

Brave New

Whatever:

Or:

*In Search of the Sacred
in the Junkspace and
Wastelands of Now*

"The symbols of the divine initially show up at the trash stratum." – Philip K. Dick

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A Foreword

“Stories are like searchlights and spotlights; . . . Their task, after all, is to ‘cure’ the stage, making it ready for the viewers’ visual and intellectual consumption; to create a picture one can absorb, comprehend and retain out of the anarchy of blots and stains one can neither take in nor make sense of.” (Bauman: p.17: 2004)

Narrative is performative, selective.

We live in saturated times: such a proliferation of stories, signs, signifiers, images, objects, data, and trash. In the spirit of the *bricoleur*, I have used (only) those stories available to me rather than pretending a thorough knowledge of all or any of the great narratives, and I have put them together, according to my will and intuition, into a structure intending coherency.

The structure was built for a purpose.

The structure was not built to last forever, and may not.

1: THEN

A Short Subjective History of

The 20th Century & Beyond

“We need history, certainly, but we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it, even though he may look nobly down on our rough and charmless needs and requirements. We need it, that is to say, for the sake of life and action..... . . . We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate -- a phenomenon we are now forced to acknowledge, painful though this may be, in the face of certain striking symptoms of our age.”

- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life”, *Untimely Meditations* ***

I:

GENERATION WHY-NOT-TRY

Doomed to Consume



I start with I, with myself. The story of myself is also the story of my generation (to be specific: I refer to the Anglo-American paradigm throughout, unless otherwise stated), the generation following what I refer to as Generation X—, to be specific/, since everybody else does. This makes me — logically and appropriately — a member of Generation Y.

Generation Why.

Levi-Strauss asserts that the artist is both engineer and bricoleur, “half-way between scientific knowledge and mythical or magical thought.” (Levi-Strauss: p.22. 1966) It is my prerogative and my luxury to tell the story just as I see it; but like any other contemporary discourse, my story is saturated with other stories, other narratives. To position myself in the middle of all this is the artist’s prerogative, and requires both scientific methodology (—in this case, a systematic research of other people’s stories, a full list of which can be found in the bibliography) and magical thinking, which — in the absence of anything else by which to ascribe meaning to my words — I have employed throughout. “Mythical thought an intellectual form of ‘bricolage’ builds structured sets by means of a structured set, namely, language. But it is not at the structural level that it makes uses of it: it builds ideological castles out of the debris of what was once a social discourse.” (Levi-Strauss: p.21: 1962)

I was born in 1980, out of the debris of the Cold War, in the shadow of Einstein's monster: the atom bomb hung above us like some blimp of doom, and my little sister lived in fear that it would fall on our house. The skies in the movies were full of outer space: outer space was full of people and things living almost as we did,

but not quite; it was clean in that space, unspoilt, *empty*. There was junk in space, but outer space - unlike the crowded earth - was infinite: quite free of the troublesome bondage of gravity, or poverty, or people. The waste just floated calmly on into the void, never to be seen again. On earth the skies were full of holes and the streets were full of trash; in the meantime, though, there was My Little Pony and Kinder Surprise and the toys from McDonalds Happy Meals, fresh from the factories - made in Taiwan, made in Singapore. The magazines were full of cars and sofas, and all the cars looked like pop stars, and all the pop stars dressed like sofas, and every month of every year brought forth new magazines, new cars, new pop stars. Such a [proliferation of [^]*stuff* and *things*!.

By the time I was a teenager, I thought I knew everything there was to know about consuming. I'd been a consumer demographic since birth. I thought up revolutionary ideas only to find out that it had all been done before: History, or the stuff of history, had already happened, and the world had become blasé. Like Archimedes' bath, culture was full: there would be no more Eureka moments. Anyway, there was too *much* of it all - stuff and things, pop stars, magazines - and the pop stars all looked the same, and the magazines came out every month of every year, full of the same stuff and things, all the same and always new. But the stuff itself was beside the point, somehow. The art and science of consuming - the *meaning* of it all - was derived from elective choice, the prerogative to control one's variables: all the time more choices to make, a proliferation of elective narratives. There was something sad about it, something empty. Not because of the staggering range and multitude of things to choose from, but because of their finitude. The phrase "Why Not Try..." seemed to summarize the abject, banal melancholy of the consumer society. Why not, indeed? There's nothing else to do. Try it, buy it, and die: in a poverty of choices, we are doomed to consume.

