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BEM OANING THE EM PEROR'S NAKEDNESS: THE GREAT PARISIAN DEBATE ON CONTEM PORARY ART

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1. Introduction

That contemporary art has always stirred controversy is a rather trivial statement. Changes always meet some resistence, in all realms of life, and every type of art has its detractors. Object of the present paper is the round of discussions on contemporary art which occurred in France in the nineties. Formally and methodologically, this paper would qualify as a study in the sociology of knowledge, because we shall try un expose the peculiar socio - historical conditions which generated and shaped the debate, and because the empirical material on which the analysis is grounded are books and essays (1). But of course, as sociologists of art, we are specially interested in the substantive contents of the arguments .

Also the reasons of our interests are rather obvious: Paris has been for about three centuries (1650 -1950) the center of the W estern art , and it still retains, among artists and tourists from all over the world, a strong attraction in this field. W hat is thought, said and written on art there carries a special importance. For sociologists, a second reason of interest is the role of the prestigious Paris school of sociology of art (the Bourdieu -Moulin -Heinich - Quemin line) , especially at the beginning and the end of the debate . Thirdly, our preliminary explorations failed to find anything comparable in other major national art worlds, although some budding, radical criticiques of contemporary art can be fo und also in the Anglo -american (2) in the German (3) and in Italian (3) literature .

In Paris, for the first time after a long period of undisturbed dominance, the basic tenets of modern art were subject to fundamental criticism, and the *raison d'etr e* of the whole business questioned, by a massive array of public personalities. The attacks came not from the traditional, conservative right - although that too joined the rabble, once started - but from some of the more respected representatives of the *gauchiste* intellighentsia and of the art world: the review "Esprit", the journal "Liberation", the former director of the Ecole National de Beaux Arts, Guy Michaud, the curator of the Musée Picasso, Jean Clair, and such. Also defenders of contemporary art, like "Le Monde" and "Art Press", could not refrain from serious criticisms of that world. If no longer the capital of the western art world, Paris has certainly become the world capital of the criticism towards that world.

The polemics, of course, had some antecedents in eighties and its follow -up in the present decade; in this paper, however, we focus on the materials appeared in the Nineties.

2. Defining the object

It is not easy to define precisely the object of the debate. In general, it concerned what the French, rather quaintly, call plastic arts (*arts plastiques*): painting, sculpture, and their contemporary transfigurations (installations, body art, performance, conceptual art); not, however, the rest of what in other languages is included in the term visual arts (photograp hy, cinema, tv, computer arts, etc.) . Music, literature, and the performing arts, although in many aspects exhibiting similar problems, have received far less attention. This may be due to the fact that one of the triggers of the quarrel has been the emargination of France in the international art market, where mostly paintings are traded, and that on e of the main targets of attacks has been that peculiar French institution, the State bureaucracy for the promotion of contemporary plastic arts.

Of course, the art world is highly differentiated not only in genres and types but also along many other lines, like levels, styles and schools. Under attack is only the upper level of the "high" arts, those that are housed in the great museums and world -class exhibitions, are discussed in specialized press and get into art history books, are increasigly taught in art academies, and are exchanged for large sums in the international art market.

As for the time frame, "contemporary, "actuel" "d'ajourdhui" are generally used to refer to the art of the last two or three decades, done by living and active artists, and generally marked by the loss of faith in art's role in socio -political progress. Some authors however stretch it to include art since 1950, to all the schools that succeded the "historical vanguards": "new realism" ,"pop" "minimalism" "arte povera" "conceptualism" etc.

"Modern" is an even more controversial term. For most people, it refers to all art since impressionism (included); for others, art after impressionism; for some, all art since classicism, namely since the rise of Romanticism in the last quarter of the XVIII century (it may be noted , in passing, that in the Italian academic language, artistic modernity *ends* there; since 1789, we are in the contemporary era). Of course, historical time -frames are wholly dependent on theoretical/substantive interpretations, and time -terms also carry with them not only the meanings prevalent at the time they were minted, but also varying denotations of content and substance. Modern, because of its very et ymological roots, is a peculiarly polisemic term (5). It may be noted, for instance, that while in common (and sociological) parlance the notion of modernity is linked with that of rationality, industry, and progress, prevalent since the end of XVIII century, in art history it usually means an atmosphere of anguish, rage, alienation and chaos, emerging a century later (6). It seems to us that these negative connotations are prevalent also in common parlance: modern art, after Impres sionism, is something that common people usually do not understand and do not like much. Instead , most participants in the Parisian debates distinguish a "good" modern art, from the middle of the XIX onwards, and a "bad " one, starting somewhere after 1950, and merging with contemporary art.

Another conceptual knot is "post -modernity" or "post -modernism". As we all know, the idea has been around f or almost half a century now, and has all but overwhelmed intellectual discourse in the human and social sciences for about two decades, from 1978 onwards (the tide is ebbing now). It is our impression that it has been somewhat less popular in discourses on the art world , simply because many of the features attributed to post -modern

society (loss of meaning and coherence, pluralism, fragmentation, instability, precariousness, alienation, individualism, cult of the new, aestheticism, etc.) are the same that have characterized modern art since its beginning, one or two centuries ago. It may be maintained that post-modernity is simply the pervasion of society by the features once peculiar to the modern art-world; the aesthetization of society. At any rate, "post-modern art" is not a very common phrase, save in some special realms, like architecture and perhaps literature. "Modern" or "hyper-modern" is usually enough to convey those meanings.

A widespread term uniting a temporal and a substantial meaning is "vanguard" (or "avant-garde"). The term originated in France and only slowly was imported in other national cultures. Originally referring to a military fact, it acquired a socio-political meaning in the writings of Saint Simon, and from there spread into socialist discourse, to refer to those societal groups who are at the forefront in the march of progress, those who anticipate history. It began to be applied to arts and artists around the middle of the XIX century, to designate the non-conformist, non academic, innovative schools, especially those with socialist leanings. When the theory and history of contemporary/modern art came into leftist (liberal, socialist, radical) hands, around the middle of the XX century, the concept was assigned to all art movements that fell into the lines of a certain "progressive-revolutionary-democratic" model of art-historical development. Vanguard or avant-garde art became synonymous with modern, new, good, original art; albeit often difficult to understand at the moment, because too far advanced. The term had its heydays in the 1930-1970 period; its ideological connotations lead to its demise in learned discourse in the seventies, with the end of Marxism as a dominant ideology in intellectual circles. However it is still used in common parlance, as a synonym of contemporary high art.

One of its substitutes is "experimental art". This term reveals the attempt of modern art to tap the social prestige of science, to present itself as a form of human activity parallel with, and grounded in, experimental sciences. Like these, art is defined as engaged in the pursuit of truth through experiments, in any conceivable direction, and with all sorts of results. Artworks can never attain ultimate perfection; they can only be documents of endless search.

Contemporary, modern, actual, vanguard, experimental high arts: these are, more or less, the object of the Great Parisian Debate of the Nineties. For the sake of brevity, from now on we shall label it MCA, modern/contemporary art.

3. The age of consensus, 1940-1970

Opposition to MCA is, of course, as old as MCA itself, but for some decades (let's say, 1940-1970) it stayed mute, outside legitimate intellectual discourse. The masses would vote with their feet, not going to MCA exhibitions, and the conservative and philistine bourgeoise limited itself to private grumblings. Almost all the officialdom – musem curators, art theorists, art critics, art historians – were in favour, or at least open to it. How did this consensus come about? Four circumstances seem to have been decisive in this regard.

