

## Life Models By Alexander Alberro

What kind of role does art actually play in society? From the Bauhaus to Thomas Hirschhorn, and from *The Yes Men* to Jean-Luc Godard, how and in what ways does art circulate beyond the sphere of the art world?

Don DeLillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega* opens and closes with a lengthy meditation by an anonymous man (who turns out to be the narrator) on Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* (1993). The first section plunges the reader into a detailed observation of Gordon's work as it was installed on the sixth floor of New York's Museum of Modern Art in September 2006. The nameless character describes the darkened, seatless gallery in which he encounters the work, the impassive guards, the bewildered tourists and the effect of watching Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film re-projected in the form of a silent, super-slow-motion videotape. He contrasts the conventional understanding of Hitchcock's classic to the meanings produced by Gordon's version, in which every movement is amplified and each detail made more apparent. In a stream-of-consciousness monologue, the narrator produces an interpretation of Gordon's piece that rivals those channelled through the official organs of art criticism. DeLillo thus casts the protagonist as the average art viewer – not an artist, critic, collector or art historian, but the common layperson who occasionally wanders into an exhibition. The installation prompts the protagonist to see the connections between things, to 'think of one thing's relationship to another'. As he puts it: 'This film had the same relationship to the original movie that the original movie had to real lived experience. This was the departure from the departure. The original movie was fiction; this was real.'<sup>1</sup> The reader is encouraged to reflect not only on the ways in which theories of psychosis move through culture – first in practice, then to the popular imagination through various media – but also on the extent to which ideas that circulate in the art sphere percolate into cinema, design, literature and vice versa. Culture is fluid here; there are few barriers, only networks, conventions and participants.

Art works present models of sensibility and events that the observer can (if he or she so wishes) apply to his or her own experience of society. Sometimes the models actually play out in real life. Take, for instance, the *Costa Concordia*. The Mediterranean cruise ship on which Jean-Luc Godard staged a large part of *Film Socialisme* (2010) is, in his movie, clearly headed for troubled waters. Stuffed with the spoils of Western civilization and passengers who are so alienated from each other by consumer excess that they can no longer remember the cultural history that unites them, the ship serves as a metaphor for the anomie of early 21st century capitalism. But even Godard could not have predicted the catastrophe that would soon befall the actual vessel. Today it remains on its side, half-submerged off the western coast of Italy, as police divers continue to search for more bodies. The correlation Godard made between the ills of contemporary life and the garish decadence on board the cruise ship was a metaphorical one, though it happens to have become a reality as well.

To gain any traction on the question of the role that art actually plays in society – its real proportional effects rather than what we, from our entrenched perspectives working somewhere within the art world, really wish it would do – it's useful first to develop, even if only in a rudimentary fashion, a framework for understanding how the cultural field operates. Society, or the social formation more generally speaking, is made up of a range of different types of practices (including economic, political, ideological and cultural) that determine one another, depending on their conditions. As the literary critic Raymond Williams explains, cultural practices do not play a secondary or minor role in this configuration; they're just as important, and just as necessary, as any of the other elements of society. Williams's primary interest is in comprehending the function of what he calls emergent cultural forms, including new meanings, ideas, activities. He observes that most of these are easily incorporated into, and in turn come to buttress and support, the dominant system. But he notes that a few of the new forms are genuinely oppositional, critical and cannot be easily absorbed into that order.

The art of Damien Hirst, reportedly the world's wealthiest living artist, is of the sort that bolsters the status quo. It directly correlates with and supports the cynical embrace of the market, and its spin-offs in fashion, glamour and celebrity, that prevails in the art world today. The current order of things is so decadent that even Charles Saatchi, one of the chief proponents of the vulgarity that has overtaken contemporary art, recently felt the need to launch a vicious attack on the buyers, dealers and curators who populate the art world. Art today, he wrote in an article for the Guardian last December, 'is the sport of the Eurotrashy, hedgefundy, Hamptonites; of trendy oligarchs and oiligarchs; and of art dealers with masturbatory levels of self-regard'.<sup>2</sup> Hirst's art extravaganza earlier this year – hundreds of spot paintings of various sizes on view and on sale simultaneously at Gagosian Gallery's 11 locations around the world – came complete with kitchenware, key rings, cufflinks and a vast array of other goods decorated with spots. The gallery operates as a global franchise, and the artist as a luxury goods provider. Hirst does not manufacture any of the products. Rather, he employs a full studio of 'assistants' to make the objects that are his intellectual property. Art and merchandise are conflated, as are the artist and the entrepreneur. As the novelist Hari Kunzru has observed, this 'isn't just art that exists in the market, or is "about" the market. This is art that is the market – a series of gestures that are made wholly or primarily to capture and embody financial value, and only secondarily have any other function or virtue.'<sup>3</sup> Business strategies such as these in the art world and elsewhere legitimate and reproduce the existing social order, which in our era is dominated by a massive expansion of a neoliberal economy.