But I hankered after an avant-garde so radically outré that you couldn't buy it at all, and so I went to Amsterdam, where I lived rent-free and richer than anybody in huge derelict houses, furnished with other people's trash. We were hunter-gatherers, sharp-eyed in the garbage piles, knew just what was rotten and what was good: everything in my possession had already been thrown away once or twice, and for this I loved it all the more. I identified with the waste objects in their redundancy and unwantedness; but I also cherished the idea that these magical

artefacts had somehow - in their wisdom - found their way to *me*, had deigned to stay awhile in my loving service: I –looked after them - gave them a context and a place to exist - and in return, they looked after me. Because of the benevolence of garbage, I had something to eat, somewhere to sleep, something to believe in.

This is my story, my subjective history. It is no more interesting than any other story, but I was brought up, according to the parameters of postmodernism, in the conviction that narratives - personal micro-narratives as well as cultural meta-narratives -- are constructed—, or *engineered* - and must be subject to the righteous-subjectivity of others and their own constructions. “What better characterises this period than the mythification of origins?” writes Nicholas Bourriaud, prefacing the *Altermodern* catalogue (Bourriaud: p.20: 2009); “The meaning of a work of art, for this second-stage postmodernism, depends essentially on the social background to its production. ‘Where do you come from?’ appears to be its most pressing question. ¹” Because my story is all I had to begin with, it shall be the foundation upon which I must build. “If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined,” writes Derrida, “it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*.¹” My discourse, the discourse of my generation, is both coherent *and* ruined: second-stage postmodernism, after all, has been the condition of my entire lived experience.

¹ "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass: London: Routledge, pp. 278-294)

II:

SECOND-STAGE {(POST) MODERNISM

A Melancholic Episode



II is for the great columniform constructs of dualism two-footed and sure, the foundations of an empire: self versus other, mind versus body, time versus space. Language is just words, after all, but words are signs, and signs are signifiers, and signifiers are incantations; and from these incantations we have built structures, and from these structures, civilizations. With the great towers of the Modern raised to heaven like obelisks on a tomb, the city-state of postmodernity is a Babylon: a confusion of languages, a “pornography of signifiers”. II is for the second stage to follow a first: a “long melancholic episode”(Bourriaud: p.19: 2009) in mourning for the mutated Modern and its monsters: Einstein’s blimp in the skies of Hiroshima; silicon valleys; battery farms; the horrors of Progress and the ruins of the twentieth century. II also stands for the two sections into which this chapter is divided: The Work of Art in the Age of Indifférence, in which I discuss recent developments; and The Article of Faith in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in which I examine our antiquity. Subjectively, of course: for, as we now know, there is no other way.

*The Work of Art
in the Age of Indifférance*

The second-stage postmodernism to which Bourriaud refers is difficult to define ontologically, since doing so would appear to defy the very nature of its native terminology, which proliferates rhizomatically like a fungal root on the junkheap of history: organic and cancerous, memetic, zygotic, psychotic. Frederic Jameson makes a comically convoluted attempt in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; but his very explanation is cyclical, mired in its own circularity, duty-bound to qualify and redefine its own terms before the terms can even be set:

“. . . this unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives, this return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos, suggests a second feature of Postmodernism theory which requires attention, namely, the way in which virtually any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very search for the present itself and pressed into service as a symptom and an index of the deeper logic of the postmodern, which imperceptibly turns into its own theory and the theory of itself.”

How did we get into this mess?