The first is the debacle of conservative criticism against the early modern art: realism, impressionism, and van Gogh. The critical establishment of those days failed to immediately recognize their value, which was instead pretty soon recognized by the public. The failure seems to have shocked the corporation of art critics, and imprinted it with the imperative: never criticise new art. Be always open, tolerant and sympathetic.

The second is that modern art has become ever more difficult to understand and to appreciate. To some extent, the eye must always be educated to understand new art forms; but as long as art set itself the goal to represent reality (as it did in the W estern painting, in antiquity and in the XII to the XIX centuries), this difficulty was easier to overcome. Modern art set to herself other goals, and so needed ever more elaborate explanations. This gives the intellectual (commentator, interpreter, critic) an ever more important place in the system. Most importantly, it gives him the power to stigmatize as ignorant him who does not appreciate modern art, and thus de -legitimize his opinions. Art has become an esoteric system, with gates well garded, and w here only the initiates have right of voice .

The third is the condemnation (often to physical destruction) of modern "degenerate" art by Hitler, in the 1930's. Since then, those who expressed reservations on modern art were liable of being labelled not only as conservative, but also reactionary and fascist (7). The nazi opposition to modern art facilitated, in the thirties and forties, the widespread conversion to the left (liberal, socialist, radical, communist, anarchist) of the artistic milieu. The conversion was also systematically pursued by the international communist apparatus, in accord with the Gramscian principle of cultural hegemony (8). Intellectuals largely described, interpreted and wrote the modern art history in this key. The art establishment, in most western societies , became soon hegemonized by a *gauchiste* worldview, which denied legitimacy to any non - conformist thinking. In the worst cases, a sort of intellectual terrorism obtained (9) .

The fourth is in some way symmetrical to the above. In the same years, modern art (first the abstract expressionism, and then pop) was expoused by the American capitalist establishment (the Guggenheims, the New York super -rich behind the MoMa and the W hitney), and after the second world war it became the aesthetic side of the American hegemony in the "free world". Freedom, progress, material wealth, glamour, cosmopolitism, were all subsumed in the appreciation of modern American art (nota su germania). So also the political right sided with it . Modern art stood uncontested, save for some erratic sniping (10) and the perplexities of an older, and therefore more conservative generation of art historians, like Ernest Gombrich and Arnold Hauser (11).

4. Early critiques, 1970 -1980

The first major crack s in this intellectual consensus appeared in the early '70. One is Tom W olfe's *Painted Words* (1974). His main charge , summed up in the title, is that modern art lives more on words (theories, philosophy, etc.) than on paintings; that it s works can only be understood if one is persuaded by its rethoric. He predicted that in future museums the visitor will find large panels with the critics' tracts, illustrated by tiny reproductions of pertinent artworks. More substantially, he exposed the social conventions and complicities obtaining in the American and cosmopolitan art system. Tom W olfe's popularity as a cultural critic secured his book a good audience, but its caustic, paradoxical and excessive style facilitated its dismissa l as a merely brilliant libel. Moreover, he was not a darling of the liberal left. Another critical analysis of modern art was done by one of the more infuential conservative sociologists of the time, Daniel Bell, in his book on *The cultural contradictions of capitalism* (1974) . He observed that capitalism is feeding, within its own heart (the intellectual elites) an ethos and a culture, imbued with to romantic irrationality, that contradict some of its basic values; as it can

best be seen in its art world. Capitalists promote arts whose general stance is in opposition to capitalism, and in the long run this may lead to demoralization and collapse.

Bell's chapter on arts was sunk in the context of a much wider -ranging sociological analysis, and did not arose much attention in the artworld. Much more excitement was stirred by Harold Rosenberg, one of the high pontiffs of the American art establishment, with his *The de-definition of art* (1972), as it already had with his earlier *The tradition of the new* (1959). They were not meant as attacks to all of modern art, but only to some its developments (pop art and such) after abstract expressionism, which he had posited as the ultimate manifestation of Western art; however, his critical arguments were wide-ranging enough. There are no objective, universally shared definitions of art; no accepted criteria to mark what is art from what is not, and to assign artistic value. These are merely the outcomes of dubious social processes occurring within the art system itself. This state of affairs is itself the result of a progressive discarding of all other traditional criteria to the advantage of a single value, originality or newness. Under its empire, no style, school, coherence, structure can hold; past as well as future are dissolved. To avoid this outcome, it is necessary to re-instate some other defining and evaluating criterion in art. Other indictment s from the left against some tendencies of modern art was written by Hilton Kramer, *The age of the Avant garde, an art chronicle 1956-1972* (1973), and Peter Fuller, *Beyond the crisis in art,* (1980)

And then there is the curious case of Pierre Bourdieu, who dedicated most of his early research to issues of art, and whose *La distinction* (1979) placed him at the top of the world sociology of art. His earlier work (with A. Darbel) on the public of musems *(L'amour de l'art*, 1966,) showed that, after half a century of avangardist rethoric, the masses continue d to be completely uninterested in high and modern art. In *La distinction* he emphasized again that the appreciation of high art, classic or modern, is a privilege of those who own enough "cultural capital". Even more important, in the last chapters of the book, where he leaves aside the ponderous analysis of the data and lets himself go into wider and deeper theoretical speculations, he criticizes the aesthetics of the cultural and social elites, having MCA clearly in mind. He attacks the masochistic asceticism of that aesthetics, unravels its socio-historical roots and its function in raising and maintaing class barriers. That book made him perhaps the most influential French sociologist of the eighties, particularly in the field of cultural policies; one of the intellectual sources of the efforts to bring high art to the people. His case is curious because, although his analyses clearly brought much ammunition to the critics of MCA, he did not take part in the Great Parisian Debate of the Nineties. This was done instead by his onetime pupil, Raymonde Moulin, with her *L'artiste, l'institution, le marchè* (1992). A vigorous third generation emerged with Natalie Heinich, whose *Triple jeu de l'art contemporain* (1998) is fully addressed to the ongoing polemics.

5. The gathering storm, 1980-1990: the apostasy of Jean Clair

In the eighties, an unexpected radical attack to MCA was fired in France by a highly respected member of the art system, Jean Clair. Like many young intellectuals of his generation, he had been a gauchiste and an enthusiast of American art, and in the early sixties spent some years in the States. This, as it often happens, made him discover, in reaction, his deep feeling of attachment to French and European culture. He became an art historian, specialist in American art, an art criticist and in time the curator of the Musée Picasso in Paris. In the early eighties,

his discontent with the art system erupted with great fracas. The arguments against MCA in *Considerations sur l'etat des beaux arts: critique de la modernitè* (1983) and *Paradoxe sur le conservateur: de la modernitè conçue comme une religion* (1988) owe much to Rosenberg's analysis on the « tradition of the new ». His heretic position earned him the job of curator of the 1995 venetian Biennale (that may seem paradoxical, but idolizing the tormentors is in fact quite common in the art system: see the case of Dada and Duchamp). He was one of the main figures in the debate of the mid-nineties with his *La responsabilitè de l'artiste: les avant-gardes entre terreur et raison* (1997), and subsequent ones *(Sur Marcel Duchamp et la fin de l'art* (2000), *La barbarie ordinaire* (2001).

