

# SWITCH

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## Conjuring Post-Worthlessness: Contemporary Web Art and the Postmodern Context: part 2

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&lt;art&gt;

of the

world wide web

PART II

## Conjuring Post-Worthlessness: Contemporary Web Art and the Postmodern Context : part 2

Brett Stalbaum on Jan 14 1997

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**In an essay entitled " -A Conjunction of Imbeciles "1, Jean Baudrillard suggests a similarity between contemporary art and contemporary French politics. He does not discuss art at all, preferring to instantiate the idea of art to serve as a metaphor for his analysis of politics**

The application of this art-of-the-web strategy is dependent nevertheless on a closely related modernist conception. This dependency is the discourse of the avant-garde, where it is the artist's role to drive the medium, conquer new aesthetic territory and open his/her audience to new experiences. The only difference between this and the strategy of the avant-garde in painting is one of media. Whereas one can view historical examples of avant-garde painting as simulacra on the web, formal art of the web reuses the strategy of avant-gardist painting via implementation of a variety of web protocols and techniques. But, implemented as they are in the web context of art systems on life support, the return of the avant-garde in its of-the-web manifestation serves as a marker delineating a division between the application of habit and the application of ideas. In this sense, web formalism is not a reification of the modernist subject, but rather an oppositional and strategic pastiche of a modernist conceptual framework intended to self-referentially conquer a living territory.

But as with many things postmodern, this strategy could be easily subsumed and reincorporated. It is reasonable to assert that just as the avant-garde in painting was eventually deflated by minimalism and short circuited by the closed loops of post-modernist appropriation, so too will web-formalism enter into the socio-cultural circuitry of art and be imitated to death, reappearing on life support as deterrence machinery. Jodi, for example, is very important in terms of repositioning the web as a medium, but there are already signs of it taking its place in art history through art institutions. In the end it may be easily reabsorbed as a brilliant example of art to be imitated endlessly. This may in small part be due to its debt to the modernist avant-garde. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the real achievement of web formalism is to refocus art practice on the www as conceptually based.

### Moving away from art as a technology of the self

There are certainly many ways of correctively approaching the problem of post-usefulness in the arts. Perhaps the first hurdle is to understand that the arts, virtual or in the world of objects, have been valued based not on their own terms but rather by various 'markets'. Art's value in any cultural or productive system of economics is a result of the complex interplay of technologies, resources, production, distribution and thought. Michel Foucault has perhaps been the most influential thinker in terms of staking out genealogical methodologies through which to analyze such contingencies. Late in his career Foucault began to look at ancient Greek, Roman and Christian documents in an attempt to locate the emergence of and changes in the ancient sense of individuality and self. In "Technologies of the Self"(16)<sup>13</sup>, he discusses ways in which human self-knowledge has developed and the methods or "Technologies" through which self-knowledge is formed. He describes four basic types of these

technologies:

1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform or manipulate things; 2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; 3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; 4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.(18)

This paradigm is applicable to an analysis of the post-useful problem in contemporary art. One note to make in the course of this evaluation is that these technologies overlap, often serving social purposes described by more than one of the above categories. Therefore their usefulness as critical categories is not individual, but is rather in their disposition as influences relative to cultural forms and socio-economic developments. Technologies of sign systems, for example, have always played an important role in facilitating technologies of production. As the written word, for example, dispersed knowledge via the printing press, it played a role in spreading technologies of production; facilitating widening production and communication and eventually culminating in the various phases of industrial revolution through today.

Our current postindustrial situation is then best described as an exponential increase in the importance of technologies of sign systems in the control of production, the application of power through telematic control systems, and in the sign's dispersion into technologies of the self through discourses of consumption. Sign technologies are not only increasingly situated as advanced control systems for the other technologies, but have ascended to the status of being economically central activity. As pure electronic simulacra, signs have attained the status of hyper-product. Cinema and television are old phenomena in this respect. Software, currently the privileged paradigm of hyper-production, is an active sign system(s) capable of execution, further productive behavior, interaction with people, and perhaps even autonomous agency. Used either in management analysis or in the automation of human tasks, computers are adding new efficiencies to the economy. The sign systems called software are the major force behind this phase of the industrial revolution.

The cultural conception of art, by contrast, functions primarily as a technology of the self in that it is still largely conceived in terms of the modernist model of art as a "surrogate for and realization of his or her essential self."<sup>14</sup> This contribution of the "essential self", (justifying the high value added nature of the art product), is the same enlightenment era impulse in western thought which Foucault has isolated in the emergence of the self after Christian asceticism. During this time, the confessional technologies of Christianity which were intended to purify the soul and facilitate disciplinary systems, were largely replaced by technologies of the self which foreground the self's individuality and autonomy:

From the eighteenth century to the present, the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without the renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self.(49)<sup>15</sup>

This "new self" of the eighteenth century became the basis for what we now habitually assume in the arts. These once revolutionary notions of art mediated by the modern self do not produce the same revolutionary results within economic paradigms where technologies of sign systems function as active productive agents. The general failure of art and artists to engage in active productive agency within technologies of production and power show contemporary art practice to lie ontologically closer to technologies of the self. Examples of this tendency include improvement of the self through the study or consumption of art as 'high culture' (expressing the sophisticated tastes of upper class aspiration), the expression of 'revolutionary' aesthetic forms or quest for metaphysical ideals, the use of artistic self-identification to enable or excuse certain typed artistic behaviors such as angst, madness or self-destructive practices, and finally in discourses such as art therapy where the modernist notion of self-expression is utilized as a mental health treatment.