We could blame it on Derrida, of course, who recognized (the necessity of) a breakdown in tautological certainties and began mapping an alternative methodology for the proliferation of terms springing up alongside all that *stuff* and all those *things*. “The *value* of philosophical thought, which is to say its *seriousness*, is measured by the non-mythic character of its terms,²” wrote Derrida in 1993, keen, as always, to define and render non-mythic his own terms/. 1993 was the same year that Damien Hirst exhibited *Mother and Child Divided* at the Venice Biennale. The terms “Mother” and “Child” are guilty of ‘mythic character’ in that they are imprecise and mysterious, invoking universally sacred archetypes as old and various as humanity itself. Placed side by side in the Judeo-Christian context (in which this work was couched and exhibited), the words conjure apparitions of

² *On The Name*, “Khora,” p.101

familiar religious icons. Hirst's big joke: the brutal juxtaposition of the suggested sacrosanct with the materiality of two dead cows in two glass cases, one big and one small, preserved in ice-blue formaldehyde//. *Mother and Child Divided* is typical of the late-stage postmodern aesthetic of which Damien Hirst is the poster boy; it can even be said that the aesthetic [philosophy of postmodernism is typified by the juxtaposition of sacred and profane: the deconsecration of the (sacred) master-signifier. Lyotard, in the seminal *Libidinal Economy*, re-cast Marx as the ultimate subordinate: the proletarian female child or "Little Girl Marx"³. Stripped naked, tarred and feathered, the lesser God of the Moderns was subjected to the transgressive violence of public ridicule, tantamount to heresy. But if there is nothing sacred any more, then there can also be nothing profane. And if there is nothing profane, then there is also nothing transgressive; and if there is nothing transgressive, how are we ever to move forward?

"As for the postmodern revolt against [(the canonization and academic institutionalization of the modern movement) however, it must equally be stressed that its own offensive features -- from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance, which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism -- no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society." (Jameson: p.13: 1991)

Moreover, the remove at which an artist-author⁴ like Damien Hirst is able to engineer his work, and subsequently have it *valued*⁵ as *serious*⁶, relates directly to a

³ Lyotard: p.96: 1974

² I use the term "Author" liberally, to describe the maker or originator of an [art] work; in this case, the Artist.

^{3 & 4} Derrida's italics: see above

⁵ "The engineer works by means of concepts and the 'bricoleur' by means of signs." (Levi-Strauss: p.20: 1966)

non-mythic approach to making. The postmodern artist is analogous to the engineer cited in Levi-Strauss⁷ (p.20: 1966): a cerebral figure, not driven by faith or passion, but by means of concepts. Baudrillard draws the libidinal analogy, as though meaning consists in the urgency of pre-cognitive desire –(a romantic elegy for a pre-Modern sensibility, perhaps, before we all aspired to the machine):

“The fetishist . . . doesn’t believe in sex, only the idea of sex (which of course is asexual). In the same way we no longer believe in art, but only in the idea of art . . . The bottle rack of Duchamp is an idea; the Campbell’s box by Warhol is an idea; Yves Klein selling air for a blank cheque in a gallery, this is an idea. All these are ideas, signs, allusions, concepts. This no longer means anything at all; but it signifies anyway.”(Baudrillard: p.16: 1997)

There is no sense of value in craftsmanship in the work of the postmodern artist-engineer, no process of trial and error — no *bricolage*. Here, even the internal creative process - the embodiment of the divine muse, celebrated like a shamanic rite and once given the privacy of prayer — has become a commodity, or a curiosity —(most notably in process-based postmodern works like Tracy Emin’s *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made*, or Joseph Beuys’ *I Love America and America Loves Me*). The artist-engineer must pay for in his materials and his technicians’ labour: he is a microcosm of the first-world consumer, for whom the relationship between manufacturer and commodity is similarly hermetic and distant. (Post) Modern Art often shares the aesthetic of supermarkets and hospitals: the processes are invisible, in that both butchery and surgery take place behind closed doors. The white cube gallery is like the most exclusive of boutiques: exquisite, exclusive commodities placed and lit just so, showcasing their desirability at the best angle.