6. Chronicle of the debate, 1990-2000

Although, for aesthetic reasons, we use the round numbers in the title, in truth the era of the debate may be anticipated somewhat. In 1986 and 1987 the influential "Esprit", well established on the left side of French culture, issued two dossiers on "*Parler peinture*" and "*L'utopie Beaubourg, dix ains après*". In 1989 Guy Michaud, art critic, professor of philosopy at the Sorbonne, and from 1989 to 1996 Director of the Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux Arts, published his attack on the French art bureaucracy, *L'artiste et le commissaries. Quatre essays non pas sur l'art contemporaine mais sur ceux qui s'en occupent*.

In 1990 Luc Ferry, another brillant young professor of philosophy, published *Homo Aestheticus*. It was a scholarly work on the connections between aesthetic and political philosophy in the XVIII centuries, showing how the debates on art, aesthetics and taste typical of the period were tied with the issues of citizenship, community, equality and democracy. The central part of the book was a heady review of the aesthetic theories of classic and XIX-century philosophers, like Hegel, Schopenauer and Nietsche. But the last part of the book changes abruptly register, and launches a serious attack on contemporary art, leaning heavily on the arguments of Rosenberg, Clair and Bourdieu, and exposing the myths shrouding the "historical avant garde". The book was a huge success, and has been translated in fifteen languages (12). Luc Ferry became a star of the Parisian intellectual scene, and was named Minister of Public Instruction in the Raffarin Government (2002). However he did perform well as a politician, and lasted in office only two years.

Officially (13) the great public debate started in 1991, with the the number of « Esprit » (July-August) dedicated to *L'art d'ajourdui. Y-at-il enchore des criteres d'appprecіation esthetique?*. The responses from the art establishment started immediately: Jean-Luc Chalumeau, high official of the competent Ministry, in the autumn 1991 issue of "Opus International" (n. 126), admitted that there was something wrong in the world of art. In the subsequent years, up to 1994, the same journal came often back on the issue (numbers 127, 128, 129, 132, 133, 134).

Two other numbers of "Esprit" insisted on the same theme in the following months: February 1992, *La crise de l'art contemporain. Quel criteres d'appreciation esthetiqu e aujourd'hui? II*; October 1992, *L'art contemporain contre l'art moderne. Quel criteres d'appreciation esthetique aujourd'hui ? III*. In all these issues the editor was Jean-Philippe Domech, who thus became one of the main actors in the debate.

In 1992 two other influential journals of the same political area joined the debate: "Telerama" in May published an article of O. Cena on L *'art triste* and in October a special issue dedicated to the Paris art fair (FIAC), titled *The grand bazar,* with articles of Jean Clair, J.P.Domech, M. le Bot. In the same Mai -June 1992 also the '"Evenement du jeudi" published a dossier on MCA, under the telling title *Les impostures.*

The art establishment responded with one of its main militant mouthpieces, "Art Press" (June 1992): criticisms of MCA were qualified as a new bout of "retour a l'ordre", like the one that was called in Europe, against the vanguards, after the first world war; an expression of reactionarism and poujadism. The editorials of the following numbers (July -August, September), written by the grand dame of the art milieu, Catherine Millet (14) continued to respond aggressively to criticisms, but with some concessions to the adversaries. Other responses came from "Galeries magazine" (August -September 1992) and from "Le revue des deux mondes", which dedicated to the question its issue of November 1992, with the title *L' art contemporaine, pour qui?* .

Another round of responses came from the art officialdom. Alfred Paquement, after having written on the abovementioned journal, in his capacity as the director of the Jeu de Paumes national gallery, organised in September 1992 and March 1993 two conferences on the issue, published in 1994 with the title *L'art contemporaine en question,* with the philosopher George Didi -Hubermann as the leading defender of the culprit.

In Februar 1993 the mighty "Le monde des debats" enters the arena, with a (virtual) duel between Jean Philippe Domecq and the art critic of the daily itself, Philippe Dagen. In July "Liberation" enters too. Other rounds take place in other venues (the journal "Raison Presente ", 3, 1993, *Y a -t- il un art contemporaine? ;* and the collection *L'art d'ajourdhui* (Felin, Paris 1993).

In 1994 J. P. Domech collects in a book his interventions (*Artistes sans art* , ed Esprit,)

After a couple of years of low tide, the debate was kindled again by Jean Baudrillard's characteristically apocalyptic article on "Liberation" *Le complot de l'art,* (20 May 1996), whose thesis was very simple: contemporary art is null and void; there is no such thing as contemporary art. There is only a simulacrum and a plot.

But the powders were really ignited by an intervention in the debate of the political right, with the review "Krisis ", directed by Alain de Benoist. The issue of of November 1996 was titled *Art/non Art* and featured articles not only by wright -wing thinkers like Kostas Mavrakis and Michel Marmin, but also of immaculate liberals (leftists) like Jean Clair, Jean Philippe Domech and Marc Fumaroli. In January 1997, Marc Fumaroli and Jean Clair intervene again on the moderate -conservative daily, "Le Figaro". This triggered vicious counterattacks from journals like "Art Press" (*L'extreme droite attacque l'art contemporain* , april 1997), and also from P. Dagen, on "Le monde" of February 15. "W hat had started in the left, as an attack from the left, seemed to drift toward the right" (15). Those who criticized MCA were branded not merely as reactionary and "poujadistes", as some years before, but as fascist and "lepenistes". Otherwise very respected intellectuals as Domech, Clair and Fumaroli were also personally attacked with allegations of ignorance (which is, as we have seen, the damning deligitimation and expulsion device, in the art system). They responded harshly, and in turn charged the attackers of terrorist and Stalinist methods. The polemics reached its climax.

In the meantime other responses came also from the officialdom. The ministry of culture organized three national conferences (Strasbourg 1994, Tours 1996, Paris 1997) calling on the experts and functionaries to analyse the situation and respond to the charges. In … .The same ministry commissioned a study on the place of France in the world art system. The picture that emerges from the painstaking empirical analysis of A. Quemin, when circulated in … …, aroused another salvo of polemics, because France was shown to rank, according to a number of different indicators, consistently at the 6th -7th place, behind not only USA, Germany and UK, which was expected, but even Switzerland and Italy.

Like J.P. Domech had done in 1994, other protagonists of the debate collected and developed their views in books. Jean Clair, as we have seen, maintained a high productivty throughout these years. Guy Michaud published *La crise de l'art contemporain* (1997), *Criteres esthetiques et jugements de Gout*, (1999) *Enseigner l'art? Analyses et reflections sur les ecoles d'art* (1999)*1* and *L'art a l'etat gazeux. Essai sur le triomphe de l'estetique* (2003). He also is the director of a series of books on MCA, mostly from a critical point of view, at the Jacqueline Chambon publishing house, in Nimes. Philippe Dagen, the art critic of "Le monde", published *La haine de l'art* (1997) and then *L'art impossible. De l'inutilitè de la creation dans le mond contemporain* (2002) which, really, is a disjointed collection of aphorisms having little to do with the title). Many other books with similar titles, written by professionals of different sectors, followed (e. g. Bruno -Nassim Aboudrar, *Nous n'irons plus au musée,* (Aubier, Paris 2000) (16). As we have hinted, also sociologists of art contributed to this literature: in particular R. Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution, le marchè* (1992), and N. Heinich (*L'art contemporain exposé au rejets: contribution au sociologie des valeurs,* "Hermes" 1996, n. 20; ead., *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain* (Minuit, Paris 1998); *Pour en finir avec la querelle de l'art contemporain*, L'echappe, 1999; and many others.

