

The Work of Art at the End of the Age of Singularity

“Thus we find reflected in the visual sphere what we noted, in the theoretical sphere, as a rise in the importance of statistics. The *orientation of reality to the masses*, and of the masses to reality ...”

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

“Be not one or many, be *multiplicities!*!”

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Rhizoma, an introduction” in *A Thousand Plateaux*.

“There is no individual, there is no species. Only the highs and lows of intensity”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

“The reproductibility of the art work does not vulgarise it, but rather constitutes an ethical experience – shattering the existential nullity of the market. Art is the anti-market inasmuch as it pits a multitude of singularities against a uniqueness reduced to the price tag. The revolutionary critique of the political economy of the market constructs a space for the enjoyment of art by the *multitude*...”

Toni Negri, *Art and Multitude*.

“Being subject to the demands of representation, *difference* cannot, can never, be *conceived of as such*.”

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

1. The End of the Singular Work (of the work as singularity)

It is important not to underestimate consequences. Small inventions such as reproductibility can profoundly upset all the economies of the imagination. And in their wake, once the symbolic orderings have been overturned, it is the economies of the *real* in its totality that are affected. But to this end it is necessary to counteract the neutralising, systematically disactivating, work of market and institutional inertia. It is imperative to interfere with the efficacy of the devices being fielded to ensure that once everything has changed, it continues to remain the same. The end of *the work as singularity* must be roundly proclaimed, and the consequences uncompromisingly laid out. There can be no collusion: any temporizing or mitigations – even and especially in the form of “print-run control” – is a connivance, upon which the structural inertia of the system relies.

There is no *singular work* that intrinsically belongs, by rights, to our time. Either it inhabits a borrowed time, and hence whispers in the ear of bygone ages (for it has nothing to say to our own that sheds any light upon the problematic nature of its own conditions of representation), or it surrenders to the tremendous vertigo of its uncontained existence, in a cascade of multiplications in which the infinite numberlessness of avatars betrays the radical, ontological equivalence of production and reproduction, of origin and scattered echo. The particularised existence of things and objects in the world is, by now and for us, a vanished chimera, an interrupted nightmare. As with grains of sand on a beach or the needles of a pine tree, any naming other than a numbering belongs henceforth to the order of schizoid raving. There are no names in the world that can hold or *subject* (for this would be the same operation as to *subjectify* objects, in order for them to vaunt the truth of the particular existence of the person who stands

before them and designates them) the irrepressible, quiet multiplicity of what there is, that which inhabits the world in the unchartable patterns of myriad millions of infinitely open, decentered series, interwoven in a febrile and unencompassable network.

This is what the art of our time must address: the *great metaphysical revolution of the epoch*, which consummates the abolishment of being in the world as it was ordained by the presumptions of individuals. The fact that it does this by testifying to – rather than concealing – its own impossible singularity, is a strength. The days when art was entrusted with the mission of endorsing the imaginaries of the particularised world are over, for that project is dead and gone. And happily so, since it falsified and negated being in its infinitesimal, seething deployment, in the trenchant epiphany of *difference*.

But we must still watch out for the corpse. Zombies walk among us, mouthing hoary clichés about “*los muertos que vos matáis ...*” Though non-existent, they maintain their grip on the state apparatus and on power (which is how that which is not alive *appears*, as in court). The order of singularity defended by such phantoms – the order in which they *exist*, if such an attribute freights any kind of *reality* in the context of them – is founded upon just these millenarian presumptions. Since they wield the power, the kingdom of this world belongs to them. So the true revolution pending would be to expel them from it, or better said, to restore that kingdom to its genuine owner: the darkest of shades, that of the phantasm on the stage – *the structure of the unhappy consciousness* – constituted in the terrain of ersatz atonements for the *fault*.

