



Daniel Dezeuze, *Grand chassis* (Large Stretcher), 1967. Wood stain on wood. 437 x 269 cm.

Studio Notes, 1967-1972

Daniel Dezeuze

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Translated by Daniel Spaulding.

1967

What is the ideological system currently in effect?

The bourgeois system and its intellectual cadaster,¹ namely:

- the false authority of “authors”
- the mystique of “genius,” of the chosen man,
- artists organized in a new priesthood objectively allied with technocracy.

We prefer to produce our own evaluation of the cultural forces active in our society. An awakening of the mind and of all the forces that contribute towards a single goal: emancipation, on both the human social and unconscious level.

But the danger of critical evaluation is an appeal to morality. A morality presenting itself as revolutionary or subversive, but morality all the same, quite in line with religious moralities. Religion in crisis abandons the field to the religion of art.

In the face of this temptation—culture as cult—revolutionary radicalism pushes the artist to scuttle the ship of ART if it sets course for some new transcendence.

But how to evaluate this course? How should we view the system? As useful? Good? Or noxious? Without considering the system as a whole, seeing not only its origin but also its consequences, that is to say both the consumption of the artwork and the results of its “ingestion”?

Art can be produced only after evaluating its effects (and not in the search for an origin). It is only after taking consequences into account that it is possible to define art’s position.

1967

On the sacralizing function of art

By general designation, “everything is beautiful.” It is enough for a thing to enter a museum for it to be beautiful. Where does this authority come from? From the artist? From the critic? From the museographer?

¹ Translator’s note: A cadaster is a register of all land parcels in a given territory. It is thus a kind of map indicating property lines. Dezeuze uses the word several times in his early writings. – Daniel Spaulding.

Duchamp, in America, set the tone: he who designates is the artist, but the functionaries of art designate which works will go to the museums: it is they who are in fact the artists, deploying their true authority. The artist himself is nothing but a producer of raw materials, an underdeveloped supplier of objects for fetishization.

Duchamp thus revealed the circuit: the cult of the artist only exists to mask the circulation of the artwork, in which the artist is, despite himself, venal.

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Already one can imagine an art with a social function such that the artist would become the obliging organizer of leisure activities, and all too often the sweetener of bitter pills.

He would referee a thousand games, from the surrealist ready-made to the retinal titillations of kinetic art, not failing to pass through the artisanal kitchens of good old homemade painting.

An aesthetic-ludic, even therapeutic activity, mixing with a shared *Jouissance*: now there's a positivist dream, of the sort our good technocrats are fond of putting into effect these days.

The artist, immersed in the "the cultural," will administer marionette theatres and those "centers of sensibility" where the citizen will go for a good swig, just like they go to confession.

And how can we resist mounting the beautiful horses of this dazzling carousel: social responsibility, intervention in popular culture, triumphant pedagogy of the *vates*, as the self-professed midwife of the masses, proud, finally, to see converge in himself the inner call and the exercise of a happy function?

But you can't reject the world if you're holding the reins of wooden horses.

1967

Televisual hypnosis can be fought with a certain non-retinal painting that refuses to become a technological extension of the means of mass communication.

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A painting beyond form, enigmatic, beyond color, its purpose intangible.

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The era of the gaze cast upon the world is coming to an end, but painting resists or is the victim of a surplus of information, painting which had once offered information about the "real." Even within this resistance, or because of this overextended resistance, all mediation is abolished.

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Language appropriates painting in order to make of it a "specific language." But painting is not language. Indeed, it often appears as the impossibility of language.

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The sociological concerns that characterize Nouveau Réalisme only conceal old determinist systems. As the critic Restany says: "Art becomes a psychosensorial conditioning of the spectator," which is to say that under the heading of "participatory" art we have entered the dubious domain of a physics of souls.

All of the so-called mass culture that emerges from this Pavlovian relation, in which “meaning” develops on the basis of existing ideology, is quite quotidian and, so to speak, natural. How could we not wish to suspend this diffuse meaning in order to analyze its function?

The question is not about the internal laws of painting, but rather about the meaning of the pictorial system as a whole. Even as painting refers to itself, it reveals itself, as such, to be a container for what has been done and is still being done in its name.

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Culture is not put in question through the injection of exotic formal systems but rather through a gradual dismantling of the complex system that is painting stuck in its historical loop [*la peinture historiquement bouclée sur elle-même*].

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Pictorial codes are in fact a “raw material” to be carefully worked upon, for the essential is not outside language, but is rather this pictorial language itself.

Society is not an ensemble of historical events, but rather a superimposition of languages in which one language becomes more or less dominant.

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The unified rectangle of the canvas can no longer serve as a homogeneous space in which things manifest both the continuous order of their identities and differences as well as the privileged field of their nomination. Now, the organization of signifiers amongst themselves matters more than the relation of the signifier to the signified.