In 1999 Olivier Mongin, the chief-editor of "Esprit", the journal that eight years earlier had started the quarrel, constated that eventually the heat had given way to more serene analyses, (like those of Michaud and Heinich), and "Art Press" had ceased to insult critics as lepenists (17). It was time to draw balances. In the year 2000 a Geneva art operator, Patrick Barrer, tried to sum up the whole debate in a book of essays titled *(Tout) l'art contemporain est il nul?*

7. The charges

What then are the main charges levelled to this art in the course of the Parisian debate? What follows is my personal analysis/synthesis of the literature. It goes without saying that all the following concepts and theories are linked to one another, like nodes in a web; there is no intrinsic hierarchical nor any other order in them; they could be extricated and listed in a wide number of alternative patterns.

(N.B.: shortage of time has made it impossible to affix in this section the opportune references and links, which would be particulary needed given the intensity of concepts and their provocative nature)

1) *MCA is elitist* . It is of interest only to to a very small cultural and economic elite. Its core is made up of perhaps a few thousand people worldwide, who run the system as officials, museum curators, critics, editors, merchants, experts, and a few major investors and collectors . Then there is a wider circle of people who make a living off MCA, but with no decisional power: art teachers, art history professors, employees of MCA institutions, and such. Then there is a still wider circle of people who like, or who think it is a social duty to like MCA, go to its exhibitions, buy books, read materials on MCA in specialist or general magazines, and may own some minor MCA work. Art students belong here, too. This is a circle wide enough to man exhibitions. But the owerwhelming majority of middle and lower classes – let's say 95%? – just are not interested . These classes have no taste for art after Impressionism and Van Gogh, perhaps with the exception of the most spectacular and easy artist s of the XX century (Klimt, Picasso, Dali). The attendance of MCA galleries and exhibitions is markedly lower that that of other ty pes of arts and museums. Morover, there are little disclosed data on the effects of the experience on visitors. It can be hypothesized that a good part go there because they are culturally and pro fessionally involved, a part out of mere curiosity, and a part just to have fun, like in amusements park.

Being elitist, in itself, is not a damning guilt. It is in the case of MCA, because it contradicts the doctrine of the avant -garde and because it comes after decades of efforts to democratize it .

2) *MCA is a failure* . It has not fulfilled the missions it was bestowed on at its beginning (XVIII century). According to idealistic -romantic philosophy, art was a form of knowledge deeper than reason (Baumgartner) or more primordial than reason (Hegel), or the only possible form of human knowledge (Nietsche). In romanticism, it took the place of religion, as the highest human activity. In the theory of the avant -garde, it was placed at the forefront of human progress, with the mission to lead and enlighten the masses, and bring about their revolutionary emancipation. Nothing of this obtained. MCA has failed its saecular, megalomaniac promises .

3) *MCA is suicidal* . The notion of art as an "uninterested" spiritual activity, its sublimation and autonomization as a new religion, , the divinization of the artist and the theory of *l'art pur l'art* , the severing of ties with other social needs and community values (the separation of the aesthetic from the ethic and from the practical) in the late -XVIII and early XIX centuries, planted into art the seeds of its own destruction.

The process took time to gather momentum, but when it did, it run full course very rapidly, like an acute cancer. The death of art was certified by Duchamp and Dada, whose hontest, serious, explicit aim was to show that art is an hoax, a buffoonery, a farce. It is paradoxical that they ended up in musems and art historory books, when their precise aim was to destroy musems, history, books and art. Duchamp and Dada invented all the motives, techniques and practices that were then taken up by other avant -gardes during the rest of the XX century. In spite of all pretenses of originality, nothing really new happened in MCA after 1917. For all his long life after his last painting, Marcel Duchamp pursued with extreme rigor a subversive program.

4) *MCA is phony* . It has built a flattering but false self - image. According to its self - description, since the beginning it has identified itself with social progress, and tended to the liberation of man, against the oppression of existing social structures. It has always sided with the people, the eternal revolutionary values of freedom, equality and fraternity, and the left. This self-image has been concocted by a few theorists and philosophers, like Adorno, and is historically false. Most historical avant -gardes, like cubism and abstract expressionism, were politically uncommitted, others had ties with murky theosophical, spiritist and occult cultures (Mondrian, Kandinski, Malevi tch), others, like Futurism, and "vorticism", were truly revolutionary, but harboured authoritarian and anti -humanistic values and prepared the ground for fascism. Other s still were rooted in mythical cultures that nourished national -socialism (some strains of German Expresionism almost became the official art of Nazi Germany). Others still identified themselves unabashedly with commercialism and capitalism (pop art). Architects of all schools have always been ready to collaborate with whatever regime (Mier van der Rohe and Gropius tried to offered their services to Hitler, and Le Corbusier to Stalin and Mussolini alike). Of the historical avant -gardes, only surrealism opted clearly, if briefly, for communism. Picasso found it convenient to accept membership in the Party, but there is nothing in his work, thought and life -style which can be called communist. All of them pursued elitist, individualist paths and most of them despised the real ("alienated") masses. The image of MCA as a force of social progress and human emancipation has been built by leftist social theorists and art historians, partly as a wishful thinking, and partly in the effort to flatter the MCA world and swing it to the left. It did succeed to a considerable extent; for about thirty years after 1945 most of MCA committed itself to the left. More serious revolutionary thinkers however, like Trotzky, never believed that avant -garde artists could contribute to the socialist revolution, except as mere propaganda agents at the service of the Party.

5) *MCA is hypocritical* . W hile it pretends to embody the romantic values of individual freedom and un -interested creation, and claims the right to preach against capitalist and bourgeois society, in reality MCA is parasitic on the two institutions it pretends to fight – the state and the market; mostly the former. Its subversive ideals are *subvention né* . The personnel of MCA is largely employed in state institutions, in a variety of jobs (especially teaching). The market too is largely dependent on the state as an employer of artists (many are teachers), an organizer of MCA events, an owner of musems, and as a purchaser of artworks .

This, in itself, is not a damning guilt. In most societies, artists have worked at the service of those who detained power and wealth. The difference is that in those circumstances artists did not pretend to work against the interests and values of their employers.

6) *MCA is functional to capitalism and represents its basic value* . Capitalist society has supported MCA, even though it defined itself as antagonistic, for a variety of reasons. One is its "distinctive" function: te be a patron of the arts, to be known as someone who appreciates and collects them, has always belonged to the lifestyle of the highest class. That MCA art decl ares itself anti -capitalist and anti -bourgeois, that it attacks traditional values and breaks the convention of decence, only adds a little pepper on the tart. It cannot hurt, and can be fun. Secondly, patronizing the arts has always been a way to legitimate wealth and power. As it is well known, the main and perhaps only patrons of MCA, in Europe and the States, have been the greatest capitalists. In some cases, as for the Guggenheim foundation, for very clear public

relation purposes. Thirdly , art, being basically harmless and insulated from wider society, is a good place where to let off the steam generated by "subversive" and "revolutionary" ideas. This is what Marcuse called "repressive tolerance", the confinement of antagonist energies into insulated social spheres . Fourthly, MCA (like fashion, to which it is closely linked) represents in its purest form one of the basic forces of capitalism, the value of the new, the endless c ycle of destruction and production. Newness and originality are the basic values both in MCA and in late capitalism.