2. The End of the Art-Commodity as a Singularity.

But let us come down to earth, in case it seems we are being too vaporously metaphysical. It should be understood that this ontological politics is directly *accomplished* on the plane of the market; the market must first, therefore, be put through a critique and a transformation (and therefore the critique shall be levelled at a specific *politics-economics*). Indeed, it is through its *accomplishment* in the order of the market, as a system for the market's articulation, that representation consolidates its establishment as the despotic regime of universal generic regulation. Artistic activity, being both exemplary paradigm and constituent structure of the mode of representation's articulation of an order imposed on the system of objects and things, should not therefore be underestimated; art activity encloses great political potential *on its own stage*, with regard to its own political economy.

The system of telematic reproductibility (by which we mean the inherent *productibility* multiplied to infinity that characterises the techno-digital image, for which there are no limits, nor any increased energetic investment when it comes to the multi-reproduction of those *objects* susceptible of being reduced to information) condemns the economy of art to an inexorable transformation. It must concede to a new regime that will assault and dismantle the structures of the one now in place. This, undoubtedly the most important event in today's art world, has begun to unfold with all the impetus of the new millenium. It marks a

radically differential periodisation of its epochal manner of being, of its contemporary ontology and also of the possible modes of its experience, of its phenomenology and, in the last instance, of its meaning and anthropological function in the information society, or the societies of knowledge.

The springboard of this upheaval is most probably located in the immaterial nature of digital products and their consequent inscription in an order of intersubjective circulations involving minimal waste or expense, in which social transmissions and transactions never build up to a lack, or a dispossession. This makes it highly sustainable within an economy of distribution, in that its reception and appropriation by others do not imply the least erosion of the sender's ownership of the information. In other words, the old system that dealt with its products as tradeable commodities – in which “transmission” required compensation for an effective loss in the relinquishment of what was given – is naturally, even *forcibly*, suspended. The quality of the unique and unrepeatable is terminally undermined by the inherently reproducible nature of the medium/support. At the same time – and this is even more momentous and laden with consequences – the possibility of basing the social circulation of art on a *post-mercantile economy* begins to seem a viable, unforced and real possibility. And as such, it is a *forcibly imminent* one.

So what's still holding us back? A two-fold resistance, combining the metaphysics of the ontological singularity of the art work, and the powerful vested interests of an art industry that handles its economy following the market model. More precisely, on a market model that revolves around the sale, or onerous transfer, of an art object, an art-commodity. Of course where video is concerned, that is not the sole market mechanism involved. There is also the payment of screening or reproduction rights, and we are beginning to see production fees being charged. These options have entered the nascent distribution economy that is tending to dominate the audiovisual milieu, but they operate, so far, as merely an adjunct to the main economy, and they are usually subsidised. The point is that this newer economy, while still so incipient that it is necessarily secondary and subsidised, is *the future*. It is destined to supplant and displace – or at the very least, relegate to secondary, subsidised status – the current model based on the trade in goods. And what is urging it forward? First, the logic of the times, and the development of technical possibilities that usher in far more expansive, “democratic”, and quantitatively potent economies (or economies, shall we say, that do not condition consumer access to solvency quite so strongly). Second, the fact that once we have developed the industrial (or post-industrial) frameworks for channelling and stabilising those characteristics in a range of distinct industries, their potential will carry everything before it, eventually converting traditional economies (with all their paraphernalia) into vestigial, back-up operations. In the process, the old economies' *selective elitism* will be shown up for what it is: the tool of sumptuary economies which intend their products exclusively for the more privileged classes, only attending to those on lower incomes for purposes of self-legitimation, in a manoeuvre which shows the real reason why public administration has taken control of the cultural management of the state – of a public sector structured, as Weber put it, in the “horror of an administrated world”.

3. The End of the Subject (Addressee) as a Singularity.

It may be that this ongoing transformation points us to an even more crucial pole, even more pregnant with consequences, that lies precisely with the *receptor*. As Benjamin foresaw, the entire process is a function of the new *orientation of reality towards the masses*. As far as the practice and production of culture are concerned, this process is already irrevocably consummated. And it brings a host of implications with it.