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Relying on the “real object” with its rustic look (wood, walnut stain). Derision of French speculations on taste, “beautiful materials,” their transmissibility as property, in short, archaizing notarial reification.

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Leroi-Gourhan highlights the “materialism” of *Homo faber*: the search for the origin, description of antiquated technologies that the painter takes up under the aegis of obsolete craftsmanship and which are thus reintegrated into an “artistic” work, to the point that it seems more appropriate to wind up at the Museum of Folk Art than that of Modern Art.

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How to be present in all the museums of France and the rest of the world without going through the troublesome process of getting into them (most artists spend their lives in this occupation and all too often only make it onto the picture rails after their deaths).

In effect this primordial occupation of the territories of culture by “adopting” the thousands of stretchers that stretch thousands of canvases from every place and period in the history of art.

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The old woods of culture: libraries, furniture without style, shelves of reading rooms or twilight lintels of museums. Bring out the old junk, rather than anticipating its ruin in the manner of Hubert Robert; that is, draw from the shadows the various orders of painting—formats, stretchers, canvases—in order to better appreciate their silence. Taking it from here, let’s say that enjoyment isn’t in the usufruct, but rather in the transformation.

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Two things are required of painters today:

1. To consider what acts through us—that is, cultural heritage and society in general—and to resituate ourselves in present circumstances (to refuse or to accept, or to attempt to recuperate the recuperable).

An urgent task which must be ceaselessly renewed, consciously, lucidly, by this belated group of “intellectuals”: painters submitted to their own sociology.

Hence the necessity for sociological “disalienation,” for a clearer consciousness of our assigned role, an assignation that one can either accept or refuse. The first term is represented by the avant-garde of entertainers for technocrats, or Socialist Realism; the second term (refusal) may lead to “splendid isolation.”

2. To consider what it is through which we act and to investigate this field of free action.

Why do we act? Why do we paint? This question implies that the work is not a totality circumscribed in time and space but rather an incessant reorganization of the form and sites of questioning. It is here that the “work” becomes multiform and takes into account both shouting and muteness, the divergent extremes between which it is obliged to move.

1968

Cubist space as revolution of the classical pictorial cadaster? Let us note that a reorganization and redistribution of space already starts with Cézanne. In Mondrian, have we arrived the very ideal of a happy outcome—pictures dynamized by a rhythm, a new “economy,” the utopian dream of a harmoniously arranged world? But why this illusion of perfection, these learned optical arrangements, this euphoria?

So, we can understand this refusal of a “rhythmic composition” that is simply repetition (an ambiguous notion because it can be taken in different ways: what for some raises the specter of the general strike for others serves to stabilize language, or rather, to immobilize it). Systematic painting, at its best, is indeed a refusal to “play the (chromatic, compositional) game,” presenting itself as a romanticism that ends up being utilized by those who have an interest in establishing a definitive language, a language from which the notion of History would be expelled.

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The Cubist reform (an agrarian one, in its way) is still taking place on the canvas/mother/earth, which one consequently approaches in the guise of a fertilizing peasant: with phallic paintbrushes loaded with pigmented sap, or, as in Pollock, with the simple act dripping and the sower’s gesture of the all-over, or with plowing, piercing labor (Fontana, Robert Morris).

At the basis of pictorial activity, then, would we find a rite enacted upon the canvas as if upon mother earth, upon female flesh (and once the rite has been revealed, the support alone may suffice and thus become the *object* of painting)—leading perhaps to the Bachelardian reveries of an Yves Klein?

Or would it rather be a matter of a real problem, beyond “poetics”?

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Of the support as flesh? (taking Robert Morris’s work, for example).

This lacerated flesh, these streams of gray felt are the support upon which Morris works; there is no stretcher at all (Christ without a cross, or cows flayed in the manner of Rembrandt's parody of the Pietà).

Do these pieces of felt not pose the question of the "very Christian" approach to the picture, to the canvas as flesh? The stretching of a canvas on a frame—repetition of the crucifixion (stretching-nailing)—then the application of what masks this flesh (this canvas) in expectation of the advent of a Spirit (the Beautiful): noble pigments, rich textures (the flesh existing to be concealed, to be surpassed in the divine and the perfect).

Stretching, nailing, the work done on the stretched canvas-flesh, appearing as a sacrifice (on the easel, the place of labor and torment): these opened for the painter a surface on which he had to gradually erase, through color, the long hierarchical work of layering and drying.

Robert Morris presents us with just this felt, this slashed flesh, nailed to the wall, repeating the fantasmatic crucifixion—the crucifixion—endlessly, repeatedly.