It is exactly these kinds of art discourse which I isolate as representative of the post-useful problem. As paid industrial work increasingly shifts from working on objects to the active application of knowledge to the design, control and maintenance of production and disciplinary systems, art and artists as we thought of them under modernism lose most of their creative charm and social status. It is not a matter of talent, genius or necessarily even meaning within aesthetic domains where we should conjure the status of art, but rather in art as a knowledge work capable of agency within the postindustrial economy. To put the point into Foucault's paradigm, (ignoring

his conclusions), art needs to move toward and engage with technologies of sign systems and their implementation in productive forces. One might speculate based on this that it is on the internet (which is broader than but inclusive of the world wide web), where much of this art work will find its expression.

I by no means wish to indicate any sense of pessimism regarding this art as knowledge work strategy. The cynicism and bitterness often expressed in post-structuralist critiques such as those made by Baudrillard both accurately characterize the contemporary art problem, and fail to offer solutions. It would be as flawed a strategy to dismiss the postmodern critique of art as it is to only raise the critique cynically in terms of art's death. I know many artists who are in denial on this point. What can not be said often enough is that the postmodern state of art is not grim. The re-coding of cultural software through many means, including even traditional forms such as painting, can become conceptually based productive activities once they are rethought and repurposed. This situation wherein the western social conception of art and its vast complex of semiotic signifiers can unjoin, dissipate and connect with other discourses in a knowledge practice is necessary and exciting.

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### Appendix 1

An archive of the **Yahoo!**

[http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Visual\\_Arts/Painting/Artists/Personal\\_Exhibits/](http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Visual_Arts/Painting/Artists/Personal_Exhibits/) index as of July 1997. I assume, as with all things internet, that the development of art expression online will change to some degree as time passes. The archive will both serve as a documentation of the context in which I am working now, and an interesting archeological artifact.

### Appendix 2

An archive of the [http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Museums\\_and\\_Galleries/](http://www.yahoo.com/Arts/Museums_and_Galleries/) index as of July 1997.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> **This article** originally appeared as "La conjuration des imbeciles" in Liberation on May 7, 1997. Translated by Francois Debrix. Francois Debrix is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Theory and International Relations at Purdue University. Available on the WWW at **Ctheory** .

<sup>2</sup>Baudrillard, Jean *Simulacra and Simulations* Stanford University Press, ed Mark Poster c1988

<sup>3</sup>Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* the Guilford Press 72 Spring Street NY NY 10012 c1991

<sup>4</sup>I'm thinking of **Thomas Kinkade** .

<sup>5</sup>Note American right wing attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts: both for supporting expression which they don't favor, and their view of art as an unimportant practice not worth Federal tax dollars.  
<http://cgi.sjmercury.com/ent/docs/066147.htm>

<sup>6</sup>ibid. Best, Steven and Kellner, Douglas *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*

<sup>7</sup>Art schools and university art departments have employed the exact same strategy, using the the web as a way to market their academic programs.

<sup>8</sup>Staniszewski, Mary Anne *Believing is Seeing, Creating the Culture of Art* 1995 Penguin Books USA Inc. 375 Hudson, NY, NY, 10014

<sup>9</sup>I personally believe that the museum system is in a healthy if awkward process of change. As for landscape painting, students (myself included) in the CADRE institute and director Joel Slayton have shown that it to can be reevaluated and repurposed.  
<http://cadre.sjsu.edu/area210>

<sup>10</sup>The Yahoo! categories are selected here because the categorization process used at Yahoo! reflects the categorical intentions of those who wish to have their sites listed. Of course, there are many other ways to search the web for art expression. See: " **Art on the Internet and the Mediating influence of the search engine** " Switch Vol.3 #1 Spring 1997.

<sup>11</sup>Greenberg, Clement "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", Partisan Review vol vi, #5 Fall 1939 pp 34-39 reprinted in Frascina, Francis *Pollock & After the Critical Debate*, c1985

<sup>12</sup> **jodi** is a web project by Heemskerk and Paesmans.

<sup>13</sup>Ed. Martin, Luther H., Gutman, Huck, and Hutton, Patrick H., *Technologies of the Self, A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst MA, c1988

<sup>14</sup>ibid. Staniszewski, Mary Anne *Believing is Seeing, Creating the Culture of Art*

<sup>15</sup>ibid. Ed. Martin, Luther H., Gutman, Huck, and Hutton, Patrick H., *Technologies of the Self, A Seminar with Michel Foucault*

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I want to mention the influence on this essay of the rest of the contributors to this issue of Switch. Much of what is discussed here emerged for me in our weekly meetings over the course of this summer. Also thanks to Joel Slayton, director of the **CADRE** institute and executive editor for Switch, Kari Stalbaum and Geri Wittig for proof reading, and to Paula Poole for her input.  
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