Nicholas Mirzoeff sees postmodernism as the crisis, not the successor, of Modernism, and this definition is a useful one. Bound by the prevailing conventions of the Modern philosophy - individuality, agency, authorship, novelty - - but stuck in the cycle of consume-and-be-consumed in which everything’s for

sale and nothing can ever be new or radical again, Generation X responded with the only form of rebellion still available: crushing indifference (or perhaps: *indifférance*). The truth-seekers of my parents' generation brought forth a set of new narratives that once spoke of real magic; now, though, these too had been commoditized by pop culture: fed into the machine and churned out as empty simulacra, mass-produced and dumbly opaque. Nothing *meant* anything anymore. "The abstraction of our world is a matter of fact now, when all the art forms in an indifferent world are assigned to the same indifference," shrugged Baudrillard (p. 10, 1997): "This is neither denigration nor depreciation: it's simply the state of things."

When the state of things comprises an understanding that all ideas are constructed and therefore of equal indifference; that all radical acts have already taken place; that everything said or thought can be sold or bought (for these are the conditions of the melancholic Postmodern), can there still be such a thing as sacred?

A thing is sacred if it cannot be subject to the degradation of deconstruction. A thing is sacred if it cannot be commoditized. And since there is virtually nothing left that can still be described as sacred, the choice to assign meaning to a thing or an idea is purely a matter of faith.

The Article of Faith
in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

“Every civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought and this tendency is never absent.” (p.3: Levi-Strauss: 1966) For Generation X, the only available meaning was in establishing and re-establishing that nothing would ever mean anything again. For the <Moderns, on the other hand, incorrigibly corporeal despite their own pretensions to the contrary (Cubist and Futurist paintings resemble nodal maps, and Nazi esotericism --the work of Leni Riefenstahl, for example - echoes a fetish for the corporeal sublime), faith did not die with God, but shifted into a manageable, materialist conceit: the sphere of the sciences. The Moderns prided themselves on their common sense, and believed in something when they saw it; The “Modern Constitution,” as identified by Bruno Latour (p.13:1991), hunkers down into its convictions, staunchly bunkered on four sides by inarguable doctrines.

“You think thunder is a divinity? The modern critique will show you that it is generated by mere physical mechanisms ... You are stuck in a traditional economy? The modern critique will show you that physical mechanisms can upset the progress of human affairs ... You think that the spirits of the ancestors hold you forever hostage to their laws? The modern critique will show you that you are hostage to yourselves and that the spiritual world is your own human construction. You then think that you can do everything and develop your societies as you see fit? The modern critique will tell you that the iron laws of society and economics are much more inflexible than those of your ancestors You are indignant that society is secular? The modern critique will show you that spirituality is ... liberated, and that a wholly spiritual religion is far superior. You call yourself religious? The modern critique will have a hearty laugh at your expense!” (Latour: p.38: 1991)

Space and time were reassuringly material; the Moderns struggled with the external realization of a space in which the mind could exist separate from the body. Although the self was understood to be sited in the consciousness, as – dictated by Descartes’ dominant mind//body separation theory (*cogito, ergo sum*), the only true understanding of self came through the spatial mapping of the physical body. Bridge and door, porch and *platz*; ^the spatial anxiety of modern urbanism was a crisis of embodiment, a struggle to internalize the external. Even Freud, whose work dealt directly with this, accompanied the case notes of famous agoraphobic ‘Little Hans’ with a sketch of a map, as though the mind was present precisely where the body had walked. Even the machines were bodies: ravenous deities of industrialisation, – Gods to replace a God, the machines of the Modern were built in our own image. *Urbemensch*, super-workers, visceral bodies breathing (hot belching exhalations of a guzzling engine! Great wheezing clouds of steam, smoking out the stars!), and bleeding: axle-grease and engine-oil. There was beauty in the raw, hulking materiality of it all: I sing the body electric!