The chief consequence is the following: the natural addressee of culture is no longer the individual subject, the enlightened mind shaped by the *bildung*. Culture no longer operates as a formative influence on an individual regarded – precisely due to that cultural accomplishment so decisive for his or her unique aptitude – as a competent uniqueness, as a “person”, as a *beautiful soul* (in the Romantic phrase). The same egregious singularity is being eroded on the other side, the side of the artist-genius, another formerly unique and differential soul whose lofty exemplariness, so distant from the common herd, is exactly what epitomises the discrete, singular nature of the individual and his apartness from tribe or species. Artists have been inscribed into the cultural space as an argument for differentiation (Bourdieu would say, distinction).

In this fashion, the emergence of *mass culture* not only triggers the emergence of a certain industry (or the conjunctural-epochal tweaking of a pre-existent industry), but also, over time, a complete anthropological overhaul heralding the profound transformation of the *being subject* in information societies. In short, it's the “death of man” (“that recent invention”) trumpeted by Foucault towards the end of the last millenium: he was referring to the final throes, now behind us, of a certain way of being a subject anchored and inscribed into the individual space and experience of a subject regarded as empirical, enjoying an organic relationship with a concrete body and a specific memory of experiences that are biological (or bio-political, we should say, following Negri).

So we might not think of culture so much as a parcel that is (or was) delivered to an individual addressee. It is more like a specific operator in whose space of consumption and praxis the subject was (and is) *produced*. Similarly, we cannot conclude that culture has been redirected to the masses, as though the addressee had simply changed. More accurately, it is culture that *produces* the new type of subject: a collective, undifferentiated and multitudinous subject. This *new way of subject-being* is beginning to be well served on the theoretical plane by the notion of *multitude*, in Negri, and *community*, in Agamben. We are witnessing the emergence of a “whoever” subject, the subject as multiplicity, for whom the condition of being is an occasion for experience, the *consciousness of experience*, subordinate neither to the punishing budgets of the ego (the essentialising, erect looming of the despotic signifier on the horizon of a psychic life prefigured by the symbolic order), nor to the trivialising disparagement of its constitution as “the nefarious publicness of the mediatic”, in Agamben's formulation.

Thus the new cultural practices tend to articulate their scenarios of reception (and consumption) in collective and even simultaneous modalities. But this is not just the effect of the particular interests of an emergent entertainment industry. It is also the result of an increasing decline of the individual-subject for whom such practices were, in their uniqueness-oriented mode, first conceived. In other words, there was a precipitous decline of the singularised subject – an offshoot of the bourgeois-Christian conception of culture, tailored to the measurements of a world project that was also a specific project for subjectivity – who had once been formed in privacy by the pages of a book, or mirrored the singularity of a masterpiece of painting amid the lonely pomp of a museum.

We might do well to pursue this issue further. Perhaps it is not simply a matter of the displacement that encourages culture to dispense with the “man of qualities” whose disappearance Musil’s writing suspected and dissected so long ago already, or his replacement as cultural interlocutor by a new form of the being-subject viewed as mass, multitude or community. It may be something that predates all this, technically speaking. Something that concerns the evidentiality of the fact that cultural happenings – the acts of enunciation and praxis that constitute symbolic production – are what converge, in the course of their unfolding, to *produce* the subject, and not the reverse: the subject does not precede, nor does it produce, cultural events. To put it in another way: we are talking about the light cast on the *identity-producing* character of cultural practices, not, vice-versa, on the expressive nature of forms of identity (for the latter would then have to predate the former, as an essence). We are talking about recognising an aspect of the culture of our times that might be described as the *subjectivity industry* facet, owing to the decisive relevance of its operations to the founding processes of socialisation, identification and differentiation; in short, to the processes whereby subjectivity is actually manufactured.

