

Liquid Arts

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IT IS only right and proper to address the story of liquid modernity through the extraordinary work and creative life of Gustav Metzger – a great artist and philosopher of art in his own right. Imagine any society as a huge room, with a lot of furniture, wallpapers, pictures on the walls, implements, all sorts – dark corners, nooks and crannies, and also very many doors which lead into this room. Imagine also that there is an electrical switch next to every door, but each one switches on lights of different colour. As every practising photographer knows only too well, if you use colour filters, particularly in black-and-white photography, the results will differ depending on which colour filter you have used. Some elements of the picture which were in shadow suddenly jump into focus; and some others, which were brightly lit, disappear from view. Each time you enter the same room you have a slightly different picture depending through which door you enter. So I shall use the door of art, and through that will try to have a look at liquid modern society, bearing in mind Metzger's comment from many years ago, that art arises from the feeling and the knowledge that the line between a generative and destructive reality is paper-thin. Metzger also said that the disposal of the components is considered from the earliest design stage. He said this with reference to his project with the huge plaster canvases:¹ losing their contents slowly, one by one. Their disposal is already contained in the original design.

In order to update my knowledge about the state of art today, I visited Paris: where else? Where the last word, the state-of-the-art of art, is on display, including a number of interesting things which bear directly on our topic. First, Jacques Villeglé: I never heard about him before, but in Paris he was everywhere. In every significant, snobbish, posh, prestigious art gallery along Rue de la Seine, Rue Jacob. He was also in Centre Pompidou, and he was on display at the big art fair at the Louvre Carousel: in total at least ten huge canvases. What are all these canvases about? He just goes around Paris with a camera and takes pictures of billboards or the empty

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walls which have already been filled in a city which is bursting with information and uses every vacant place to locate it. The walls that gape from Villeglé's canvasses pasted over the *gallery* walls are the *city* walls, those living and constantly updated records of the eminently modern art – the art of modern living. They are the very places where the blatant or surreptitious, but always inexorable labour of living can be found, revealed, recorded and then transferred inside to museum walls to be reincarnated as works of art. Villeglé's objects are boards customized to carry public notices and announcements, posters and advertisements; or just the stretches of walls that separate and hide private residences and commercial rows – those plots of brickwork whose pristine blandness had been a challenge and a temptation for the printers, distributors and hangers of bills, a temptation impossible to resist in a postmodern city filled to the brim with sights and sounds vying for attention. (Are not the posters the weeds of the information society that invade each and any root-free scrap of soil? Are they not the weeds in the gardens of communication? Are not the blank walls the updated version of that 'void' which all nature, in this case the nature of information society – abhors?)

What do we see on all these pictures? They have titles such as *Boulevard Marne*, *Rue de Zirco*, *Haussman Mallèsherbès*, *Rue Littré* and so on. They are called after the various places in Paris where the photographs were taken, but they are all remarkably similar. They are just posters fighting for space, and they can gain space only by destroying other posters. So what you see there are just scraps hanging in the air, half-finished sentences, sentences without beginning, lips open to a silent shout; faces with one eye or one ear, creation and destruction going hand in hand. This *nature morte*, this still life of the billboards, is in fact full of life. What you see is the struggle for attention which can only be achieved by death, by destruction of someone else fighting for exactly the same thing. All these huge canvases by Jacques Villeglé actually are records of a history which proceeds by shredding its traces. History is a factory of waste. It is neither creation nor destruction; neither learning nor genuine forgetting; just living evidence of the futility of such distinctions. Nothing is born here to live long and nothing dies.

Another great artist who is shown widely in Paris today is Manolo Valdes. Valdes obsessively paints one thing: a face, always the same face.



Figure 2

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I use the word 'paints', but I am conscious that it is difficult to use this word. He produces a composition; a collage, an aggregate of fragments, all put together. But what is remarkable about Manolo Valdes is that his canvases are made of sheets of Hessian – a canvas made of jute or hemp. Valdes' collages have been laboriously patched together, layer by layer, from bits and pieces of hessian – some dyed, some unashamedly of the erstwhile blandness of jute or hemp; some primed to be painted over, some already shedding crumbs of the dried-up paint with which they had been overlaid before. Or have they rather been torn apart from a canvas already complete, seamless, whole and wholesome? Patches are poorly glued – loose ends hang in the air – but again it is anything but clear whether they are about to be pressed to the other cuttings beneath, or are in the course of getting unstuck and coming off. Are these collages caught in-the-process-of-creation, or are they rather in a state of advanced decomposition? Are these bits and pieces of hessian still-not-fixed, or already-un-fixed? Fresh and immature, or used-up and putrescent? They are, again, like in Villeglé's photographs, hanging in the air. So is it *aller* or *retour*? Is it on the way up or on the way down? The question which these pictures are shouting, and to which they also provide the answer, is – you cannot tell. There is no difference between creation and destruction. They are two processes which depend on the time when you take the snapshot; looked this way or the other, but in fact they amount very much to the same.