Capitalism boomed and burgeoned: nobody had to wait until heaven to reap what he’d sown any more. Freed from the shackles of heavenly bondage, the Moderns found meaning in the sacred specificity of terminology, the non-mythic nature of technology, the precision of science/. No time to wait for God, who worked in mysterious ways and at a mysterious pace: there were factories to be built, wars to be fought, cities to be filled! And bodies begat more bodies, and the cities filled up and out, and out and out and outwards; and the machines in the factories churned out *stuff* and *things* for the bodies to eat, to wear, to buy and so on, and on and on, and up and up and unstoppably: from skyscraper to suburban sprawl, mile upon mile of rhizomatic junk-space, and all in the name of the great, grey Modern - until we’d filled up half the world. “If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet... . . . Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fall-out. Modernization had a rational program: to share the blessings of science, universally. Junkspace is its apotheosis, or meltdown.” (Koolhaas: 2006)

Visualize a toy store or retailer of consumer electronics, or a high street franchise selling fashionable clothes. New stuff and things: so many things, fresh from the

magazines and ready for the space-saving storage units of Britain and America. “Modernity is a condition of compulsive, and addictive, designing.” (Bauman: p.30: 2004) “Where there is design, there is waste.” ‘Inbuilt obsolescence’ is only partially related to production values and product quality; it is also a necessary function of toys, electronics and cheaply produced high-fashion attire in the cycle of consumption, all of which will be done with, played out, or obsolete within a year.

Waste is an integral by-product of the affluent liquid-modern lifestyle, but this lifestyle is built partially on the principle of control — the armed big brother of choice. By controlling all possible variables we have done away with nature as it once existed, and now all that is left of nature is our own waste - piling up on every side, running in every stream, seeping through the cracks in our culture. We mistrust the inherent nature of waste and dirt: entropic, organic, terrifyingly foreign, it threatens the very foundation upon which the Modern Constitution is built — of *Fortschritt Uber Alles*, and then, later, Buy-Til-U-Die, which has retained its hold on society (in the absence of anything new, since nothing can ever be new again) up until now. And although there is nothing new under the sun, there’s no end to the fresh stuff and things popping off the production lines, and since that’s all we have to define ourselves by - as useful members of a consumer society - the cycle continues.

“Waste is the dark, shameful secret of all production. Preferably, it would remain a secret... . . . And yet . . . The sheer mass of waste would not allow it to be glossed over and silenced out of existence.” (Bauman: p.27. 2004) Historically, though, the paradigmatic aesthetic of {(post) Modern consumer culture has left no room for waste, preferring clean lines and productive bodies. There is a multi-million dollar industry of commodities and services devoted to managing our waste. We obsess about cleanliness, as though trying to keep the devil at bay. We deodorize ourselves out of existence: one’s individual scent is no longer the smell of one’s skin, but of one’s perfume. We pay millions of pounds a year to IKEA for storage products that will ‘clear our clutter.’ Lifestyle magazines urge us to throw away old things, get rid of keepsakes, usher in the new and start afresh, fresh, fresh!

Cycles come and cycles go. Something, sometime, had to give.

We have consumed our way through most of our natural resources as though they were on special at the supermarket. In filling the earth with cities and factories, we have created the problem of human clutter: displaced beyond Ikeaification, a rising tide of uncomfortable itinerant truth that seeps like dirt into the cracks in our cities, demanding payback by dint of existence. Our own effluvium - like a thing from a horror movie - looms just out of sight, threatening a comfortably hermetic existence. "Firstly, we know that the processes of global technology and capitalism produce waste and wastelands: an abject excess or unproductive expenditure -- not reducible to commodification -- of shit, garbage, disorder, discarded ideas, histories, ideologies and people. |"(Fisher: p.63: 2002)

So where does it all go?

It washes downstream from the mainstream, tonnes and tonnes of it: stuff and things, digested ideas, broken bits, forgotten people. It ends up in the wasteland.

2: NOW

Bricolage and Magical Thinking, or:

How I Learned to Stop Worrying

And Truly Love the World

“This is where we should start feeling at home.

