

Manufacturing Marginality

I am what is described as a 'highbrow'. That is the first thing about me; it underlies, and influences, all the other things that I am—all the things that it is not desirable to be ... But this term—half abuse, half of derision—is not *me*, it is not an attribute of mine, or anything personal to me. It is just something that happens to any writer or other artist, to be described in this ridiculous fashion—one who is not a bestselling or potboiling hack.

(Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, p. 13)

The widely trumpeted dissolution of high and low in culture is a fiction. The two realms, which have increasingly become caricatures of themselves, may be more aware of each other now, glancing over their shoulders to see if there is something in the other that might be used to advantage (to lend some short-lived air of credibility, perhaps), but Lewis's description is as accurate today as it was in 1950. When the use of low material in high art (or vice versa) is effective, this is only because it exploits the fact that this dusty but absolute distinction is still in place. It is a tired game, as old as modernism itself. Why then is it still such a favourite strategy?

Far from fusing in some ideal unity, high art and mass culture constantly redefine one another. As the juggernaut of mass culture stirs, driven by technological imperatives, its own internal logic and the overweening ambitions of its powerful purveyors, high culture, too, is transformed, wrapping itself around the changing physiognomy of the giant, defining itself by what mass culture is not. They are mirrored, negative images of each other which, although their tones and the disposition of their organs are reversed, are bound together like children in a three-legged race, capering and tripping over one another. In this interminable dance, high art offers what mass culture neglects, a sense of presence, danger or discomfort (an electrified *vernissage*, for instance), or caters to smell and touch, these exceptional features serving as signs of its authenticity.

Each realm has its own positive qualities: high art, an idealistic creation of objects which are valued for themselves through meaningful work; mass culture, its popularity, comprehensibility and high technical standards. Each also has its corresponding weaknesses: the elitism and obscurity of high culture; the banality and idiocy of the low. As Adorno famously claimed, these are the torn halves of an integral freedom to which they no longer add up. Each half sees in the ruined image of the other a specious but convenient justification for its own virtues. So high art paradoxically serves as a validation of the low, and each taken together validates the whole mechanical system. While high art owes its character to this relation with the low, the intimate nature of this connection is denied in the writing which supports it, which instead endlessly praises its unique, intrinsic qualities as if it stood alone and unsullied by the rest of the world.

The form of wood ... is altered if a table is made out of it.

Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous

thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 163-4)

How is it that quite ordinary objects, coal, for instance, or fan letters, are transformed, as if by alchemy, just by being displayed in a gallery? Naturally, most galleries try to cultivate this magic, setting their objects in hallowed ground against a virgin white. People often lower their voices in response. Yet a vulgar version of this same transformation is at work in adverts and shop windows. Aesthetic value, like price, is a single, universal scale on which all objects can be placed, lending both works of art and consumer goods the same autonomy and phantom objectivity. They are objects, sure enough, but also the hosts of an obscure value which appears from nowhere and connects with nothing.

Money and aesthetic value are absolutely linked in the eyes of the public. Try to find one of the many popularising articles about Damien Hirst, for instance, which does not mention money. Is a work of art worth £10,000 because of its indefinable aura, or is the aura a product of the £10,000? Art objects are the perfect commodities: lacking the complication of usefulness, they are pure tokens of exchange, their value based on opinion alone. Yet the power of their exchange value is taken for an aesthetic charge: with ordinary commodities an apparent relation between things, mediated by price, masks an actual relation between people; with works of art this same autonomy of the object stands alone, yet the monetary value on which it is founded is concealed by an ideal relation involving people—the artist and the viewer.

Money is the necessary and often the sole *raison d'être* of the gallery system; yet, at least in terms of presentation, the galleries have a prissiness about it, carrying the conventions of mercantile display to such a rarefied level that commerce (price tags, etc.) tends to disappear. Money must simultaneously be gestured at and concealed, since it is both essential to aesthetic aura and what threatens to taint it.