The suggestion is, then, that we find ourselves embedded in a *post-identitarian*, post-essentialist economy of enunciatory and signifying practices. Identities are teased forth by the movement of cultural practice itself, understood as a constitutive practice, and this is the foremost function of culture in the societies “of knowledge”. Cultural practices bring forth the subject – a subscriber to the forms of experience – through the speed and efficiency of their circulation as well as through social interaction. Thus even that “nostalgia for a life of one’s own”, signalled by Beck as the last community feeling remaining among advanced societies, demands to be relativised. It might stand on a par with the melancholy testimony of the android in *Blade Runner*, devoting the final moments of its existence to a plea for recognition on the grounds of the unrepeatable singularity of its lived experience – when such extreme singularity required first and foremost that its ancestral line be ritually maintained (for the sake of history, for the sake of the species) through a *community* scheme, in the historic trail of *humanity immemorial* and the inertia of its “line of germination”: a line that biologists and geneticists agree is of itself immortal (and no doubt *unique* with regard to the species as a whole). Beyond this, the sorry invention that is the individual subject is helpless before the crushing diagnosis of Roy, our best clone: *all this will be lost, like tears in the rain...*

4. Disorientation and Non-place – the End of Space as a *Singularity*.

The sea change transforming the contemporary world forces a reconsideration of the relationship between space and power. No critique of prevalent social economies can be mounted without venturing into geopolitics, into a critical topology of spaces and places, and a foray into the modes of territorialization. The most immediate effect of the globalisation of the contemporary world has been an exhaustive topologisation of the earth as a heterotopic environment, in which the distribution of densities, energies and potencies are anything but even, and anything but entropic. The striking increase in various mobilities – including not only geographic migrations, but also shifts in terms of class, culture, gender, ethnicity, biopolitics and economics – has led to the systematic deterritorialisation of that possessive, despotic equation which goes by the name of globalisation. Never before has the world been criss-crossed by so many flows, in every direction (and at *such a speed*), and of so many categories: streams of people, goods, values, information, knowledge, emotion, data... The above-mentioned concept of heterotopy jeopardises any topological approach that seeks to idealise itself as a differential space, made up of fixed borders separating distinct domains. Instead, the new forms of *utopia* are negotiating a practical realization for themselves at the threshold of “wherever” space, in the deterritorialised ubiquity of non-place, lost place, dis-placement, or the *non-space* of commuting and transit.

Millimetrically saturated down to the last nook and cranny, the countenance of the modern world is a smooth surface (as though sanded down, or ploughed level) veined by a fibrillation of rhizomas spreading in every direction, proliferating erratically and indiscriminately, dodging fixed or stable attributes: this is *the space without qualities*. The paradigmatic form of such a heterotopy of scattered microspaces is none other than virtual reality. Here too we find the deployment of an elusive *non-space*, existing solely as a topology of encounters and circulations, spurts and streams of information, merchandise, knowledge or affect, virtuality providing a space, a code and a mechanism for unobstructed flows of every kind.

Not the fractured space of privacy – that clumsy architecture that parcels out the earth in the manner of a estate agent – and not the deceptive, self-advertising space of the state, with its management of the collectivity by dint of some (Kafkian, *toujours*) bureaucratic apparatus. Rather than with these, we are concerned with the concept of a newly polished space, that can be plied in many equi-probable directions, that presents itself as a web of interchangeable, indiscernible points, among which the *here* is manifest as an *anywhere*, like a micropolar ambit of action under the sign of multiplicity, and no longer a territorialised singularity. Against the politics of uniqueness, of the wholesale allotment of space and its regulation by means of a territorial law and its accompanying devices, we hail the new space conceived as transitivity, as hyperconductive *locus*, a grid of points that are not “itself”, but rather, like Leibniz’s monads, totally defined by their exteriority, their communicativity, their being in pure *otherness*...