Part of our daily perception of reality is that this disappears from our world. When you go to the toilet, shit disappears. You flush it; of course, rationally, you know that it's there - in canalisation and so on - but at a certain level of your most elementary experience, it disappears from your world. But the problem is that trash doesn't disappear. The difficult thing is to find poetry and spirituality in this dimension: to recreate - if not beauty - then aesthetic dimension in things like this - in trash itself. That's the *true* love of the world. Because what is love? Love is not idealization. Everybody knows that if you really love a woman or a man then you don't idealize him or her. Love means that you accept a person with all their failures, stupidities, ugly points. And nonetheless that person is absolute for you, what makes life worth living. You find perfection in the imperfection: and that is the true love of the world. “

- Slavoj Žižek, at a landfill site, in *Examined Life*

O:

WASTELANDS

*A Continuous Production
of Otherness*



O is for the Other, for zero, for ground zero. For null, for nought, for nothing. For redundancy and superfluousness; for (built-in) obsolescence.

Nicolas Bourriaud, curator of *Altermodern*⁸, has recently made a number of big assertions based around a central big theme: that postmodernity -- our long period of mourning - is over. Bourriaud sees the unfolding of the twentieth century as strictly linear, analogizing history to time's arrow; but in the age of hyperspace and ultra-globalization --(when there is no such thing as a sure thing) even time has come to mean something different, namely: the last wide open space left on earth. "History is the new continent," said Bourriaud, in interview: "We are living in the era of Google Earth; there is no terra incognita anymore. The last continent to be discovered is time."

Time and space used to be intractable facts of nature, harnessed and negotiated by way of relatively accessible numeric systems, which were also intractable by design. However, perhaps Bourriaud was right in having understood a change in time-space perception (and after all, one's perception is the *only* truth in a thoroughly deconstructed universe). Hervé Fischer writes about "the return to magical thinking that techno-science promotes" (p.13: 2006) and indeed, we practice magical thinking every day; as we stare into the constellation of visual

⁸ Feb. 3 – April 26, 2009. Tate Britain, London.

metaphors on the screen, existing in two dimensions and four at once, we swim in the fluid ether of a virtual *dreamtime*. Despite Descartes' dominant mind-body separation theory, We Anglo-American (post) Moderns have never seen or experienced what it is to *think*, and *therefore to be*, in cultural memory, but for mankind in general this space is not new, but ancient, antecedent; *sacred*. For Levi-Strauss, coining the idea of mythical thought, it is precisely this spatial-temporal aspect that gives the 'savage mind' its power:

“The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel.” (Levi-Strauss: p.263: 1966)

We trust our quiet mind-machines to support us, transport us, entertain us, work for us; and yet we have no understanding of how they perform their tasks. The sleek type and clean lines disguise the messy code beneath, and under the code there are simply rows of noughts and ones. And beneath all that the bare circuitry, fine as fishbones. But like supermarkets and hospitals, the guts of the matter are hidden from our eyes; and yet, they are there; just as intractable as anything else. While Bourriaud may be correct in stating that this space - like outer space in the movies of my childhood - is a terra incognita (especially for a society recovering from two hundreds years of unquestioned corporeality), it is neither empty nor unspoilt. Like outer space - but unlike the filthy overcrowded earth, crawling with filthy bodies and their filthy waste -- timespace goes on forever, accumulating trash as it expands ever outward:

“The excess of information is too much to be dumped into human brains - or even into its conventional repository, the library shelves. The invention of the electronic memory came in handy: the world wide web fills the bill of an infinitely capacious, and exponentially growing, waste-information disposal.” (Bauman: p.25: 2004)

Wholly overlooked, too, is that uncomfortable materiality of this timespace: a toxic deluge of obsolete computer parts, glowing palely on mountains of plastic in rural China. They are no good to anybody and they will never decay; to rid the world of

our sophisticated technology involves chemical processes capable of burning holes in the atmosphere, and in the eyes, the skin.