Yet the field of art also produces forms of social intelligibility, knowledge and signification that do not serve to reinforce the status quo. The art world, like the social world more generally, is riddled with contradictions and full of things that might be different, things that might be oppositional or alternative; for instance, different gender positions, race positions or positions of class, ethnicity or sexuality. Social relations and social positions are structured differently, and those variances

produce contradictions – what the philosopher Chantal Mouffe would call ‘antagonisms’ – within the dominant cultural or ideological system. Alternative or oppositional art forms and activities often take up those tensions and manifest them in some way. For instance, much feminist practice in the 1970s and ’80s art world appropriated mainstream conceptual art, but gave it a political content that emphasized the difficulties women continue to face in Western culture. That was a real shift, which had a significant effect across a whole range of conventions.

The impact of cultural forms on the world beyond the communities of art is difficult to gauge since it takes place over time. Cultural forms are inherently bound up with social movements, and become part of a much larger process. They don’t pretend to effect change on their own. For instance, the realist novel didn’t transform society in the 19th century by itself. It was part of something else – part of a whole epistemological and philosophical shift in the way people comprehended the world and their place within it. Art has historically contributed to those shifts. But that’s not something that’s easily measurable. How many minds have actually been changed by a play by Jean Genet, a novel by Toni Morrison or a sculptural installation by Mary Kelly is impossible to calculate with any certainty. Such questions presume a positivist logic that is akin to functionalism.

The functionalist programmes of the 20th century, from the Russian Productivist avant-garde of the 1920s and ’30s (a utilitarian-minded offshoot of Constructivism), to design schools such as the Bauhaus during the years of the Weimar Republic and the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm, Germany, between 1953 and 1968, fashioned an array of objects, tools and transportation and communications systems, that emphasized the rational in the design process. Some of these – such as the Marcel Breuer club chair or Braun’s audio equipment – have become widely used. The operation of these utilitarian structures in large part dictates their look; the prime objective is to fulfill a task. These programmes of standardization were distinctly utilitarian and, in the case of the Bauhaus and the HfG, contributed to the creation of an increasingly regularized and ordered world. But many 20th-century artists and writers also spoke out explicitly against functionalism, arguing, as did the philosopher Henri Lefebvre, that in practice this aesthetic doctrine splits critique off from creativity and ‘eliminates critical thought’.<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of functionalism, anything without an explicit use value and rationale is superfluous, pointless and must disappear. Much alternative or oppositional art has, in turn, laid claim to uselessness and indeterminacy as ways to critique functionalism and the ethics and aesthetics that follow in its wake.

While the forms that critical art practices take vary, there are some overarching constants that can be discerned. For instance, many assume a process of reconsideration, re-elaboration and revision. From this perspective, the primary aim of art is to defamiliarize, to estrange the viewer or reader from habits of understanding, troubling that which seems patently acceptable in cultural terms. The notion of defamiliarization was reformulated in various ways and contexts in the 20th century. The Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky and his formalist

colleagues argued that it was at the core of aesthetic experience. Art, Shklovsky wrote, seeks 'to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception'.<sup>5</sup> Through difficulty and complexity, art challenges modernity's predictable and simplified forms, and offers the observer a return to apprehension and thought. Bertolt Brecht took that idea up with the notions of distanciation and refunctioning, where one rearticulates an existing form in some way, transforming it to mean something else. Stuart Hall cast the concept in terms of the politics of representation, or of signification, formulating the dynamic model of disarticulation/rearticulation that not only probes the process by which the world is represented, how it comes to signify, how it is made intelligible, but also seeks to produce counter meanings, counter representations and counter forms of intelligibility. That's what critical work largely means. Many artists have produced art works that explicitly refunction the means of artistic production and reception and put control in the possession of the spectator. Nicolás Guagnini's Curatorial Machine (Exhibition System 7) (2011), is a case in point. The 'machine' consists of a cross-shaped set of four rotating panels slightly larger in size and proportion than the revolving doors commonly installed in airports and corporate buildings. Both sides of the rotating panels serve as walls upon which to display art. The mobile configurations allow for the flux of spectators to reconfigure the position of the panels and therefore of the display. The incorporation of the arbitrariness of audience participation undercuts a curatorial decision: that the rotating units present art of a certain dimension, which is made to be placed on a wall. Everything else is left to chance, though within a defined horizon of geometric and mechanical possibility.