7) *MCA's only operational values, originality and creativity, are inadequate* . "Originality" i.e. "creativity", is the only value acknowledged in the MCA. But this value, left alone, is destructive and self -destructive. Originality hinders the building of ties, of community, of traditions, of style s; it entails extreme individualism and even the fragmentation and dissolution of personal identity. Moreover, it has a very short life -span: original works excite only the first time one sees them. Further, originality presuppose a knowledge of normality: only if one knows what came earlier, one can appreciate the originality of the new. It does not bear the passing of time. There is nothing more forlorn than the exciting novelties, the dazzling inventions of yesteryear gathering dust and fading away in the halls of aging MCA museums. The very idea of conserving in musems object that had been famous only for their originality is contradictory. Musems are for lasting esthetic values; the right fate of only original objects would be their disposal after the novelty effect has faded away. Creativity is a virtue only if it is at the service of other values.

Creativity is no longer, as it has perhaps been in other societies, exclusive of the sphere of the arts. In modern societies, the quest for creativity is very strong also in science, in business and in other social realms, where it can be much more useful then in arts. Creative personalities can find more satisfaction there than in the arts. Equating art and creativity, as W arhol famously stated, can mean equating it with business. Also criminals are often very creative.

8*) MCA is a an integral component of the global economic system* . It is organized around a relatively small number of managers of world auction houses (Sothesby, Christie's) of curators of large national MCA museums, galleries, and exhibitions, of organizers of international MCA fairs, etc., of owners of big private galleries and other types of merchants and go -betweens, of directors of art magazines and publishing houses, and of pace -setting world -class private collectors. The more adequate way to understand MCA is to analyse it as an economic system. In this system, aesthic values translate into monetary ones according to highly complex and shady interaction s among the critical components. The MCA world, as a business and as a market, has many peculiar features, but many others are quite similar to any other sector of the economy. Artworks are assets and investments; their prices go up and down according to many economic and political variables. They are very sensitive to fiscal policies, and to general conjunctures. The spatial features of the MCA system reflect closely that of global capitalism: it is centered in New York, with important secondary centers in a small number of capitals, both in the US and in its closer allies, like UK and Germany. Political -economic and artistic rank are strictly correlated. The MCA system is just a component of global capitalism, or, to put in in a more extreme way, of the cultural sector of the American empire.

This is nothing new, and in principle there is nothing wrong in being an economic system, nor with being part of an empire (provided that it is better the the others) ; but there is a problem of coherence with MCA's self -description as the realm of autonomous un -interested esthetic values, and as an emancipatory moral and political force.

One very concrete problem is , however, that economic interests tend to condition , and possibly shape, aesthetic judgements. It is very difficult to stand in front of an artwork worth million s euro and not to think that it has some aesthetic value. It is not easy to go around lavish fairs, exhibitions and galleries, see the huge investments, read the glossy catalogs, observe the numerous people living off all this, compete for a scholarship or a research grant in MCA, and not to conclude that th ere must be som e worth in all this.

The interference with economic values tend to limit the freedom, spontaneity and authenticity of esthetic values. A person or an institution that has invested fortunes in artworks would do all it can to keep up its aesthetic appreciation, because that impinges on its financial value. The whole MCA market/system rests on a huge bubble of aesthetic consensus and conventions. Like all complex systems, it has a number of self -maintaing devices (one being the benign neglect of debunking voices); but like all bubbles, it may deflate someday.

9*) MCA is terrorist* . The need to maintain, on one side its quasi religious status, on the other its self-description as a free force for progress and emancipation, on the third the value of the investments in artworks, and on the fourth the power and income of the involved personnel, endows the MCA system with a sensible irritability and strong strong reactive capacities. Outsider who dare criticise it are immediately deligitimized as being ignorant and reactionary. The philistinism of the bourgeoisie that rejected the Impressionists and van Gogh, and the ghost of Nazi destruction of MCA as "degenerate", are immediately evoked.

10*) MCA has a mythical and wildly contradictory image of the artist* . Theo retically, in the MCA the artists are the heroes. Heir to the romantic tradition, the artist is the creator, the genius, the prophet, the semi -god. The artist is endowed with something like a divine grace, thanks to which everything he produces – excrements included – has esthetic value. Every existing object (like an urinal), if selected, touched and signed by the artist is transubstantiated into an artwork. The esthetic (and monetary) worth of the artist fills homogeneously all his products. Artists are purportedly exempted from most rules pertaining common people, and are expected to be trangressive and provocative. In the romantic bohemi an tradition , they are also expected to be poor, alienated, enraged, victim to a number of physical and pshichic pathologies, and to die young; possibly by suicide. But there are also other role -models, like the successful flamboyant showman (Dali), the irrepressibly energetic Mr. Natural (Picasso) , the shaman (Beuys), the slick decorator (Buren) , the art -businessman and PR -man (W arhol) etc.

In fact , the run -of-the-mill artists are pretty normal people, and have a quite marginal place in the system. Since the demise of political engagement, in the seventies, they have lost much stamina. They realize that the MCA system works on mechanisms on which they have little control. They resent the growing power of all other actors of the system. They no longer believe in the romantic heroic model and tend to see themselves as modest artisans and experimenters; not creators, but producers and workers. They are conscious of their dependence on the system and that their professional ability is only a minor factor in the formula of success. They are demoralized. Most artists earn most of their living in other, related

professions; mainly teaching. By far the main channel of state support to arts are not musems, commissions, purchases or scholarships, but the school. Their marginality in the MCA system is demonstrated by their very weak presence in public discussions on the subject.

In this situation, the formal vocational educations of artists in in disarray. Nobody knows for sure what the student in Fine Arts Academies should learn. Old technical abilities (Drawingm anatomy, perpective, theories of colours, etc.) seem quaint. The current emphasis is on the study of esthetic theories, on the cultivation of sensitivity and creativity, on the knowledge of the present art world and on new technologies. But little is known on the effects of all this. It is estimated that only half percent of Fine Arts students manage to become professional artists. W hat all others do with their acquired abilities, if any, is not known . At the least, they concur to make up the MCA public.

11) *The central actors of the system are the experts* , the officials and the curators plus the largest the merchants and collectors . As in all modern economies, material production has become less important than communication and marketing. A whole array of new communicational professions have sprouted, and older professions have changed. For instance, the critic no longer makes comparative judgment on the aesthetic value s of different artists; it limits itself to interpret, comment and praise "his" artists. The virtual disapperanace of negative criticism is due to three factors. First, the corporative defense of the system: internal fights must not be known to external public. Second, the law of least effort: in the crowded competition for recognition, it is more convenient not to waste resources in criticism of the others; it is best to concentrate in promoting one own's darlings. Third, and most important, in MCA there are no generally recognized standards (criteria, values) of aesthetic judgement (other than newness) .