There may yet be terra incognita in the abstract spaces of sci-fi fantasies, but there are no more undiscovered continents. The wasteland is now. We are living in it. The fluid trajectory of culture has become a fountain of sewage, sourced at the mouth of a stream which flows unending: a feedback loop, an eternal rotation of re-appropriations, re-imaginings and juxtapositions:

“Junkspace thrives on design, but design dies in Junkspace. There is no form, but proliferation... Regurgitation is the new creativity; ... Superstrings of graphics, transplanted emblems of franchise and sparkling infrastructures of light, LED's, and video describe an authorless world beyond anyone's claim, always unique, utterly unpredictable yet intensely familiar. Pretending histories left and right, its contents are dynamic yet stable; recycled or multiplied as in cloning: forms search for function like hermit crabs for a vacant shell... Junkspace sheds architectures like a reptile sheds skins, is reborn every Monday morning.” (Koolhaas, Ibid.)

Bourriaud differentiated the arrow of history from the *maze* of history as it is now unfolding, in which we are bound to search out meanings willy-nilly as we find them: each man for himself, each narrative a subjective construction. The libidinal urge to consume — both ideologically and materially - has run its course, leading to yet more nothing: “Brands in Junkspace perform the same role as black holes in the universe: essences through which meaning disappears.” (Koolhaas, Ibid.) In this respect, I believe, Bourriaud had it right: there can no longer be anything new, but there is something generative and fungal in the wasteland, a rhizomatic decay, pulsing with the beat of life itself - organic and cancerous, memetic, zygotic.

The waste — and by this I mean *stuff* and *things*, terms and definitions, regurgitations, signifiers that have outgrown their significance, the dead relics of deities nobody believes in anymore — is our nature. We have created it, and as such it is what we inherit, and what will outlive us all. Built-in obsolescence has landed us with an uncomfortable forever the like of which we have never seen in human history, and now it's what we have to begin with - it's *all* we have — it is the foundation on which we must build. It is our story, our past and our future: it is our

pressing question, and it must also be our answer. Ground zero: we begin at the end.

“There can be no artistic workshop without a rubbish heap,” writes Zygmunt Bauman (p.22: 2004), “This however makes waste into an indispensable ingredient of the creative process. More: it endows waste with an awesome, truly magic power, equivalent to that of the alchemists’ philosopher’s stone -- the power of a wondrous transmutation of base, paltry and menial stuff into a noble, beautiful and precious object. Waste is simultaneously divine and satanic. It is the midwife of all creation -- and its most formidable obstacle.”

Moreover, the obsolete article -- carries a special aura of authenticity in a virtual world: that of the subjective narrative. “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced/.” (Benjamin: online: 1931) A thing is sacred if it cannot be bought or sold; a thing is sacred if it cannot be subject to (further) deconstruction. Flaws, cracks, obsolescence of all and any kind: these are the marks of the sacred, the “symbols of the divine”. We must learn from the objects themselves, in their wisdom of age and their dereliction: intrinsic in human waste is the memory, the aura, of meaning. If we are to survive, we must become *bricoleurs*. We must stop consuming and start reimagining - from scratch, from nothing, from what we have: our waste. Levi-Strauss offers a *modus operandi*: “Consider the bricoleur at work and excited by his project. His first practical step is retrospective. He has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider or reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it” (p.18: 1966).

The objects themselves, with their flaws and special qualities, suggest the order in which we are to piece together -- or bricolage - - our stories, our works of art.

“Where do you come from?” is our pressing question, our necessary dialogue. For in the waste we discover our own nature; our libinal urges, our love of the world.

J.D, London 2010

CODA:

Notes on Bricolage

“The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’, that is to say with a set of tools and materials that is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions.”

- Claude Levi-Strauss, p. 17, “The Science of the Concrete” in *The Savage Mind*, 1962

In December I took part in an international art event in Haiti’s Port-au-Prince: the Ghetto Biennale. Haiti is the wasteland of the world, desperately poor and held together – - quite literally - by faith and community and a couple of well-placed nails; there is very little else with which to build. Port-au-Prince is built of corrugated iron and concrete-rot, thrown together haphazardly; pure bricolage, built for a purpose.