Figure 1: Elisabeth Wright, *Le Corbusier Cube*, as shown at *Candyman II*

New fuel is constantly needed for the contemporary art-world machine and, while, like oil, it must be refined, in the early stages its crudeness may be an advantage. Since the fall of modernism, changes in contemporary art can no longer be described simply as progress, but are founded on the domestication of the marginal, the dangerous and the alienated. One of the easiest ways to create marginality (especially for those artists whose accidents of birth do not allow them to play identity politics) is to flirt with the low. In the brave new world of post-modern art, taboos are forever being broken and borders constantly disrupted, and yet (with a few honourable exceptions) when we turn around and look again, all is magically back in place, ready for the next round.

The art market needs the marginal to feed its appetite for novelty; the manufacture of marginality is business. The marginal is not so much what the art world repudiates or ignores, as what it pronounces marginal, in the next moment hoping to claim it as its own. Nothing is easier than appropriation: the mere offer of a contract is usually all it takes. Post-modern relativism has led to a removal or reduction of the distinctions of value made between different kinds of work. This is only the precondition for a more wide-ranging commodification, and is the aesthetic equivalent of abolishing barriers to trade. The path from marginal to central is, more often than not, merely a matter of moving work from one context to another. The creation of value demands that the different potentials between areas be exploited, like the price differentials between geographical regions across which products are moved.

In 'post-industrial society' (a euphemism indicating economic failure) contemporary art is often seen in abandoned industrial buildings. This is partly mere expediency, of course, since these spaces are in plentiful supply. Heavy industry gives way to the cottage industry of contemporary art which, nonetheless, produces work on a massive scale, rivalling the history paintings of the old state Salons, and requiring the high ceilings and extensive floor spaces of ancient machine halls to house them. In *Candyman II* an old biscuit factory, which had catered to the sweet tooth of the general populace, has been converted into a spacious mall displaying aesthetic sweetmeats for a cultural clique. Industrial spaces also have an air of novelty for a middle-class audience unused to such places. Beyond this, there is a perverse attraction of opposites, in which consciously post-modern art, a product and expression of deindustrialisation and political reaction, flaunts itself within the very corpse of its victim. When the space has not been whitewashed, but left as it is, where works are shown against a backdrop of crumbling walls, peeling paint and damp stains, this might seem even more of a risk, but actually it only makes the effect more blatant. Furthermore, this *frisson* is also about money, about putting art into contact with engines of commerce. Now defunct, these industrial halls become suitable for aesthetic appropriation, for they are themselves useless artifacts which match their new contents. Above all, however, the very movement of works from these tainted halls to pure white cubes, like the passage of coffee, or other drugs, from poor countries to rich, creates value.

We can imagine styles, subjects, media and their combinations laid out in a table. Within the bountiful but far from universal post-modern smorgasbord, artists can be found to occupy most of the table's discrete positions. Individuals must paradoxically demonstrate their individuality by doing as all others do, searching for a unique position within the options. At

first sight, it might seem as if there is little significance to the various places chosen, but value tends to adhere in certain areas more than others, at the extreme edges for instance, and among clusters of like-minded but differentiated artists, who form a tendency, a mass, attracting value as if they were a gravitational force. 'Alternative' group shows, for instance, attempt to create such clusters, acting as flags of convenience for artists who share nothing other than the desire to make it, hoping to be seen as part of an emerging trend that can be tagged to some place or decade, which will be lent significance as a manifestation of the zeitgeist. Of course such a table would be constantly changing and while content as such has little significance, position and trajectory are all.

So for some time now the 'Cool School', clad in the invulnerable armour of irony, has been offering bizarre ornaments to the rich. If now there is evidence of a backlash against them in favour of work about identity, subjectivity and even a self-conscious exposure of flaws, then this must be recognised as only another marketing option, another turn of the wheel of fashion. The most important element in all this is forgetting; the recognition that we have been here before must never surface. This amnesia is in fact generally achieved, because content has so little intrinsic significance within the system, and because the very weight of the support structures (advertising, writing, openings) tends to blot out the past by creating an absorbing, eternal present.