Most critics, like the artists, usually do not live exclusively off their activities as critics; they support themselves with other jobs (teachers, journalist, etc.). Art criticism has become an intellectual pursuit and a literary genre on its own. As we have seen with Tom W olfe, it has occupied an ever larger place in MCA, which would not exist without the support of a world of texts commenting and praising artworks and artists, and persuading people that they should like it, and explaining why . It can be sustained that the smaller the esthetic value of the artwork, the bigger must be the discoursive apparatus to justify it. The critic does not limit itself to comment existing works; he encourages producers to work along certain lines instead of others, organizes production and the event s (exhibitions, etc.) to communicate it. The critic has evolved into curator, and art exhibitions have become works of art in themselves, for which their curators deserve praise or criticism, and recognition of authorship.

All the central professions involved in theMCA art system are osmotic: the same expert can, in different circumstances or at the same time, act as critic, curator, official, merchant, agent, collector, teacher. This, of course, encourages the development of personal abilities and opens the way to all sorts of criss-crossing interests within the same person, and the building of closed, interlocking circles of people sharing the same set of roles. Art operators become a mutually supporting, unassailable power elite. This is one of the main reasons of the widespread resentment against this category, and of the Parisian great debate.

12. *MCA has lost or suicidally rejected its traditional social functions* The fundamental reason of the crisis of CMA is the weakening, loss or rejection of the traditional functions of plastic arts : to represent reality, to decorate objects and environements, to commemorate and

celebrate values, to materialize knowledge . The first has been taken over by photography and the ensuing technologies; so painting had to find new ways and reasons of existence. Baudelaire was in fact right, in stating that the invention of photography would entail the end of painting; he was only about a century too hasty. The second has become the realm of architecture and industrial design, fashions, artistic handicraft, and such . These two fun ctions have weakened, but not disappeared: artist still do som e figurative painting, photography has become an art medium, and many artists still produce pleasant work to decorate private and public environments. Only some avant -garde theorists have rejected these functions. The sphere in which the change from classical art is more spectacular pertains the third function: commemoration, celebration and promotion of social values. CMA has taken as its paramount task, instead, to debunk and subvert them. There is no doubt that most of the avant -gardes adopted a negative stance - from the right as well as from the left - toward the existing social world , and that "epater the bourgeois" has always been one of the main aims, from Munch (or perhaps Courbet, or Gericault) onwards. This justified the representation of the most hideous aspects of man an d society, the transgression of every rule of decency, the almost complete abandonment of beauty and pleasure as aesthetic values. At present, MCA aesthetics still maintain s that the function of art is to disturb, irritate, scandalize, displace, alarm, awaken to social evils and to the human predicament. Of co urse, all this could be justified by it s "redeeming social value": the destruction of the dominant, oppressive social order could be presented as a necessary phase, after which a better world could be built, and real beauty could emerge (The Modernist utopia). In fact, however, the constructive phase was embodied , and briefly (thanks God), only by Socialist Realism and Nazi Classicism; most of the rest of MCA remains stuck, up to our days, in the critical, negative stance.

The aesthetics of scandal and ugliness could be accepted so long as it was the manifestation of an honest belief in the emancipatory role of the arts; but, as we have seen at the beginning, this belief was not very widespread even in historical avant -gardes. After 1970, nobody could seriously believe in it.

At the end of the XIX century, CMA rejected the classic social functions of art, i.e. the celebration, commemoration and communication of social values. In the seventies, it lost faith in its critical political function. So it is left without a mission. Only the "tradition of the new", only the aimless invention of original forms, only the search for mundane success is left. This is why MCA of the last two or three decades can be declared void and null.

13) *Cognition is not the proper function of art* . Above we have mentioned the cognitive function of art. As we all know, the interest of XVIII centuries philosophers for aesthetics stemmed from the idea that art was, alongside reason, a way to investigate reality; obs cure, but deep intuition alongside clear but often superficial intellect. This idea had some peruasiveness in the case of discoursive arts, like poetry, literature, theatre and such; but it was much more difficult to apply to music and painting. W hat painting could certainly do is to communicate through images (illustrate) ideas already existing somewhere (minds, books); much more difficult is to conceive how painting can produce new knowledge (except, of course, the mere knowledge of visual form). In short, the cognitive function remains the job of intellect, reason, philosophy and science.

The last attempt of MCA to demonstrate its cognitive competence has been conceptual art. It was then stated by some artists that the art's mission was not to produce artifacts, but to

develop and communicate ideas (concepts). This was a new manifestation of the romantic view of the artist as prophet and savior; but also of the radical rejection of the "fetishism of the art object", of the commodification of art, so seriously taken by young radical would -be artists in the sixties and seventies, bent on the destruction of the very fundaments of bourgeois society. So this strange sort of art came about, in which artists expressed themselves not in manufacturing physical objects, and not even in using words; but in behaviours, "performances". However, the problem was that in this way the ideas could be communicated only to a small circle of watchers (usually friends and collegues). To give them wider circulation, it was necessary to come down to compromise: performances would be photographed, filmed or taped, and these recordings were sent around in galleries and museums and journals. The fashion did not last long; but it had the effect to destroy the distinction between "plastic" arts, performing arts, and preaching. Painters pretended to be taken seriously as silent scientists, moral philosophers and political analysts. This did not work, simply because society did not bestowed onto them that role. The established social categories of scientist, philosophers, politicians , priest s and so on were not disbanded by conceptual artists. Indeed, almost nobody took notice of the latter. So the net effect of conceptual art was the evacuation of the last function of plastic art, the production of artworks. Again, after that MCA remained ever more null and void.

14. *MCA suicidally rejected visual beauty and pleasure as its main values* . The needs for visual beauty and pleasure are engrained in man's nature, and the need to fix on stable supports images of reality (perceived or imagined) is an universal social need. Fulfilling these needs has been the main job of art since the beginning of culture. At the end of the XIX century avant -garde arts, for a number of reasons, rejected that job and began exploring other paths. So those functions were taken over by other social practices. Some were arts themselves, but less "pure and noble", like architecture and industrial design. Some were humble applied arts, decorative crafts. Some were quite new practices, as photography, cinema and television. Some started as mere commercial practices, like advertising, and took some time to be recognized as arts.

In modern society, beauty has radiated from the palaces of the rich and wealthy, the churches and the gardens and has flooded everywere. W e are overwhelmed by oceans of images flowing from all sorts of electronic or print channels. Most of those images try to be brilliant, exciting, beautiful. The objects that surround us, from house furniture to cars, from buildings to clothes, and even factories and machines, are designed in order to please our eye. Each of us is able do produce beautiful, colored, moving images of whatever he likes, thanks to cameras. Many of us have enough abilities as to use more traditional instruments of representation of reality or phantasies. Who needs CMA artist s?

People flow by the millions to commercial centers, tourist resorts , plazas and cinemas, while almost nobody goes to CMA exhibitions. It is not, as snubbish reactionaries like Adorno wanted to make us believe, that these people are manipulated by the capitalist culture industries. It is because p eople naturally yearn for beauty and pleasure, and since about a century MCA refuses to supply it.

Up to some time ago, the myth could be held that avant -garde art was a necessary source of inspiration for architects, designers, illustrators, advertisers, textile creators. This was true only to a certain extent, and is much less so now. Each af these professions has developed

its own patterns of creativity and looks for inspiration in a wide variety of worlds (nature, exotic cultures, science, etc.). The role of CMA there is quite marginal.

So, again, who needs modern art?