This would be one way of revoking all the privileges, all the hierarchies, associated with the assignation of spaces and positions in the endless topologies of *the formless*. What is at stake here is the construction and eventual prevalence of a new form of publicness, to remake the *public sphere*. A form that would depart from the so-called “citizens’ representation” model, deformed as it is by a political simulacrum instrumentalised by the media. Perhaps what we must try to imagine is how a new, “post-mediatic” configuration of the media might help to articulate new forms and conditions for the construction of publicness, of citizenship, of inhabiting the commons, within a framework of *enhanced democracy*...

Ideally, it would take the form of a *community of communication*, enacted in a gathering of emitters/participants, in such a way as to ensure that all contributors to the games of speech and enunciation should intervene on the same level, with the same rights and under the same conditions. This heuristic fantasy would be no more than the regulatory horizon of a rhizomal loom of communicative fabric, over and above the topologies of power deriving from the allocation of place and position in the mapping of symbolic civic space as the instrumenter of the Public stage.

With regard to the practices governing cultural – and especially artistic – output, the above would entail a fundamental destratification of space, wiping out hierarchy while suspending the allocations and privileges of the museum to the benefit of the everyday, the jolly world of life. Is this not a fantasy well worth harbouring? But if it is to come about, something else must happen first: the work of art must emancipate itself from the demands of space, it must cease to depend upon it. The technologies of our time allow us to envisage such a leap. Whereas for centuries we have been fed visual productions as devices for producing singularised spaces that were positively “sacralised” by a gamut of liturgies and rites, we are now, just maybe, stepping into a period of history (defined by the emergence and establishment of the digital image and its efficacy in inducing an *image-time*) which shall have the privilege of dissociating the effect of distinction from any marker of place whatsoever, that is, from any superior *here*. It will be linked, instead, to some marker of time. After several centuries of domination by an *art based on space*, we welcome the tentative first steps of *time-based art*, which far from being cramped into the spatialising uniqueness of a statist/static “now” (being more at home in the *wherever*, once hierarchies of place have been dismantled), expands, on the contrary, *over the course of time*...

5. Expanded Time – The end of time as a *singularity*.

The relatively recent appearance and gradual consolidation of image-time as the kind of image that vehicles the main or default mode of *experiencing images* in advanced societies, heralded the fall of the millenarian empire of the static image, and hence of the regime of experiential relations it had fostered. The new image (which we shall call image-time, brought into being by the latest technologies of image production and distribution) does not occur in the frozen, arrested time of some unique “successful moment”, de-temporalised into a present which is cut off from the flux of becoming. It unfolds in an expanded

time, continuous and uninterrupted, neither spatialised nor fragmented, nor reduced to a free-floating, discrete unit; rather it is expansively distributed as *dasein*, event or happening, becoming; continuity of being inasmuch as it exists.

The most obvious consequence here is that this new way of being exposed to the image, in the form of image-time, implies an unprecedented adjustment of the nature of reading (and therefore of *presentation* devices), to make it compatible with the expanded time required for contemplation. The time of the viewer's perception (in correlation with the internal time proper to the work-sign itself) has ceased to be a singular moment; it has become a deferred or extended time, which develops and unfolds over a period. The "reading" of the work cannot take place at a glance, in an instant, as it could in the case of static works; it too must stretch into duration, and become an event that occurs in time, that unfolds through a succession of present moments, during which the work, in turn, takes shape, changes, and is expressed as a story, a narrative. The time-based work does not offer itself once and for all, forever identical to itself, congealed for all eternity, aloof from the passage of time. On the contrary, the representation acquiesces to the regime of duration from within its very form, to become internally temporised. Thanks to this, it becomes endowed as a narrative device with the capacity to tell stories, rendering itself as a time-sign realised in the very deferral of difference. The same internal temporisation – that way of being pregnant with the sign of an inner, expanded temporality – is of necessity carried over into the realm of the *reading*. All this entails a certain de-localisation of the exhibition arrangements (museums and galleries being unsuitable places in which to observe objects endowed with internal times), that is, the way audience reception of the work is articulated. It is no longer enough to set up a spot, *here*, over which the image shall preside in static immobility; what is now required is to identify an environment which may facilitate our expanded attention over time, a receptacle that enables prolonged viewing.