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Of flesh and gravity: dripping and soft forms. Those who accept the law of gravity, such that it becomes less a matter of *law* than of *fact*, are fewer than those who would rather blind themselves to it by means of form.

Thus, the Baroque, thanks to its aerial pretensions, its will to ascension, is a religious pedagogy, "educational" art *par excellence*, at all times.

Pollock works on the horizontal canvas and organizes the gravity of his path (dripping), in which pigments and their medium are linked to gravity in their task-like effect. And even if his canvases are exhibited vertically, we can hardly speak of that Baroque élan that aims at a refusal and overcoming of centripetal forces, an aspiration to the heights.

Christianity regulated the overcoming of the flesh, a system of forms each with their "calling," but also with their necessary opposite: fallen flesh and its hell, pledged to eternal gravity.

Dripping, however, cancels this vertical relation because it organizes our acceptance of gravity and of its world (Chance?).

As for the soft forms of American painting (Oldenburg, Morris), these seem rather to confirm certain myths of ascension precisely through their contrary, that is the Fall, with the term "downwards" taken as a curse.

Does this work fall below the level of dripping? Is it not rather one of the expressive forms of dripping? And as dripping was diverted to the ends of Abstract Expressionism or Tachisme, can these soft forms avoid being drawn into a new expressionism (surely in Oldenburg)? To an idea of gravity as downfall?

In this sense, then, Robert Morris is a "Baroque" painter.

1968

Contestation and refusal, in the form of a strike effected through rarefaction, are the Mallarméan outcome of the Mallarmé of *Igitur*. But why not express the same state of affairs through an overproduction of unsaleable products and generalized dumping?

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How has painting articulated itself? On this basis we could pose the problem of the spectator's participation, participation imagined not as "psycho-sensorial" conditioning (cf. so-called "participatory" works), but rather as the spectator's capacity to exercise, on his own account, the unveiling of these articulations and to experience what he sees not as a closed system of enunciations, but rather as a system in which possibilities still remain to be enunciated.

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Art is essentially composed of cunning, drollery, impertinence, but not of a very corrosive sort.

Its drama in the 20th century is this parody of transgression, after having known that of impossible elevation through its traversal of the sacred.

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The right to happiness, which society proclaims and organizes as a "strategy of desire," implies the right to beauty. A political watchword that is difficult to obey in any society whatsoever.

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The avant-garde exhausts itself in anticipating the global society that consumes artworks by banalizing them.

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Art becomes a sort of administration of cultural territory (this is the myth of the environment and of technological art, which takes up the futurist theme of the adequation of man to his new surroundings), the deification of the Future, the flight to the forefront of all so-called prospective speculations, the assurance that an authorized avant-garde lends to the system.

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The avant-garde of the turn of the century has already fallen prey to rampant historicism. It normalizes the order that it transgresses and is entangled with various academicisms.

But the avant-garde does not become academic to the extent that its oppositional function becomes useful, if not necessary, to the modern city; this function ultimately permits a sort of aggressiveness, exploration, invention, and renewal.

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But art is nothing but a mask over the *taedium vitae* of our societies, a semblance of adventure in the midst of generalized monotony. It is asked to presage happiness even as it is traversed by the idea, or the experience, of unhappiness.

From one side just as from another, art tells us that life is forever gray and that its cathartic vocation only serves to maintain the diffuse existence of a purported disease.

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The ludic, the spectacular, pseudo-terroristic activism: so many operettas petulantly conducted by a few intelligent clowns.

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Cathartic art treats its spectator as someone to be healed. Its postulate is the sufferer and its end the truth. A kind of painting that allows no opening for the movement of identification, for fantasmatic projection, escapes from this classic schema.

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The "epistemological break" is nothing other than the opening of a window in the confined world of the bourgeoisie, and it is this, finally, that lets in a whiff of oxygen.

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Structuralism inherits its pedagogical utopia from the thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment, but the microstructures that it studies will not be able resist the sort of pressure that maintains more “universal” structures. The apprehension of power relations can therefore override utopia and optimism.

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Art is not the creation of objects but rather of an unbearable situation that forces the community to redistribute its roles. By not expressing happiness *now*, it gestures, through its refusal, towards the future. The experience of art is more that of a tragic game than of delectation.

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This notion of absence, as opposed to presence in the world, is a voyage towards that which makes us mortal, and art itself senses this mortality in obvious disarray.

There is good reason for the bankruptcy of “worlds-beyond,” in the Nietzschean sense of the term. But all things considered, it is better to risk the voyage than to hold to a timorous Epicureanism.

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The idea of Happiness for all has marked the most terrible adventures of modern history. It was the object of bloody deliriums. Our present societies, too, aim to modulate happiness, to plan it, control it. Hence Boredom.

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In fact, happiness is fragmented in space and time. So say the arts, which have more to do with chance than with any Ideal.