15) *MCA survives on socio -political inertia and marketing interests* . And yet, many states spend sizeable sums in order to support CMA. How come? One reason is simply social inertia, or the paretian law of persistence of the aggregates: all states have always supported living art; creativity is an important social quality, and art is traditionally held to be its highe st manifestation; why break with this tradition? Moreover, there are many people living off the institutions of MCA, they cannot simply be disbanded. And then, the prestige of a nation is also measured by its rank in the international art system, why not strive for a dignified position there? There are also good dollars to be earned, in the export of artworks.
Finally, having a lively CMA is a sign of modernity and progress. No city, of any size, would do without. In the leaflets handed out in hotels, there must always be, besides all other tourist attractions, also the municipal gallery of modern art. It is a simple matter of urban marketing. And as long there is a need to build galleries there will be need of artist to put some objects in it. MCA is needed to crown off the cultural tourist menu. As long as there are galleries, some people will drop in; no matter with what educational results. According to UNESCO statistics, every week a new gallery is opened somewhere in the world, and art tourism is one of the fastes t developing industries. Municipal prestige and economic interests converge in the material growth of MCA; in contradiction with all that has been said in the foregoing 11 paragraphs.

But material growth is not all. Also the late roman empire was a period of lavish expenditures in great public -cultural buildings. To give meaning to such things, there must be a real faith in their contents. Does our society really beliefe in the worth of what is enshrined in MCA galleries?

Another suggestion comes to mind from the classic age. Art effectively ceased to evolve there after abut the Third Century b.C. Fore more that six centuries, ancient civilization got along pretty good without important novelties in sculpture and painting; it contented itself in the imitations and replicas of the earlier masterworks, with only minor stylistic oscillations and technological changes. Is it conceivable that our civilization similarly gives up the striving for originality in plastic arts?

16. *The need for transcendental anchoring.* It was Andre Malraux, one of the most eminent promoters of art – CMA included – in modern France, to prophesy that "the XXI century will be metaphysical, or will not be at all". Modernity started out with the destruction of all metaphysical anchoring, and with the faith in the capacity of man to survive, develop and maybe rule the universe relying only on his own forces . MCA was an integral part of the project of modernity. After two centuries, such assumptions seem shaken . There are many signs that the world situation is getting out of human rational control. Can a civilization survive without some sort of faith in some sort of transcendence, i. e. something higher and more important than individual life ? This is a rather big question to put in a paper on a discussion on contemporary art, but not wholly without reason. It can be maintained that real art always refer s to something beyond the senses and bigger than individual life; real art has always ben sacred art not in the modernist sense, of a substitute of religion, but in the classical sense, of

commemoration, celebration, celebration, manifestation of transcendental values. Some observers see a return of such feelings in some contemporary art movements, and worry about possible regressions to reactionary religious obscurantism. Others would hail it as a possible way out of the present predicament , of MCA and of mankind. This will be a matter for further research.

8. Why in Paris?

All the reasoning in the preceeding chapter proceeds from the texts produced in the context of the Great Parisian Debate on MCA. W e are not aware that comparable discussions were raised in other *foyers* of contemporary culture. W hy in Paris, why in France? One general reason could be, of course, the peculiar concentration of brilliant intellectuals in that city, and their also rather famous irritability and zest for debates.

According to another interpretation, the debate on MCA is inscribed in a more general mood for self -criticism, soul -searching and depression that characterized France in the Nineties , and which in turn is attributed to problems of internal integration and the effects of globalization. The French realize that the cultural politics of the Republique, traditionally aimed at the French -isation of the immigrants and the defense of French culture against foreign intrusions, does not work as so well. The growth of the reactionary right (Le Pen) is a symptom ot this uneasiness. In this context, also the effectiveness of cultural policies regarding art comes under critical examination.

A third general cause is the crash in the international art market, occurring around 1990, when the mean prices dropped about 30% This could have started some thinking on the overall value of MCA (Barrer 15)

But three more specific causes, I think, must be added. One is the disgrace and resentment suffered with the post -war transfer of the center of modern art from Paris to New York (the "theft of the idea of modern art": Guilbaut 1983). Paris has been the center of W estern art and culture since the times of Louis XIV, and its rapid fall from primacy after 1945 was wont to kindle some reaction. Particularly painful must have been, in the eighties and nineties, to realize that in contemporary international art market France ranks not only wide down from the American superpower, but also - according to many statistical indicators - under Germany, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and even Italy). In such conditions, it seems only natural to question the sense of all this business. It would be understandable if France, having fallen deep down in the hierarchy of MCA producers and exporters, solaced herself with the thought that, after all, MCA is all null and void. Remember the story of the fox and the grapes?

A ccording to a second interpretation, what happened is simply the re -emergence of the true attitude of France toward MCA. In spite of the role of Paris as a *plaque tournante* of all artistic movements of the last century and a half; despite the presence there (and on the Cote d'Azur) of a numerous colony of MCA artists, often from other countries; despite the myth, fabricated by a handful of intellectuals and adopted by the State, of France being at the forefront of artistic progress; despite all this, in fact the French people have never liked MCA. The French national character is basically conservative, and so remains its taste in esthetic matters. Bourgeois homes tend to be decorated in classic styles, and popular tastes in art –like in other countries - do not progress beyond Impressionism. Those who attacked MCA in the last two

decades simply voice this conservative and even reactionary side of the French national Character. In this sense, they are aligned with Le Pen.

But why did the attack on MCA emerge so late? Here the explanation is a bit more complex and less convincing. Up until 1945, MCA in France was confined to a very small coterie of artists, sponsors, merchants and collectors; it did not get official recognition by the public and the State. The Communist party did something in this regard, but still with minor impact on the public and on officialdom. Instead, MCA exploded in the USA with abstract expressionism and such; in Europe, MCA was seen , appreciated and imported basically as American art. There were some resistances to it from the conservative (not only in matters of art) French Communist Party, and from the nationalist, conservative right; but from the fifties onward, most the entire liberal intellectual milieu endorsed it enthusiastically, not so much because it was American, but because it was radically new, modern, progressive. From the convergence, in the appreciation of MCA, of leftist intellectuals and enlightened, pro -american conservatives (personified by Georges Pompidou), in the late sixties the strategy was conceived to throw the French state's might in the promotion of MCA: and so its huge cathedral was built, the Beaubourg. This took the better part of the '70, during which the consensus held, in a state of suspension. Thus the critical voices agains MCA, that had began to be raised in th U.S in the sixties and seventies (W olfe, Rosenberg, Kramer) found little reception in France, tense in the expectation of the coming into operation of the giant powerhouse of MCA. Hence the delay in the emergence of the revolt against MCA.

The third peculiar factor is the implementation, in France, of a unique state apparatus for the promotion of MCA. This was launched in… and by the nineties its activities were such as to arouse the indignation of a number of people. The is no doubt that one of the main causes and targets of the Great Debate was this apparatus.