Benjamin recognised long ago that the phenomenon of expanded representations in time (the image-time, and even more specifically, the image-movement we find in cinema or television) fosters another, more straying, less concentrated kind of perception – whilst the return of the gaze onto its object finds the latter altered, turned into something "else" (the *deferral of difference*, we might suggest along with Derrida) where time is concerned. Thus an inescapable alliance is formed between moving image and distracted perception, inviting the *skewing of the image towards entertainment*. But at the same time it means a certain sapping of the authority wielded by the image over the gaze inasmuch as it constituted a static affirmation, lifted and bracketed away from the laws of time, foreign to the regime of *being as self-substraction* that tends to go with the notion of incident or *event*. Taut, contrived, sealed into its changeless identity with itself, the unmoving image provided the conditions – and the powers, and the anthropological-magical-symbolical promises – of a visual, scopic regime built around the static sign (for manuality or craftsmanship could produce nothing more), elevating itself from time immemorial into a hegemonic regime. A regime which is being undermined, like it or not, by the arrival of the image-movement.

The hopeful new prospect is that of levelling all timeframes into equivalence, tearing down the hierarchies of singularised time and annulling the pretensions of those *nows* that adorned the beautiful moment (“Stop, moment, beautiful that you are!” wrote Goethe) or the well-brought-off moment (as in the mystique of that photography which strives to capture an “eternal” second). It is the prospect of assuming the horizontality of an eventfulness manifest in the uninterrupted succession of *whenever-times*, breaking away from the construction of history as a string of special moments and doubling back (like the long-denied “history of the vanquished”, in Benjamin’s phrase) through the strait gate of the instant, to where its intensive extension makes the density of *now-time* indistinguishable from the flowing, glorious horizon of *full-time*.

This is what underlies the continuity we observe in so many contemporary works, from the expansion of the image-time (in video projections and in the whole new genre of narrativity on technological supports, whether it be narrative, digital photography, or the cutting edge of video research) to the other expansions taking place in the field of *performance* or the *production of situations* understood as strict affirmations of happening and duration, that is, as a *politics of eventfulness*. But this alliance between image-time and event is hardly new: it will be remembered that the most radical stages of the naturalisation of video art, during the Sixties and Seventies, already displayed this penchant for asserting whenever-time, or the entropic time of happening. The connection between image-time and the art of experience (I am thinking of *Time as Activity*, by David Lamelas) was, and effectively is, a fact. And what is most radically effected by this mobilisation of the potential of image-time is precisely a *politics of the event*, a politics of experience.

Is this an affirmation of mere existence – any old existence – upheld against the static being of the entity – the already *has-been* – asserted by the sign inasmuch as it was conceived to the measure of the word? It is an affirmation of *presence* versus representation, a cheer for what offers itself as an on-going deployment of the *deferral of difference* versus the *petrification of what is*, so well championed by ontotheology. For to put it frankly, the classic work of art in its static incarnation, by instituting and consecrating the *representational order*, was not so much a latent argument underpinning such a theology, but rather an accomplice and even a major instigator of it – at least as much as the *logos*, of whose imperium the classic work has been dark lackey and shameful guarantor at once.

6. Visual Culture and the Aesthetisation of the World – The end of art as a singularity.

We might well sum up the many-faceted declines of the *representational practices* spawned by a regime of singularities in an all-encompassing, general statement: the announcement of the end of the radically singular character of artistic practice compared to other domains – those for instance of symbolic, visual, or signifying production. This would mean, perhaps, the actual advent of the long-trumpeted end of the separate existence of that which is deemed artistic, enclosed in its segregated allocations far from the modes of production

pertaining to critical or rational activity – the typically modern separation of spheres: speculation, praxis and aesthetics. It must be remembered that any overcoming of this segregated state – any pooling of the totality of the experience corresponding to each one of those three spheres of reason – would reflect the accomplishment of a utopian longing, as would too the figure regulating the dissolution of the separate condition of artistry, melting it back into the amplified, entropic, and de-hierarchised ensemble of cultural and representational practices.