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Doesn't repetitive painting just decenter the picture in formalist terms? Formal decentering presumes that the unity of the painting gives way to a visual rhythm that is infinite in character.

But just as there are prayer wheels, there are vision wheels [*moulins à regards*].

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How to attain clairvoyance through permanent desublimation, insofar as art participates to a greater or lesser extent in an enterprise of sublimation? The path to be taken is hence not that of the aesthetic work but rather that of art as simple manifestation of a certain degree of consciousness.

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What to exhibit if not the fantasmatic theater of painting, defused, washed up on a silent beach? What an ambition: to wish to return to the constituent and repressed elements of the past few centuries of the history of art, to embrace vast swathes of civilization, as well as to uncover the unconscious sediments of our own subjective history!

To resist these panoramic vistas a certain scholastic naiveté is required, as well as the constant posing of the following methodological question: Under what conditions do painting and discourse on painting meet, converge, come to each other's aid, or on the contrary, suffocate each other?

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But the acceptance of a body of knowledge [*un savoir*], like an irrigated continent the meanders of which must be traced, differentiates my attitude from that of the reigning anti-art tendency, which negates painting as a whole.

Ultimately, anti-art casts a cold gaze on art, as something already or about to be abolished. It participates in the necrophiliac voyeurism inscribed in the topos of a superego that appears, according to Freud, as a “culture of the death drive.” And hence the corresponding ceremony, hence this perpetual wallowing in the everyday.

But an archeological view of the history of artistic practices could also proceed from this same drive.

1969

Notion of gesture: extension, tension, articulation. To push gesture to its final consequences is a parody of Action Painting; it's also a part of my “extensibles.”²

Notion of support (gesture is defined by its relation to the support).

Notion of color: pigments, cellular reality, swarming in the pigmented unit.

It is not the problem of the support as such but rather its function of tension that concerns me. This tension of the canvas animates a *mise en scène*, that metaphor for the “great theater of the world.”

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One of the painter's tasks is to put an end to the surface as a possible site for the mental projection and “mystical participation” upon which the spectator's behavior is based. A picture can indeed summon a kind of depth (Renaissance perspective) and allow the viewer to see himself extended into a teleological infinity, thanks to the device of the vanishing point. This helps to determine the site of the corresponding “point of view,” which is to say, a certain fixity: that of an immobile eye. Cubism's great achievement was to have broken with the classical position of the fixed “viewpoint” (Picasso moved around his model while drawing). But this fixity has reappeared insofar as the surface has become “receptive” to the viewer's oneiric-mental wanderings; this is what happens with Klein's monochromes, or indeed with a simple white canvas untouched by the artist's intervention: viewers are invited to project their own fantasies, their desire, upon these screens.

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Pop Art, discreetly “popular” according to its abbreviation, is a typical example of highly ideological social control: the only “transformation” it performs is to make what already existed by *nature* (the urban landscape) into something that henceforth exists by reason.

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It is useless to insist on the notion of “novelty,” which is linked to that of productivity and of the simulation of ruptures. It is here, though, that we find the artist's famous “sensitivity,” which is nothing other than that which allows him to detect the social demands formulated by dominant ideology, to anticipate the opening of future markets, and to adjust to these as soon as possible, before others catch up, by distributing his products known as “recent works.”

² Translator's note: The reference is to a series of works of the period that consist of flexible wooden trellises.

(Those who are most apt to satisfy the ideological needs of a social group or of a society at a given moment are kept on, while others fall into oblivion.)

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Art as evasion. Is it possible to apply Marx and Engels's criticism of religion to art, as an ideological, irredeemably idealist form?

If so, we've ended up with iconoclastic strategies after all (end of art, perfunctory anti-painting, etc.)—nihilistic and romantic positions.

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In the alliance of proletarians and intellectuals, which is based on the slogan "unity-struggle," right-opportunism appears when unity prevails over struggle. When struggle prevails over unity, left-opportunism emerges. Thus, a politics of "fusion" corresponds to sloppy discourse; but among the supporters of a "class against class" position, what tends to develop is sectarian theoreticism.

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In the pictorial field, which is overdetermined by the art market, massive overproduction in obedience to this overdetermination is the result of economic and political demand.

Simple reduction, either by repetition or by a lessening of production, mitigates this process but does not outline any real transformation insofar as it does not yet constitute theory. Rather than theoretical critique, painters prefer a reduction of production and of what this production implies: the reducibility of signification and its free play ends up in anti-art.

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The emphasis placed on the dominant role of superstructures, at a given moment, can only reinforce the old Hegelian idea of the primacy of the Idea and the natural growth of the omnipotence of ideas and representations: a question thoroughly studied in psychoanalysis and anthropology.