The National Museum of Modern Art, the centrepiece of the Centre Georges Pompid ou, started operations in 1978. Soon the Mitt ererand Government, with Jack Lang as Minister of Culture, realized that the MNAM should not soak up all the funds for the promotion of MCA , and that the rest of France could not be left to the artistic desert. Thus a network of provincial centers for the promotion of artistic creativity was launched. The Délégation Générale aux Arts Plastiques (DGAP) at the Ministry of Culture spawned the Direction regionales des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC), with their Conseille urs Artistiques Regionaux (CAR), which were put in charge of the administration of the Fonds regionaux d'art contemporain (FRAC), which would be added to the Fond National de L'Art Contemporain (FNAC) and to the Fond pour l'incitation a la creation artistique (FIACRE). Under Jack Lang, 1981 -1993, the appropriations for the ministry of culture grew from 4 to 14 billion francs. In the early Nineties, the state purchases of MCA artworks through that apparatus hovered on 65 millions: 12 -15 through the FNACm 25 -30 in commissions, 10 -12 through the FRAC, 10 in scholarships, grants and emergency interventions. The whole system of regional centres is controlled centrally, along the traditional pattern of prefectures. The only advantage of this decentralization, Guy Michaud bitingly commented, is some savings in the telephone bill. There seem to be nothing in W estern countries comparable to this stupendous system. The French state apparatus for MCA has been called the only surviving and anachronistic case of socialism and democratic centralism in the administration of culture. The power of the "inspectors to artistic creation", as its functionnaires are called, is enormous ; according to their critics, they exert it with a sort of " terrorisme gentil, competence flottante et sens de la communication". An official dogmatic ideology on CMA

coalesced. After about ten years of the opening of the Pompidou and the implementation of the regional centers, the effects of all this on the state of artistic creation in France was wont to come under scrutiny. It was observed that the MNAM remains the less popular of the facilities of the Beaobourg, that its impact in the improvement of the public appreciation of MCA are impalpable. Some financial malpractices were uncovered in the regional centers. Criticisms of state apparatus soon involved MCA in general.

8. Conclusions

At the present state of our research, we do not know what was the impact of the Great Parisian Debate on general public opinion, on the worlds of MCA, and on the corresponding public policies. We also do not know whether there were some effects in other national cultures, or whether autonomous critical thinking occurred or is occurring there. Language barriers still pose some friction to the international spread of ideas. As noticed earlier, our scanning of Anglo-American, German and Italian literature on the subject suggests that criticism of MCA is much weaker in these countries. Further research in this direction is needed and planned.

My research interest stems from the fact that, however hard I tried since my first visits to musems , in the early sixties, I never managed to fall in love with modern-contemporary art, the way I did with classical art (up to Impressionism) since my adolescence. Of course I could appreciate many single artworks and even some authors and styles, byt I stood unmoved by most “avant-garde” art after Van Gogh. I have always felt a bit guilty about this blindness, as I feared it was a personal deficiency. When I started doing professional research in the sociology of the arts, I was relieved to learn that my handicap is shared by almost everybody else, and that only a very small cultural elite likes (or pretends to like) MCA. So now the problem was: what are the social mechanisms that explain the high place of MCA in the official culture? And again, I was relieved to find that the theme has been hotly debated in French literature in the last twenty years.

As stated in the introduction, my interest in the Great Parisian Debate is not in the formalities of its occurrence, but in the substantive arguments that have surfaced in its course . In this paper I have selected, rephrased and reworked them according to my research interests, but I am confident I do not have misrepresented them too much. Only the space constraints of a paper and the time constraints of its preparation have prevented me to fully document, with the all the appropriate quotations and references, how close I tried to stay to the ideas of the authors on which I have based this paper. Of course, I may not have always succeed, and I apologize in advance for any misinterpretation. I may have been swayed, here and there, by the strength of my feelings on the subject.

This is the second installment of a work in progress (the first was presented last year in Murcia). I am confident that next time I shall be able to present the completed work

NOTES

1) Defining books as empirical material may sound odd, but not in the framework of the sociology of knowledge and of content analysis. In our case, there is an element of

random sampling of the materials, which were selected mostly from museum bookshops and main bookstores in the Rive Gauche (sections “art theory”) in April 2003.

2) S. Gablik, has Modernism failed? Thames and Hudson , New York -London, 1984 (2nd ed. 2994); J. Spalding, *The eclipse of Art. Tackling the crisi s of art today* , Prestel, München -Berlin -London -New York, 2003; Donald Kuspit, *The end of Art,* Cambridge University Press, 2004
3) B. W hyss, *Der Welt als T -shirt: zur Ästhetik der Medien* , Du Mont, Köln 1997 ; B. Kleimann, R. Schmücker (Hgb.), *Wozu Kunst? Die Frage nach ihre Funktion* , W issenschaftliche Buchgesellscaft, Stuttgart 2001
4) A. Vettese, *Artisti si diventa* , C arocci, Roma 1998; F. Poli *, Il sistema dell’arte contemporanea* , Laterza Bari 2002
5) The latin term *modus* has many meanings. According to some interpretations , *modernus* , first recorded in Cassiodorus, VI century a.C, is close to “moderate”, “ staying in the middle”; according to others, it draws from another usage of *modus* , , meaning “ now, at the present time”.
6) H. Meschonnic, *Modernitè Modernitè* , Verdier 1988
7) The use of the term fascist to cover also nazism (national socialism) was imposed on the culture of the left by an explicit rule of the Comintern, in order not to compromise the concept of socialism. It is peculiarly injust with reference to art, since Italian fascism was not hostile to avant -garde art (futurism) .
8) The most famous case is certainly Picasso. But some clear, if less famo us, cases can be found also in Italy; e. g. the “Corrente” group, initially made up of young fascists, who were all converted to communism by a couple of party agents. See S. Carnelos, *Corrente. Mecenatismo, giovanilismo e fronda nell’Italia fascista,* in R. Strassoldo (ed.) *Muse demotiche. Ricerche di sociologia dell’arte I,* Forum, Udine, 2001
9) (on terrorism)
10) E.g see J. Gimpel, *Contre l’art et les artistes* , Paris 1967
11) W hile Gombrich is mildly sceptical on the worth of XX century avant -garde art, Hauser even questions the value of most romantic XIX century art, because he, like Proudhon and Balzac, sees in it an excess of aestheticism and a deficit of social and political engagement. As for the art of XX century, he simply refuses to deal with it and shifts his attention to cinema, as the only relevant visual art of the XX century.
12) In 2002 it has been rewritten for a more popular public, under the title *Le sens du Beau. Aux origins de la culture contemporaine* , ed. Le Livre de Poche, Paris .
13) A chronicle of the debate has been compiled by « Esprit » in 1999. See als P. Barrer (cur.), *(Tout) l’art contemporain est -il nul?* ; Favre, Geneve 200 0, and G. Michaud, *La crise de l’art contemporain,* Puf, Paris 1997.
14) Catherine Millet became suddenly world famous in 2001 with a book in which she described in detail her incredibly intense and promiscuous sexual life, with a preference for multiple intercourse and orgies. In the first year the book sold more that a million copies and was translated in 29 languages. The episode certainly gives much food for thought in several directions; one being the lifestyles and values current in the Paris MCA milieu, and another the possible links between this outing and the intellectual debate of the previous years.

15) G. Michaud, op.cit p. 14

16) The idea that contemporary art is in crisis must still be rather popular in Paris, because titles referring to it continue to be given also to books with quite different, even opposite content; like that of P. Nahon, *L'art content pour rien. Le monde de l'art en question* , Ramsay, Paris 2002, which in reality is just a publicity vehicle for an art gallery in the Cote d'Azur.

17. O. Mongin, D *epasser le débat sur l'art contemporain?* « Esprit », … ……1999

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