government control over creation, according to a study by sociologist Nathalie Heinich, also caused an explosion of **the number of artists.** By creating a chain* of State recognition and a source of financial support, the idea was maintained that this was a trade like another. The choice of conceptualism as official art gave a chance to everyone, without the obstacle of having to prove any particular skill.

- Still another consequence was the **destruction of this art world which was the privilege of Paris.** Although it had been deeply degraded by the sectarian quarrels of the Seventies, artists were still speaking to each other, they were close geographically, and rubbed shoulders in general meetings, political demonstrations, and exhibit openings... From the 80's, the increase in rents in Paris separated artists geographically, but even more harmful was the competition for co-optation by a unique network – the one State-sponsored network. Some renounced, demonized for their persistence in the deprecated practices of painting, sculpture, or engraving.

The takeover of creation by the State in France was immediately a hot topic. Various protest movements stood up, but the Ministry of Culture, to discourage any resistance, quickly launched a lynching campaign in the medias. Recurrently, rebels were sacrificed by being branded as reactionary, Poujadist², nostalgic, "far right", etc. A climate of fear was instaurated, and the debate on art went underground.

The milieu of art in France was slow in understanding that the reference point was not any more Paris. The circulation between New York and Paris was not visible, and Jack Lang's double talk asserted that: "contemporary art" was revolutionary art of the left, so that not adhering to it was, in itself, reactionary and secretly Nazi. In this he was slavishly aligned on New York, which had promulgated that "Anyone can be consecrated here, except Communists", and this was what he did.

But the 80's are also a moment of immense prosperity on all the markets of art and all artists, conceptual or not, living and working in New York or not, official, or not, profit from it. Being quite busy in their workshops, the artists deferred questionings. Jean Clair published *Considérations sur l'État des Beaux-Arts* (Considerations on the State of Visual Arts) as early as 1983.

In 1990, two events disrupted the situation: The fall of the Berlin Wall and the financial/economic crisis. The crisis emerged in Japan, which represented 60% of the art market at this time. Its worldwide aftershocks prompted the first crash of Contemporary art and other markets of Art.

In France, this deepened the rift between State-supported artists and all the others, good or bad. Indeed, year after year, the State gradually became omnipresent and quasi-omnipotent in media spaces, exhibition venues, sponsoring money, as well as national, regional and even local commissioning. With the disappearance of independent channels of recognition, the national art market was also impoverished. Who could still accept the work of a painter, a sculptor, an engraver whose practice was vilified in the media networks, close to the ministry and subsidized by it, and considered to be obsolete by the civil servants of art? How could galleries face competition by the State?

In 1993 the official system still hardens. In a gambit before polls likely to bring the conservatives back to power, Jack Lang took 22 initiatives to organize the survival of his system. To protect the agents which he had co-opted, he creates two bodies of civil servants especially in charge of managing creation: "*conseillers de la création*" and "*inspecteurs de la création*" (advisers and inspectors of creation). A hiring contest is organized and, as a transitional provision, the ministry integrates all the existing agents into the civil service. It was a body of "experts" with "scientific" competences and enjoying a privilege – unique in the whole civil service – whereby their hierarchy had no say: the "principle of liberty in their artistic choice", amounting to an arbitrary right in the use of taxpayer money. **All this**

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poujadism>

created in France a “**deep State**” able to survive any shifts of majority. It became more difficult to steer the Ministry of Culture than to control an iceberg, and everything was as frozen.

Slightly earlier, in 1991, a similar body created by Stalin in 1944 had just collapsed in Russia – the “**Head Engineers of Souls***”, in charge of controlling literature. In a contrary move, in France, the last State-official art of the 20th century was consolidated.

We, in France, did not understand during the 90’s that America, the reference of our official art, was in fact experiencing serious problems. The market that legitimated New York as the art capital of the world collapsed at once because collectors had borrowed from banks to buy art works, anticipating a rise of their valuation; the financial crash obliged them to sell to pay back their credits.