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The avant-garde, despite its critical power, cannot give birth to a counter-ideology. All that is left to it is the privilege of a Verbal Threat of Revolution.

1969

Doesn't the treatment of the support allow the production of the most effective operations? The problem is by no means simple, because the support implies the notion of format, which itself participates in the function of the picture as an object and piece of furniture. Attempts at a rationalization of the format (the "shaped canvas") have so far been unconvincing. The real question can certainly be located in the continuity between the reverse side and the site that replaces all planes of depth, reinforcing the surface effect.

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The stretcher-canvas couple first appears in the Renaissance, accentuating a certain effect of *mise en scène*. For the stretcher organizes the canvas as a stretched surface, as backstage machinery.

Velázquez and Poussin, for example, painted themselves as stage directors, or machinists, the former in *Las Meninas*, the latter in his self-portrait in the Louvre, each revealing their "backstages", that is, stretchers and the reverse side of the canvas; hence the

conception of painting and of life as a theatrical representation, the concept of the “great theater of the world” that was the classic metaphor used to describe life (and the stretching of a canvas on a frame always organizes the field of a representation, quite literally, and aims to articulate a language atop these specific stretcher bars).

This “theatricality,” of which the stretcher was one organ, reduced color to the “costume function,” that of simply clothing a composition in grisaille or chiaroscuro. With the “triumph” of Fresnel’s prism, color ceased to be this accessory; its massive arrival would scramble the scenario.

Although Impressionism accelerated the disappearance of the tableau as scene, it maintained its status as “window” (cf. Bonnard); all the same, the old colonnades, with a courtyard on one side and a garden on the other, definitively gave way to another order, an order no longer of the spectacle but still of the “cast” glance.

The Cézannian brushstroke, followed by the multiplication of depthless planes in Cubism, would consummate this process; the surface effect and flatness became so strong that nothing was left but the plane that Pollock traverses horizontally: the painter is no longer a stage director, no longer arranges the lights, but is rather a walker who wraps himself in his own steps.

1969

An observation on “avant-gardism”

The phenomenon known as the “cultural avant-garde” is most often born from a conflict between two parallel cultures in a given historical situation, in a given society, when crises or ruptures chase the artist from his privileged position (that of play, or glorification, or simply “management”) towards a criticism of the established order.

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The term “avant-garde” is situated in a zone of tensions, of contradictions, and signals the frontline of conflict during an epoch of historical dislocation; its military connotations in fact remain vivid, implying polemics and struggles in many directions.

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In romantic attitudes we find an aristocratic tendency that on the one hand refuses, or refutes, all contact with the masses, and on the other hand fights against the conventions and routines of the dominant class, which is judged to be excessively “matter-of-fact” and suffocated by utilitarianism. Between the bourgeois and the mass of the people, the romantic artist removes himself to a sort of no-man’s-land which nourishes his feeling that the artist has never before been so isolated and rejected. It is also not uncommon to see him accuse society of having damned him, of crucifying him like a modern Christ. Certainly, this identification is not always so clear-cut, but it is always latent and produces equivalencies such as found in Vigny’s statement, in a letter on his *Chatterton*, that the poet is the “man suicided by society” (a phrase that Antonin Artaud was to adopt in his “biography” of Van Gogh); the artist sacrifices himself, or is sacrificed, so that his spilled blood may effect the redemption of the entire tribe of sinners. Isn’t the popular theme of “Mozart’s assassination” that of human sacrifice, but in a sublimated version: the sacrifice of the “spirit” on the altar of material, historico-social contingencies?

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Today examples abound of these “crucified heroes,” crucified by the conventions and the general conformism of a “society of grocers.” Perhaps here we should look into the points of connection between the notion of sacrifice and that of the romantic curse.

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If, as Georges Bataille writes, “almost every people attributed the greatest importance to the ritual destruction of animals, men or vegetables; some immensely valuable, others merely supposed to be valuable,”³ is it possible to say that certain modern societies have practiced this destruction and sacrifice at the level of the artist and poet, thus accomplishing the now more abstract sacrifice of “intelligence” and “genius” under the social cover of the increasingly bureaucratized world of Culture?

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Would the energetic excess of a social totality thus here be consumed in the gratuitous expenditure of art, by “sacrificing” the man of genius, the misunderstood artist, the *Desdichado*, in the intellectual form of the curse?

The romantic sensibility for the useless and the gratuitous seems contemporaneous with such a vision; the accursed artist sounds the cry that accompanies this rite of the destruction of what could have been, but which was instead, as he sees it, devoured by a system of which he too is a part.

His function, furthermore, is to denounce, to stigmatize; his “engaged” oeuvre becomes a stele that he plants in the soil of an innocence proclaimed in the face of ceaselessly invading alienations. Bourgeois humanisms proceed from this position and very often remain fixated on it.