With this we do not aim to wheel out old figures like “the death of art”, claiming new relevance for them in the light of a metaphysics reactualised by the technological threat. Instead, we mean to attempt a reconsideration of the problematic position in which the above figure is placed in the context of the entire programme of “high” or late modernism. Put simply, the scenario is one of art shadowed by the figure of a *decline*, or endlessly-postponed demise, veering between the affirmation of its own difference from other symbolic practices, and a state of indiscriminate immersion in the diffuse, expanded constellation of visual production practices, a field which has enjoyed disproportionate growth in the present historical context of the definitive establishment of cultural capitalism, now that mass culture and the cult of the quotidian have conquered irrevocably. Contrast this with the time when “lofty” forms of “high culture” prevailed, designed for singular consumption piece by piece, and linked, as we have shown above, to the specific production of the modes of being of the subject itself, conceived as a singularity.

There can be no doubt, then, that the space which has opened up in the course of this process is deeply problematical. This is a thoroughly slippery terrain, mined with uncertainty and bristling with equivocation. To turn our backs on the issues it raises amounts to a refusal to confront the questions thrown up by our times. There is little to be gained by flinging ourselves blindly into its chasms, but still less by denying the reality of their presence, and their status as the epochal challenge par excellence facing the practices of representation and identity production conveyed in the generation, dissemination and consumption of *visuality*.

It is moreover possible to suppose that the primordial task awaiting the survival that is *art* consists in meeting this same challenge – and that in denying its priority, art may be losing its last, or dare we say *posthumous*, opportunity. To put it another way: the option of resistance, digging in safely behind the doors of privilege while all around rage floods of undifferentiated homologation, would leave art to wither away high and dry, in the most ignominious of declines as a result of its in-significance, lack of scope and refusal to examine and respond to the core of its epochal problematicity. Or to put it in yet another way: it would exist as no more than a spectacle administered by the entertainment industry, meekly endorsing the logic of the contemporary aesthetisation of the world which proceeds by means of the generalisation of just some of the traits of aesthetic experience to the whole of visual and cultural production (and even to experience as a whole): traits such as the pleasure function, associated with a particular, intensive sensoriality, or the exemption it claims from the exhaustive conditioning of other aspects of life by the economic-productive fabric. But both

these may be predicated of countless other activities and practices of representation, so that this demarcation – the vaunting of a difference with regard to being absorbed by the entertainment industry – calls rather for a greater self-exigency in the proposal of alternative enunciative structures and modulations. Among these, the obligation to confront the nodal problematic points of the epoch in relation to representational practices will, more than any other, define art's mission, task and specificity.

However this may turn out, we are addressing a *horizon of dissolution* that entails profound displacements, indeed an authentic mutation. At stake is a wholesale levelling of the field, the homologisation of the topology of the terrain in which cultural and other practices which produce meaning are played out, along with symbolic practices, producers of the collective imagination, and representational practices, producers of identity. Whether we accept it or not, this horizon embodies – for the whole of that expanded constellation – *the challenge of our time*. And how should we believe in such practices *as art* unless they were capable of taking on this challenge, the highest task that can be entrusted to the practices of representation? The challenge is to elucidate this space, acknowledge and illuminate its problematic aspects, trace its limits and contingencies, equip ourselves to employ it in the full knowledge of all that is implied in this use, and hence constitute ourselves as the subjects of this practice. From the outer point where their foundations are set, let us help ourselves to understand, or at least intuit, how and under what conditions each *order of representation*, each *order of discourse*, becomes instituted in the History of human production. In this space lies their efficacy and even our very existence...

José Luis Brea