As the valuation of CA crumbled, criticism emerged. This was the start of US “**cultural wars**”, a turn-of-the-century echo of Mac Carthyism, in a more moral and less political guise. The debate was very different from the underground debate that was taking place at the same time in France, because it was founded on morals rather than philosophical and esthetic issues. The protestors were the general public: family associations, churches, morality leagues* – and not exclusively the intellectual and artistic world as in France. The methods were violent: demonstrations, destructions of works, advertisements in major dailies – as contrasted with publishing philosophical articles in some erudite reviews like here (cf. the highly influential article by Jean-Philippe Domecq in *Esprit* in 1992).

The triggering event was the award of a grant by the NDA*, a Federal cultural institution, to a group of artists claiming to belong to the *gay* community for an exhibition of shocking, blasphemous and pornographic works. You know one of them: Andreas Serrano’s infamous “Piss Christ”. This prompted ten years of demonstrations throughout the USA. Congress discussed whether the State should use taxpayer money to fund works that do not respect the beliefs and morals of US citizens.

A protracted lawsuit concluded in 1998 with a last instance ruling merely saying that “public institutions had the right not to accept works attacking religious beliefs”. Neither *Le Monde* nor the French press at large gave the slightest account of these “cultural wars” – and this was no happenstance. Fear of contamination, probably...

In the USA, these cultural wars were viewed as an alarming sign of the possible break up of the consensus, so essential in a country with a mosaic of communities. They were taken politically very seriously.

US policy had been initially to collect the fruits of the dismantling of colonial empires by setting up a multicultural empire in the USA themselves. From 1965 on, segregation was suppressed, and a law granting an equal quota* of migrants from all the countries of the world in the long term made the US a global model: it became a reduced image of the entire world, with the legitimacy to reign over it. The USA’s most important cultural endeavor during a half-century was not to develop an elitist culture and an elitist art, but to highlight and put on same level the practices and popular arts of its various communities. **To avoid break-up, America’s cement could only be the multicultural religion.**

In addition, the message passed to the world was: “Come to America! Get trained! Create! Get recognition, and return home with glory”. The world-level creation should be done in America – production, elsewhere.

A new Theory...

A new theory was needed. It was shaped (something not unprecedented) by foundations and universities, and relayed by the media. This new theory was about to engulf art, contemporary art, the economy and peace among nations. It is based on a new concept – “creativity”. Any society featuring “creativity” is supposedly a source of economic prosperity. “Creativity” is not at all the act to create, but an “attitude” fostering the resolution of social and economic issues. Its “inventor” Richard Florida quickly became in the late 90’s the star and herald of this new Utopia manufactured for the entire world. Characteristically, in 2009 he was named US cultural ambassador to the European Union, to defend this point of view during the year dedicated by the EU to the theme “Creativity and Innovation”

“Creativity” is based on three Ts: Tolerance, Talent, and Technology.

According to this theory, the presence of “creativity” in society can be measured “scientifically”, by recording the incidence within it of foreign minorities, homosexuals, a Bohemian middle-class and advanced technology. “Creativity” is also measurable in people as the capacity for life long adaptation and change. It is a “derivative” of Culture and art that prohibits the idea of elite, perfection, refinement, high art, transmission of techniques and values,

and primarily encourages attitudes of permanent questioning of everything, valorization of the ephemeral, and the superficial.

We experienced a first semantic break in the early 60's which blocked our thinking by surreptitiously reversing the definition of the word 'art' by adding the adjective "contemporary". The warped use of the term "creativity" is the second such semantic manipulation. It is a confusionist term like the word "contemporary art", which Christine Sourgins abbreviated to 'CA' (AC) to highlight its ideology *. This is the conceptual broth the word "creativity" serves us: a mixture, under the same word, of radically different activities and concepts: Art and culture, Creativity and creation. Art, invention, innovation, scientific research, entrepreneurial capacity, and public relations. Supposedly, everyone is creative or can become so by learning a bit.