This is as much true of mass culture as it is of high art: as the engine of culture runs faster, the constant reinvention of identity, supposedly radical, is simply the only strategy open to those who want to stay on top for more than fifteen minutes: they are renewed as the motor turns, made marginal once more at each revolution. If this makes them seem a little inhuman, we can comfort ourselves with the notion that humanity is an outdated theoretical construct.

It is essential that contemporary art criticism never say anything definitive; it is preferable that it never says anything critical. Indeterminacy, deconstruction, the sublime oscillation between opposing alternatives, the return of the repressed, the universality of artifice; all these are linked and serviceable tools for saying everything and nothing, for stamping a work with the mark of value, while never being reductive, never subjecting discourse to closure, never treading on anyone's subjectivity, never completing a thought. Post-modern theory is the perfect capitalist ideology since it authorizes the endless recycling and reappropriation of styles and statements. Why, for instance, the love affair between art criticism and psychoanalysis, that widely discredited fabric of contradictory beliefs? Just because, in its incarnation as literary and artistic theory, it sanctions interminable discourse and, in the process, whatever arbitrary association may be expedient that day. Psychoanalysis is symptomatic of a wider operation of criticism in which all readings are open, plural and always already convenient. This endless writing serves almost everyone concerned: it works for artists, dealers and gallery owners because the more writing which surrounds a work, the weightier it seems; for critics, whose reputations are often founded on prolixity; for academics, whose freedom to study now depends on the slavery of amassing research points through publication. Post-modern arguments about knowledge are a perfect self-description of the shadow play conducted in the worlds of literary and artistic interpretation. Content in criticism comes to matter as little as content in art.

He who offers for sale something unique that no-one wants to buy,
represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange.
(Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 68.)

Can the operation of this system be resisted or sidestepped? An obvious strategy is to do what this essay, and some recent art, attempts: to comment on the situation itself, to produce a writing or a structure of publicity around the work which does not support it in terms of the system. This is nothing new; Dada often pursued similar ruses, and was easily and swiftly appropriated as a scandalous success. The powerlessness of content, in art and writing, makes such an activity difficult. The very fact that an exhibition has a catalogue at all supports the work, no matter what its text says. Yet damaging points which the system actively suppresses can be exploited: the poverty and impotence of artistic content, the residual nature of high art in relation to the culture industry, its elitism which contrasts so pointedly with its claims to universality, and most of all, perhaps, the centrality of money to its operation.

Individual artists and critics can have only a limited effect on the overall system. As Terry Eagleton has said, the only thing that capitalism cannot assimilate is its own defeat; think of the millionaires who bought Socialist Realist painting, but only after the fall of the Eastern bloc, when it was instantly rendered archaic, safe, even charming, suitable to be patronised. In the long term, while the system survives, all will be appropriated, but, as one famous liberal economist put it, in the long term we are all dead. In the shorter term, sustained resistance is possible. There are life-long radicals who have successfully resisted appropriation, garnering praise in many quarters along with the unending ire of the powerful. Think of Chomsky, Pilger, Said or Haacke. Possibilities for exploiting weaknesses in the system have recently widened. The long recession has caused the engine to turn over a little less smoothly. Capitalism has come out from behind the cloak of Communism and is newly revealed as what it always was, a world-wide system, and not a pretty one. In the art world, the conditions in which the engine operates become so extreme, the time between marginal and mainstream so narrow, the act of commodification so blatant, the trivialisation which accompanies it so apparent, that illusions about it may be eroding even from the inside.

In pursuing aesthetic value, we embark on the old quest for the ghost in the machine of the fine art system. Money is both the fuel of the machine and its output, aesthetic value its exhaust, constantly evaporating in the polluted atmosphere of mass culture, and as long as the machine runs, constantly replaced. It is pointless to look for the ghost in the machine, look rather for the pecuniary machine in what appears to be the ghost.

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[This piece of writing was commissioned as the catalogue essay for *Candyman II*; in the event, the catalogue never appeared, and it was published in *Art Monthly*.]