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The state of alienation, in this respect like that of sin, comes to be regarded as a tragic experience; man’s total development is unattainable, hence the bitter feeling of “existential” mutilation and malaise. The artist’s aggressivity turns on himself, as Baudelaire demonstrates in his myth of the *héautontimorouménos*, the self-tormentor; it may lead to suicide or madness, which are the extreme outcomes of the curse, but also to the more common attitude crystallized in the figure of the “clown,” forever “chastised” by the laughter of others.

To put it as a joke, we could say that the romantic avant-garde is the elite that punishes itself for having been “chosen” by becoming clownish, scandalous, or spectacular: that is to say, the sacralization of the genius as expiatory victim. In the Christian West, the notion of the curse, whether attributed to the sign of suicide or clownishness, remains linked to that of sacrifice.

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“The death of God” proclaimed in the 19th century has resulted in a subsidence of the artistic function, which had hitherto been that of mediation between God and human beings. As the divine order disappeared from the horizon of History, the artist could no longer serve as this intermediary between two orders. The heavenly Azure, in the impossibility of its attainment,

³ Translator’s note: the quotation is from Bataille’s essay on Jules Michelet in *Littérature et le mal* (Gallimard, 1957). Translation modified from: Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 55.

is for the romantic consciousness indeed the sign that this transcendence has been forever lost, or at least has become intangible.

The aspiration to the Azure, the desire for deliverance and elevation to the celestial heights, follow theological schemas that ceaselessly throw him back upon what he has refused; the absence of God becomes the “presence of the absence of God,” a painful, absurd (etc.) obsession.

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Hence there is in the romantic avant-gardist a will to escape all contingencies, towards the azure summits: as Georges Bataille has shown us, the myth of Icarus presupposes a helio-centric system, a God hidden in some absolute.

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Every romantic avant-garde detaches itself from the social totality of which it is the product in order to rise to a higher horizon and to prove the force of a spirit, the presence of God at the same zenith: it wants to be a thinking head detached from the body, in the idealist aspiration to go beyond matter, in defiance of gravity. It participates in myths of ascension, whether religious, political, or aesthetic; every “downward” return is regarded as a fall, chastisement and sacrifice of the spirit as it is engulfed in social matter (both bourgeois heaviness as well as the vulgarity of the masses): the morality of the summits becomes a philosophy of decline.

In this context, too, political engagement (in its current form of activism) as well as “explanatory” theories are often what permit the avant-gardist to escape from the solitude of the “I,” to avoid the role of the “clown” or the “damned.” These are two footpaths leading off the stage where the tragicomedy is played, passing over the orchestra pit and towards the public, towards society in general, in the desire for redemptive communication. “The spirit of the poet craves spectators—even if only buffaloes,” wrote Nietzsche, who hardly concealed his disdain for spectacles and poets. Mediator with neither cause nor object of mediation, the traditional “avant-gardist” cannot in fact act but falsely: his theories are not the nodal point of a real construction, but rather the *a posteriori* justification for the stage play that is his search for an audience.

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The pictorial avant-garde is still dependent on those avant-gardes of the past which were at once generous and misguided, grandiloquent and opportunistic. It is through a more assured political practice that the avant-gard might untangle the contradictions that animate and mortify its obsessive repetitions.

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If anti-art is the critique that implies that art has become the site for the deification of the contradictions that agitate certain social strata of a vacillating society, and if this art has become the object of an official cult that attempts to fix precisely these contradictions in certain sterilizing sites (for example the art market, the museum—worst of all, an “imaginary” one), it nonetheless does not consider these contradictions to be inherent to the petty bourgeois elements that feed the pictorial avant-garde, which is to say its own ranks, and by the same measure it cannot resolve these contradictions, either at the sociological level that would seem to be its own, nor at the specific level of productive functionality, which it denies to all pictorial practice.

1970

On conceptual art

A certain critical movement in the field of painting has led certain painters to pose questions rather than to develop a discourse: questions about the system and the neglect of the syntagmatic element as an activity of the painter in the development of an “an oeuvre.”

This may be presented as a return to the position of ancient Sophists, in its incessant questioning of the value of the signified; going beyond the questioning begun by Duchamp, the conceptual artists accordingly aim to reorganize the system of painting as a system of values and valorizations.

In this revision, everything is permitted in the name of various reactions against:

1. fetishization as a market process,
2. Gestalt Theory and phenomenology in general,
3. socio-technology (McLuhan's, in particular),
4. historicism, and/or a Hegelian vision of art,
5. the critical study of the valorization process,
 - a. cultural categories
 - b. genealogy: the relation to the object,
 - c. the discourse that gives birth to the object.