All and everything pertains to creativity and qualifies as art: technological inventions, fashion, design, architecture, and so on. These borders are abolished to foster the production and convulsive consumption of transitory products. Any return to an approach based on excellence would amount to trying to stop the great wheel of production and economy and causing social discrimination.

After the Berlin Wall has been brought down ten years ago, the millenium is then completed. America has created a new Utopia to make people dream worldwide. **The era of concepts gives way to the era of brands.** Art must still change definition to adapt: from then on, everything is art, even Art proper. It was excluded for a while, but it is allowed today, only on a par with anything else in the anything-goes.

The first person to put this in practice was the director of the Guggenheim Museum, Thomas Krens, who turned museum space into profitable space, to the detriment of the collections, which were partly sold to fund this project. He stopped exhibiting objects reserved to an educated public; instead, it opted for objects as accessible as motorbikes or collections by famous fashion designers such as Armani, conferring to consumer objects the status of work of art.

It was then felt necessary to anchor the art market on safer bases. The memory of the bitter failure of the financial crash explains the collectors' obsession for firm safeguards pending the recovery of the art market (which occurred 7 years later, in 1997). Collectors took inspiration from the new secured of the financial derivatives, which were quite in vogue. The method for financial value creation changed, in a transition from the agreement system invented by Castelli to the trust system practiced by billionaire François Pinault. From then on, each network includes the recognition chain: galleries, museums, foundations, media, and collectors. Often, the main collector has all these roles – in which case, the money is just transferred from the left pocket to the right pocket of the collector's jacket. In a normal market, such practices are described as insider trading or the creation of trusts, and are severely repressed by law. This is not so in the market of contemporary art, where they are now the principle of value creation.

In addition, since the value of the new contemporary art is now established via the networks of financial collectors, **art co-opted by these networks has been gradually drained out of actual contents: whereas it used to have a critical stance, it now proposes a smooth product, an vector ideal of P.R. worldwide.** It was also a means for new global fortune-makers to advertise themselves, and to enter the networks of financial actors without the obstacle of ideas, religion, or social or national background.

After the decade, art was not so much an instrument of public policy as a P.R. tool. The Berlin Wall had fallen, indeed.

This all-inclusive definition of art made it possible to legitimate conceptual art forever and to put it on the same standing as (actual/traditional*) ancient and modern art.

This shift was enabled by the agreement between Christie's and Sotheby's in 1999 about a new classification of their departments for 2000 to be implemented by the turn of the millenium. The new chronological classification would cover three departments: ancient, modern, and contemporary art from 1960, i.e. at the conceptual break. Modern art became history, thus acquiring value.

This strategy was supplemented by their decision to invest the market of contemporary art in spite of the fact that auction rooms normally only act on the secondary market (i.e. objects already in circulation)*. Their project was redefined as the direct, international-scale management of living artists. This proved an easy task, thanks to their global presence and large financial resources. They had the power to launch in a spectacular, fulgurating way the valuation of artists co-opted by the networks, and to make them universally visible.

All was in place in **2000** for a new blaze of the market of contemporary art, but two incidents delayed this: 9/11 and the financial burst of the Internet bubble.

By **2005**, the valuation of contemporary art is back at the levels of 1989.

In 2006, contemporary art sells higher than the Impressionists and modern painters.

In 2007, contemporary art sells higher than ancient art

In 2008, there is an acme with the sale of works by Damian Hirst.

The fall came one month after.

And Now the Crisis

This is how the Very Great Crisis started, taking us to the outcome* of this historical account...

The 19th century really closed in 1914 with the First World War. The 20th century closed in September 2008 with a global crisis.