Not all artists are content to produce work that, despite problematizing the conditions of viewing, cannot imagine a viable position outside of that framework. Some have developed strategies to intervene in an array of fields that are far removed from the official art world. Often working in groups, the scope and tactics of artists such as the Critical Art Ensemble, the Institute for Applied Autonomy and subRosa is broad, ranging from ideology critique to biological engineering, from pamphleteering at public demonstrations to electronic disobedience. One of the most effective of these interventions was The Yes Men's Union Carbide exposé in 2004. The piece references the 1984 gas leak at a Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, which left many thousands of people dead and even more permanently ill. In order to raise awareness of the issue, and of the fact that many who are still suffering from the calamity haven't been sufficiently compensated, The Yes Men constructed a website strongly resembling that of the Dow Chemical Company (which owns Union Carbide). Falling for the ruse, bbc World contacted the group with a request to do a television interview on the 20th anniversary of the disaster. The Yes Men responded by inventing a fake spokesperson who claimed on air that Dow had decided to put human lives ahead of profit and would therefore finally accept their responsibility for the catastrophe and allocate us \$12 billion to compensate the victims of Bhopal and clean up remaining contamination. The news spread before the gambit was uncovered, and in the meantime Dow's shares

plummeted. This in turn prompted the company to issue, in a highly revealing instance of damage control, a public statement declaring that the claim that they would compensate the victims of the disaster was baseless.

The route that tactical media interventions such as the Union Carbide hoax orchestrated by The Yes Men takes to return to the sphere of art is usually through discourse. Indeed, another significant contribution made by contemporary art to culture at large has been the development of public platforms where professionals (and amateurs) of all kinds come together to discuss specific issues. Staged in various formats, such as seminars at universities and museums, or presentations and open discussions at artist-run spaces, these conversations, at their best, are vibrant and speculative, producing different knowledges and forms of social intelligibility, different models and accounts of how society works.

Whereas the oppositional discourse of 20th century art largely centred around questions of the commodity and the ways in which the commodification of everyday life distorts social subjects, the 21st century has opened with a growing number of artistic practices that have tended to focus on the destructive effects of the neoliberal market on society as a whole. Neoliberal ideology has increasingly restructured the goals and priorities of institutions such as the art world into, according to cultural geographer David Harvey, a theoretical programme of 'political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade'.<sup>6</sup> Besides privatization, neoliberalism has also systematized art work such that creative production operates according to market logic, where patentability, utility and quantitative methods are valued over collaborative, speculative and qualitative approaches. The inevitable outcome to this hierarchical arrangement is that critical experimentation is largely discouraged.

Yet artists have responded to these conditions by producing work that manifests a high degree of self-consciousness about the operative and institutional dynamics of contemporary art systems. For some, such as Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson, this has meant exposing the contradictions between the ideal self-presentation of the institution of art and the actual way in which it operates. For others, such as Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, it has prompted a turn to educational models and paradigms. For yet others – Carey Young, Melanie Gilligan and Sharon Hayes come immediately to mind – it has culminated in research-based artistic practices that often do not result in traditional art objects, but instead exist in performance, conversations and re-creations of archives. These focuses have, in effect, provided ways to shift the discussion away from what needs to be opposed and towards that which can be imagined. The art at once takes as its theoretical and practical point of departure social relations and context, creates environments in which people come together to participate in a shared activity, and produces an inter-subjective encounter that elaborates meaning collectively rather than through individual consumption. Some of this work has come to be referred to as context art, which collapses the distinction between aesthetic, social and economic dimensions to

reflect on art's institutional framework, or as relational aesthetics, where interactivity largely serves as the content rather than as a tool for something else. But much of it goes further than that, doing the hard work of constructing models of egalitarianism that can be continued in everyday life. Thomas Hirschhorn's public art projects provide a well-known example of this type of art. His Musée Précaire Albinet (The Albinet Temporary Museum, 2004), for instance, built and maintained by the artist and the inhabitants of the Parisian suburb of Landy, featured a rotating programme of diverse events that included not only the installation of art works by canonical artists, but a number of related activities directed by the working and unemployed residents of the largely Malian, North African and white neighbourhood. That some of these activities have taken on a life of their own and continue to this day testifies to the effectiveness of the project.

The epilogue of DeLillo's *Point Omega* returns the reader to the narrator's sixth and final viewing of Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho*. During this visit, the protagonist interacts with other visitors and incorporates personal memories into his interpretation of the video sculpture in the gallery. His ruminations on news media, Hitchcock's film, Gordon's installation and his own experiences (detailed earlier in the novel), intermingle. In effect, these four forms of media – mainstream press, a classic film, a video installation and an award-winning novel – each reach their publics in different ways. But often they overlap, one folded into the other. This seems to be DeLillo's point. His narrator's deeply engaged reading of a contemporary art installation offers a dynamic model of the process by which art emerges from other practices, crystallizes in form and experience, only to move beyond those conditions in often-unpredictable ways to generate new narratives and knowledge. Art works are social subjects in this way, and not simply aesthetic objects. They are meaningful only when seen in relationship to a wider network of beliefs and practices, economies and exchanges. Art is the current, not the fixture.

1. Don DeLillo, *Point Omega*, Scribner, New York, 2010, p. 13 2. Charles Saatchi, 'The Hideousness of the Art World', *Guardian*, London, 2 December 2011 3. Hari Kunzru, 'Damien Hirst and the Great Art Market Heist', *Guardian*, London, 16 March 2012 4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 2 (1961), trans. John Moore, Verso, London, 2002, p. 199 5. Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' (1917), in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1965, p. 12 6. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 2

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