In the three terms (a, b, c) there is an attempt at a redefinition of the material. But sexuality and politics are judged as “expressive” if not “expressionist” elements. They are repressed under purely aesthetic terms. Nothing remains but the articulation with the linguistic sciences, which would thus appear to be conceptual art's only justification.

Conceptual art, anti-technological by virtue of its critique of archaizing technology (technology of the material) and of the ecumenical technology of the mass media, nonetheless utilizes technologies of communication in which content is entirely secondary, not to say absent.

In abandoning formalism, conceptual art falls into formalization (that of so-called “Anglo-Saxon” linguistics). It overlooks its own relation to language, a brake on the communicative speed to which its sensibility aspires. It refuses to acknowledge the opacity of language and at no point affirms the priority of signifiers.

The relation of conceptual art to Duchamp is hardly complex if one views conceptual art as a “minimalization” of Dada.

A formal reductionism opposes itself to Dadaist exuberance as well as to the profusion of media in the epoch of McLuhan, or to the multiple “appropriations” of space expressed in a lyric-pictorial mode by an artist such as Yves Klein.

Nonetheless, it is possible to envisage this conceptual tendency in terms of a network in which the individual has the role of a sender-receiver switch. Painting, however, places itself outside systems of communication. It is not a vehicular language; it can do nothing but designate the multiplicity of languages or the absence of a shared synthetic language.

1970**On Land Art**

If we are witnessing an increasingly massive refusal of industrial civilization in the USA (with some going back to Thoreau, others finding in wild nature forms of pantheism inspired by India and the East), it does not seem that the artists of Land Art are part of this movement.

Indeed, the presence of powerful mechanical tools (cranes, bulldozers, airplanes, etc.) indicates that industrial civilization has not been totally rejected.

It is in fact more a matter of pioneers who assure the domination of nature than of a search for fusion with the All.

By the same token, these artists situate themselves in the breach opened by Yves Klein, who, with his “appropriations,” found his natural and decisive orientation in demonstrating that art, like science and technology, can subsume entire world.

As with Klein, Land Art has the ambition of evolving in the absence of traditional supports, to the demonstrative benefit of the only support that has no “precise” location, that is, the terrestrial surface as perceived in its banal geography: deserts, fields, mountain ranges...

All the same, it is worth taking note of this will to transgress the specific localization of the classical support through an action that may occur anywhere whatsoever.

Absence of the public, museal impossibility, interchangeability of places (thereby turning one’s back to the spirit of the place): Land Art usefully casts into oblivion the “sacred” mission of the artist as demiurge who, in immortalizing a place, believes that he can immortalize himself.

The traffic in valorizations through exchange (the artist valorizes a place, which in turn valorizes his work) is, here, revealed to stand under the sign of Duchamp.

1971

In the singular “point of view” typical of European painting, the eye is institutionalized. The total recuperation of the world effected by the “Single Point of View” does not exist in Chinese painting, which juxtaposes things and which can thus lift the corner of a topological space, in terms of “vicinity.”

The fluidity of this painting, due in large part to the suppleness of the brushes, resists the construction of the perspectival lines upon which Western perspective is based.

In the latter, the no longer divine yet nonetheless transcendental subject constitutes itself (in a multiplied spatial distribution). If we here consider the analytical history of this subject, it is possible to conjecture that the symbolic role of the perspective system in the maturation of his personality at a given moment (the genital phase in the male child) remains fundamental.

The “point of view,” with its differentiations, presumes an overcoming of autoeroticism and the coordination of a sexual space determined by the Oedipus complex, in which the primacy of the phallus is affirmed.

This coordination affects the constitutive elements of the three dimensions of perspectival space and lends perspective an especially intense symbolic dimension.

If Euclidean space is able to account for this genital phase, topological space is more adequate to the comprehension of the preceding stages, insofar as, in its inner relations to each object or to each configuration, it better corresponds to the lack of organization in infantile sexuality.

What interested the ancient Chinese painters is precisely that which has not yet taken form, that which does not have a distinct essence. Their mode of knowledge is not that of conquest by means of a system, such as perspective. It is not securely situated in the maturation of monocentric vision.

The frame as the inner wall of an isolated cell floating in a vacuum, in a region where the real will never manifest itself (or so we think), in this region of *a priori* negative experience? No doubt the (painted/depicted) real is to be found in the interior of this cell. And the tableau assumes this final role in its museographic function, as an interlocking of localized structures, of which the museum would be the largest.

Time plays no role in the definition of Euclidean space, which confirms the Subject as an atemporal being. This space postulates the subject's existence in relation to physical phenomena (in contrast to Riemann's geometry).

We could here define the search for the real as a progressive envelopment. Localization here remains founded on the convergence of successive interlockings as well as of nested surfaces.