In 1960, an unknown system started out in the field of art. One particular avant-garde had been selected as an instrument for a political strategy with major stakes. For the first time, this could be done without it being perceived as an act of violence.– through the capacity of the **mass media** to create a “reality” that shadowed or erased all other aspects of reality, and above all, through **value creation using network-based financial techniques**. Thus CA imposed itself as the single global official art.

The theorists of the unipolar, all-inclusive stance (*l’englobant*) allege that CA is the only art of our time because it is a unique reflection of social and economic reality. As a corollary, any other artistic expression is put down as despicable “pastiche”. Refusing this state of things makes you a “reactionary”. In so doing, theorists conceal the trick of the winner and endorse the law of the strongest. Let us ask ourselves: is legitimate art the art of the winner?

And concretely, isn’t that, maybe, the case of art imposed by a financial market?

In 2008, the collapse of financial derivatives prompted the collapse of the market of CA. This clearly exposed its: Financial Art nature. People’s minds awoke, because the use of money is universal. When one understands that the financial mechanism behind even the most vapid works resembles in every aspect those of financial derivatives, one finally elucidates the mystery of the making of the value of CA. One also understands the intrinsic difference between art proper and CA.

This realization, which was impossible so far because of the semantic highjacking of the word “art”, is finally made possible by the crisis. Network-designed values break down with the collapse of those networks, and the aura of the most expensive objects of the world fades with the fading of its valuation.

Anyone, regardless of nationality and wealth, is experiencing today that **finance cannot not determine artistic value**. Arbitrariness and absurdity are fatal flaws. To survive intellectually and esthetically, one must maintain the autonomy of one’s judgment and find other evaluation criteria.

The second pillar of this system – the technology of mass media, which had made it possible in 1960 to create an international contemporary art with the touch of a magic wand – is also crumbling. It **generated an uncontrollable ugly duckling: the Internet**.

We had hardly known anything during the Fifties about the McCarthyism craze nor in 1990 about the “culture wars” in America. We had not known anything about the cultural stagnation of the USA during these years. But today, such concealment is impossible. I will provide an example from only last week.

After the Yves Saint Laurent sale, Mr. Pinault organizes at Christie’s (which he owns) a sale of the “most expensive artists in the world” from his collections and convenes global elites in Paris (this type of sale would be considered, in London or New York, as a provocation, even by the media).

He adopts the “charity sale” formula to advertise that it is not a case of collectors getting rid of their collections, but artists, so humanitarian-minded, donating for the benefit of cancer research.

He invites all the collectors to plant the show of a healthy and sound contemporary art. The sale takes place on March 17th. The poor results, published by Christie’s, are reported nowhere in the major media, either as factual information or as analysis... but blogs step in. **Mass medias are still the MCs of the show, but not of its performance**.

Now, we know that the market of contemporary art is in a critical state, whereas the market of ancient and modern art, for good artworks, is doing better and better, as witnessed by the Pierre Bergé sale.

What is happening in France in 2009?

At first sight, all seems quieter than elsewhere. The market of contemporary art is not collapsing in France, since French artists have not been co-opted by the financial networks. Even Mr. Pinault did not buy from artists “living and working

in Paris". The crisis for French artists has been going on for a very long time, except for those which the Ministry sheltered, and often assimilated as public servants with positions as professors or cultural agents.

But the crisis indirectly impacts those of our civil servants who direct creation, because **their choices, aligned on New York trends, are being questioned. They are disorientated by the collapse of their single reference.**

In addition, the pervasiveness of official art has become all too visible and heavy these last months, and the public is growing impatient.

Whereas the United States, England, Germany, China and Japan openly defend their artists, in Paris all the high recognition venues – the Louvre, Versailles, the Grand Palais – laud “the most expensive works of the world”: golden rattles of the “global collectors”, as Judith Benhamou calls them.