I went to Haiti with the idea of building a church from the waste. More specifically, I went to Haiti to see bricolage and magical thinking in its native habitat.

Almost immediately, I realized I’d made a terrible mistake: there is no *waste* in the wasteland.

Of course there is plenty of waste in Haiti: the stuff and things that America no longer needs or wants. There is garbage and there is decay; poison trash piled up high on every corner, stacked soft and wet on the banks of the viaduct, towering above the city in the shantytowns with no infrastructure to dispose of it all. Port-au-Prince smells like human faeces and rotten flesh, and in those rotting stacks, the remains of chickens, dog legs, a baby dead in the afterbirth=, one eye gazing out at the sky. But the Kréyol word for this kind of waste (human and animal remains, hollowed-out grapefruit shells, random components from obsolete technologies;

shit, plastic bottles, and sachets that once held water) - *fatras* - must be distinguished from *waste*, by which we mean unwanted surplus.

There is nothing wasted and nothing spare. Bits of trash too fragmentary to warrant a moment's thought in an affluent Anglo-American reality are engaged to perform discrete functions, or used as part of greater constructions: houses, businesses, contraptions to keep the sun out, or in substitution for a tool; in downtown Port-au-Prince, for example, there's no such thing as a department store.— With the exception of school uniforms, all clothing is imported in aid packages from the USA and resold on wire hangers in the street; this is known as *pepe*, and sold by weight. The young men of Port-au-Prince, fully cognizant of sartorial subcultures, languish on street corners dressed just like young men in Atlanta, New York, and Miami: but this too is bricolage, since the young men of Port-au-Prince assemble their outfits, in perfect pastiche, from the cast-offs of young men in Atlanta, New York and Miami. Vodou churches are hung with bright balloons, incongruously advertising the Christmas sale of a small franchise in rural Massachusetts, or commemorating the 50th birthday of somebody called Val.

During the final stages of my dissertation, in which I intended to write extensively about my experiences in Haiti, there was a terrible earthquake in Port-au-Prince. Everything I saw, everyone I knew, everywhere we'd been: suddenly gone.

News of deaths confirmed started filtering through that abstract timespace, one by one. I kept writing through the pain, which - like all suffering - is both universal and indescribable, and so of no special relevance to this narrative except that I couldn't bear to exemplarize a country in such suffering, and so rewrote a few sections of the text. However, the relevance of Haiti as a microcosm for the wasteland of our world is more pertinent now than ever.

I am not equipped to provide a history of Haiti, nor to provide an extensive commentary of what is happening there now, but I will say this.

Throughout this text I have attempted to make a case for bricolage as ideal praxis for the artist living in the super-saturated wasteland of consumer culture. I believe that my case is a strong one, since -- by all counts, economically, environmentally and socially -- it's time to stop consuming and start (re) creating with what we

have, employing a little bit of much-needed magical thinking to help the process along.

But this is an ideology. And although passionately felt and probably correct in intention, ideology is always a luxury.

No such luxury existed in Haiti.

In sculptural terms, the bricolaged object is composed of several disparate elements not designed to fit together. There is no fusion, no melding or welding, no tessellation; the elements exist in perfect frail symbiosis. The sculptor-bricoleur solves the problems faced by every earthbound object -- the problems posed by gravity (let us think of it as the "dust-to-dust" principle) and entropy (or: the "this-too-shall-pass" principle)- using the objects at his disposal, and the special sculptural qualities provided by these.

Such structures are built for a specific purpose.

Such structures are not built to last forever.

In the event, of course, they did not. "A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that 'All sacred things must have their place.'" (Fletcher, quoted in Levi-Strauss: p.10: 1966) "It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed."

No amount of aesthetic ideology can bricolage a wasted city back together. The wasteland is what we inherit.

This is not a conclusion, but an elegy.

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