To multiply the envelopes surrounding reality is to avoid the latter's evaporation by attempting to definitively stabilize it. Absolute certainty requires that nothing will ever be found outside the surface of localization, given that there is just as much "nothing" in the interior as on the exterior.

1972

Quattrocento's feed-back⁴

Rind of shadows—camera obscura—tetrahedrons with the golden number chiseled in prominent masses, seizing the space between the pubic fork of the vanishing point, diverting the night, reborn in the light of a wake frozen into organs of basalt / factories. The wreck of the Quattrocento persists in its oblivion; multiple tracks, but all leading downwards, to the very edge of the irrational and the hollow path along which the gnarled ball of hysteria is pushed:

1. The base line that defines the level on which the imaginary viewer or painter stands.
2. The perpendicular lines that frame the whole system.
3. The horizon line, already mentioned.
4. The parallel lines, or lines of foreshortening, that converge at the "eye point" or central vanishing point.

⁴ Translator's note: This subtitle is in English in the original.

5. The diagonal or oblique lines that converge at distant points, or secondary vanishing points.⁵

On the bias of these endless colonnades, under the black sun, a city like a puffball choking on its own spores, organic morel, residue of trembling rain and, phallic as it is, incapable of penetration, thanks to the cartilage of perspectives knotted at the nape of the neck and riddled—pulverulent—with convolutions in which all mental machinery exhausts itself. Lying on its own jaw, catatonically, howling into the pigmented soup, like the scrutinizers of facial expressions and other tracers of various portraits on shrouds and tissues.

Cennino Cennini's prescription, as a good anatomist: "There are bones throughout a man's body. His 'nature', which is to say his penis, ought to be of a size pleasing to women, the testicles small, well-formed, and fresh-looking."

Collapsed *veduta* of these vast estates; the figures hoist themselves up, alongside other structures, in a firm, tense matrix, and deliver their arrows in bundles: is drawing the project of the old saurian that lives within us (the neuro-vegetative system), prehistorically writing itself? Or is it the construction of the wall of the cloacal universe, that which separates it from the universe of the vagina? (Freud reminds us of the infant mind's primitive misrecognition of this separation in the architecture of the genital organs.) Branching of the kidneys at their intersection with the respiratory system, the breath that sails through the body's interior; the spinal column stretched across the back, with its many tendrils, carries the influx down below the cortex, clutched tight at every point in its frame. The body wanders, rambles, carting its lumps tossed from affect to affect to the chaos of raw ooze. (At the end the stick you touch defecated skin, dishware disfigured by unknown juices.)

Death drive. Painting/scatology: red madrepores, on the menstrual backsides of buttocks, emerge in the Grand Guignolesque skid of Florentine screwing.

Time of nomination rather than numeration and of its multiple folds, operating the intersections that the painter unleashes along paths other than those of reason, on stages other than those of knowledge.

But the whole, better buttressed than an eructating mammal, restores the unknown givens of the species, the murmuring and the noises, on canvases saturated with the usual media: ox gall, stain, ink, etc.

Among the burettes, the heaviest of colors was chosen, here, to dirty these layers. The canvas, it was said, withdrew from the world, in order to violently expel, flowing back over its spine in a thousand grains, crossing the ribbons of sedimented pulmonary membranes: drawing, arachnean thread and golden foliation.

These retables of veined laminate (lines, erasures), where this stretched/distended canvas (fishnets, mucous membranes) becomes the receptacle for effigies, like the sheet of papyrus, the birch bark, the tablets of red clay that received a notch for each calamity, the hieroglyphs or ciphers discerned on tortoise shells.

⁵ Translator's note: The sentences numbered 1 through 5 are in English in the original. Dezeuze quotes them, without citation, from Adolf K. Placzek's introduction to: Jan Vredeman de Vries, *Perspective* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), unpaginated.

Later, drapery is nourished with artificial poisons, coatings, tains. Hence, in the Renaissance, this padded painting, this drape for the century of drapers: the Shirt of Nessus for the man, a blacksmith's apron for the woman, a bib or blanket for the child.

Félibien: "In the terminology of Painting, to 'throw on a Drapery' means to clothe a Figure and to give it a Drapery. This word 'to throw' seems to me all the more expressive because Drapery cannot at all be arranged like the clothes we wear in the everyday world: but following pure nature, which is far removed from all affectation, it is necessary that the folds must fall by chance around the members of the body, such that they appear as what they are; & that by industrious artifice they contrast and accentuate them, & that they caress them, so to speak by their tender sinuosities, & by their softness."

To pass by in grisaille these vast dyed hangings, askew, like the high mounts of China, and that of Venus with her damned seed.

But the hands of the poor unshrouded stiffs who haunt our century do not cease to encroach upon the fold amplified with eloquence and drapery.