In response to the protests of the French artists thus scorned, **our civil servants of art convulsively go about enhancing their splendid Utopia:**

- the 15 measures for contemporary art announced by the Minister at the time of the FIAC in October 2008,
- the project of a second *Palais de Tokyo* to “manage” artists at middle career
- their relentless obstinacy to consider only conceptual art, and to scorn any painting, sculpture, or engraving. This is the case of exhibition “La Force de l’Art”, which is about to open at the Grand Palais, designed as a showcase of art in France.

But the development of official art fosters dissidence.

Art sociologist Raimundo Strassoldo, who has conducted comparative studies of informed criticism of contemporary art worldwide, notes that because of hardline official art, France has produced an exceptional and unique corpus of analysis and criticism by sociologists, historians of art, artists, economists, philosophers and writers from all kinds of ideological horizons.

The major media, after relaying as little as possible in thirty years the debate on art, are undergoing today considerable pressure from the Internet, including blogs. How long can they ignore dissidence before their active occultation is exposed?

The debate on art in France is at the same time intense and underground, except a short media burst between November 96 and May 97. For 30 years, only three critical figures have been allowed on the media scene: Clair, Fumaroli and Domecq. This placed a heavy weight on their shoulders, and gave the impression that they were isolated.

This is not so. **Dissidence in France is a major current.**

- Pierre Souchaud, the head of *Artension* magazine, has been reporting on all the facets of this debate for 30 years, under very difficult conditions.
- On the erudite side, the periodical *Ecritique* run by François Dériver, Francis Parent and Michel Dupré, produced clever analysis and historical accounting of the period with total and heroic independence.
- for many years, Gallimard’s magazine *Le Débat*, directed by Marcel Gauchet, has been courageously featuring all the points of view of the debate.
- This was also the case of *Crisis*, directed by a major nonconformist, Alain de Benoist.

Around 2002, visual artists discover Photoshop, which brings a revolution to image on the Internet. They adopt this means of communication and gain access to information and the debate on Art.

- The first blog with very high traffic and high-level exchanges, *Face à l’Art*³, started in 2002. It was created by Marie Sallantin and other painters, and frankly exposed the problem of the totalitarian exclusion of painting.
- It was followed by another blog, *La Peau de l’Ours*⁴, run by an association of artists linked to amateurs. In it, Philippe Rillon comments and deciphers, with appreciable reactivity, the events of relevance to Art.
- Rémy Aron, the President of *Maison des Artistes*, created in 2007 a site⁵ to inform and connect the MDA’s 40 000 affiliates.
- *Débat Art contemporain*, created by Michel De Caso, is dedicated to high-level information on the evolution of the debate. De Caso also works with archives in “Dissidents Art Contemporain”, publishing Laurent Danchin’s exceptional and extensive bibliography on informed critique on CA and Art for thirty years, regularly updated and used by academics worldwide. This is a good showcase of off-mass-media reality, wholly referenced.

³ www.face-art-paris.org

⁴ rillon.blog.lemonde.fr

⁵ www.lamaisondesartistes.fr

- The *Blog du dessin du XXIème siècle*⁶, by Serghey Litvin Manoliou, analyses the mechanisms markets of CA and various searches for alternatives. It also reveals the hidden world of drawing. Moved by the desire to rebuild on the ruins of the market, Litvin launched the *Foire internationale du dessin* rue de Turenne in Paris.
- In *Chroniques Culturelles*, Carla van der Rohe⁷, a doctor in Art History, briskly vindicates the need to reintroduce the methods of art history in the evaluation of current creation. She advocates a new approach of art critique, and makes a witty criticism of the system, to the dismay of all the heralds of official art... Their peremptory claims about what is art and what is not are screened with infallible humor.
- In her blog, Christine Sourgins⁸, the author of *Les Mirages de l'Art Contemporain*, provides a corpus of texts of critical and erudite analysis of contemporary art that initiates the onlooker to its logic and its games, based on concrete cases.
- I should also mention Sophie Taam's blog⁹, and MDA 2008¹⁰ by Lydia Van den Bussch. The list grows longer every day, contacts abroad are increasing, and the French phenomenon is spreading elsewhere.

Thus the sectarian episode is now ending. The art world is refocusing on professional and amateur artists, reconstitutes and convenes again. The debate is resuming where it was stopped: What is art? How have we been alienated? Are there evaluation criteria? How to solve this deadlock?

A new landscape of art is appearing

"Modernity" in art has been inappropriately described with the image of the succession of avant-gardes. In fact, avant-gardes did not follow one another; they were often simultaneous. A better description would be the image of a river branching out into a delta: From the 19th century, the great river of art divides: multiple streams appear in the middle of the 19th century, and are still active now. The episode of conceptual "Contemporary art" imposed financially and by the medias hides but does not remove this protean modernity. The collapse of the CA market and of its hegemony on both visibility and resources makes reveals the numerous other streams. **Its inventory and evaluation are now on the agenda.** This will require some time, but also the knowledge and historical outlook of historians and art critics who have been so far sidelined by the theorists of CA. This will prompt the reconstitution of an art market, with appreciative participants not primarily motivated by financial deals.

Wanted: a capital of art

Paris could be a serious contender ... **but as long as in France the State and its network remain the only circuit of legitimation and recognition, this will not be possible, notably because current art practice as displayed by the Ministry of Culture, exclusively focused on conceptualism, does not correspond to the reality of creation today.**

Under the Soviet system, when asked "What is a dissident?", the Russian-in-the-street would answer: "Whoever says the truth", that is, whoever sees reality and does not adhere to the State Utopia. This applies to French dissidence: it does not stand for a new Utopia, nor does it preach a particular political, philosophical or esthetic line... It evokes the concrete, existential reality of creation.

The State is so pervasive that no private competition can stand up to it. It even frequently torpedoes initiatives it does not control. Any endeavor that does not follow its esthetic line is in jeopardy.

What kind of **profile and visibility**? Which artistic adventure? What discoveries are possible under these conditions?

Change is on the agenda, but the people in charge have a hard time thinking it out... What can be done by the High Committee controlled by the Presidency and headed by Mr. Karmitz? It is too early to say, but it has a major advantage: it is better to have two brands of official arts than just one.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will formulate a few suggestions:

- Let the wall of concept, which has cut us off from sensitivity and reality, finish crumbling down,
- Let us walk out of the semantic swamp and master the vocabulary, hence our faculty to think and appraise.

⁶ www.blogdudessin.com

⁷ carla-van-der-rohe.blogspot.com

⁸ sourgins.over-blog.com

⁹ www.sophietaam.com

¹⁰ mda2008.blogspot.com

- Let us distinguish art vs culture, art vs contemporary art, creativity vs creation, multiculturalism vs universality.
- Let us find different criteria to evaluate different approaches, in order to reinstate in each of them its legitimacy and function. In art, let us evaluate the /achievement of form which offers meaning as an additional gift. For CA, let us assess the authenticity of the criticism and questioning it set itself as a goal – since what is termed today “Contemporary art” has always existed – only without the totalitarian claim to be the only possible expression. Art has always had counter-powers to question its immense prestige – a sanity device recalling us that no one holds the ultimate receipt, nor can claim ownership of the good, the true and the beautiful. In fact, the transgressive behavior of the cynical philosophers, the recurring carnival time inverting values, the followers of “incoherent arts”, of Dada, and Marcel Duchamp, were always contemporaries of art
- Let us also refuse the hegemonic and reductionist accounting through “sociological all-inclusive” and let us pursue the timeless dimension of Art.
- Let us find in our work the sense of transcendence and escape this terrifying, totemic sacrality that has replaced it.

Jean Clair wrote that modernity is “adaptation to time...”. This is a natural approach, all in all. It does not need theory, but practice.

Rediscovering the paths of natural modernity may allow us to reconstitute Paris its radiance and its role.