The third artist is Herman Braun-Vega. Braun-Vega paints *impossible encounters*; that is not his phrase, but I impute it to him. He is a realistic, even naturalistic painter of sorts. He presents one picture in which the Velasquez nude is in the company of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*; and they are both watched by a Paris policeman in full 21st-century uniform. There is Pope Pius IX reading a newspaper with a recent pronouncement of Jean-Paul II. No wonder he looks sad when reading that. Then you have Brueghel's jolly peasants cavorting in a state-of-the-art *nouvelle cuisine* restaurant. These *impossible encounters* are composed of fragments; well-known fragments but taken at random, almost, from all sorts of historical eras and put together in quite a comfortable cohabitation. It is very much like the entry to the new shopping malls in Leeds; where you rub shoulders with a mass of people of all sorts of shades and forms. Now what Braun-Vega actually shows us is that these impossible encounters are actually natural encounters. That life and death, in other words, have lost their meaning-bestowing distinctions. Death was defined as something irrevocable, something which cannot be changed; you cannot be restored to the previous state. Now that is no longer true. The dead are undead. There are pop stars and athletes who jump from nowhere into the centre of public attention for a short time and then disappear from view completely; but they are not dead, they are somewhere in cold storage. They could be picked up at any time and brought back in a completely different context.

I consider these three artists to be representative of the liquid modern era. They are and do representative art of the liquid modern era; in which

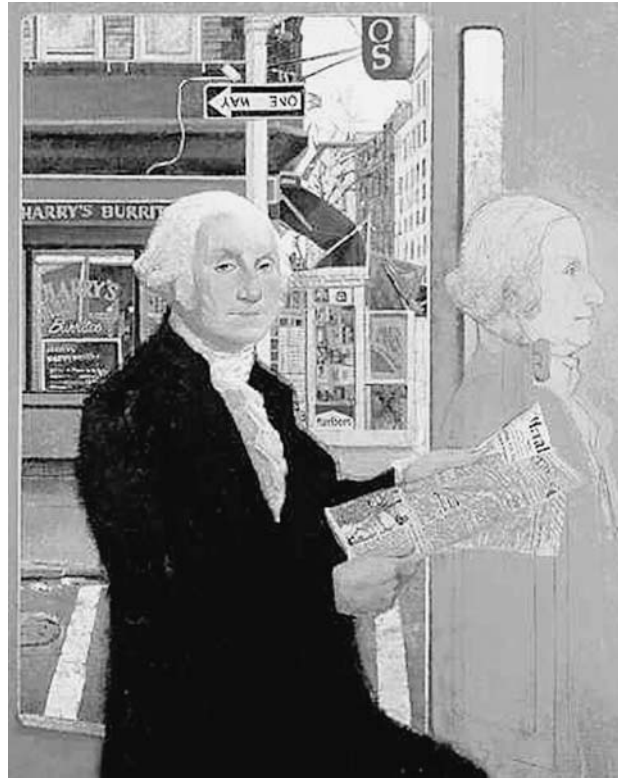


Figure 3

time flows, but no longer marches on. There is constant change, but no finishing point; a sequence of incessant new beginnings, in which, as Gustav Metzger told us many years ago, the final disposal of the object is already built in, as part of the original design of the work.

Liquid modernity may be characterized as a state in which the important oppositions which constituted the framework of early, solid modernity have been cancelled: oppositions between creative and destructive arts, between learning and forgetting, between forward and backward steps. The pointer has been removed from the arrow of time; so you have an arrow, but without a pointer.

The three artists I have mentioned are not alone. They represent a very widespread tendency in contemporary art; different from the art of the old era, of which Hannah Arendt spoke, for example. For Arendt, you could recognize a great work of art by its ability to arouse the same sort of emotions and artistic experiences as it did several centuries ago. Instead of that, these artists of the liquid modern era concentrate on short-lived events; events which it is known in advance will be short-lived, so that the event of art, rather than the work of art, will come to the end very soon. So these installations are

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happenings, which are construed and put together only for the duration of the exhibition, after which they will be dismantled and disappear. Or they create artworks which are guaranteed to be exposed to the vagaries of inclement climate and so slowly disintegrate. The artists select materials for their artwork that are deliberately frail and friable, unlike the old artists who actually looked for the secrets of paints and materials that would last forever.

As de Kooning suggested, 'content is a glimpse' (1992: 90); and quite recently Yves Michaud, whom I consider to be the greatest contemporary theorist of art, summed it all up, saying that 'we live today in a space in which the aesthetic celebrates its ultimate triumph by being emptied of works of art' (2003). So you have aesthetics permeating every nook and cranny of our world, while the work of art has disappeared from this world. I had the first inkling of it when travelling, through Nørland, the northernmost part of Norway. There were sculptures put in the wilderness, in most unexpected places, by the greatest sculptors of the contemporary world. They were well paid to do so, and one installation particularly relevant to our subject was made by Gediminas Urbonas, the Lithuanian sculptor, who put four containers in a very monotonous, very dreary, northern landscape, on the slope of a hill overlooking the road. The containers were of considerable height, so virtually every passing driver stopped, and people climbed the hill to see what was in the containers. In three containers there were objects. In one a regular *objet d'art*, in another a ready-made object and in another a bizarre found object; and the fourth container was empty. Now the interesting point was that the lingering crowds were largely gathered around the fourth container, which was empty. They were liberating the meaning of emptiness, they were liberating the ultimate destination of artwork.²

I think that one can say, in a very drastic simplification, that in the liquid modern world, the solidity of things and human bonds is resented as a threat. This is the big difference between the solid stage of modernity and the liquid stage of modernity. Not many years ago, the major concern of still solid or nostalgically solid modernity was: the centre doesn't hold. I would suggest that liquid modernity has changed so that it resents the centre as such. In the cacophony of sounds and the hubbub of sights – a kaleidoscope of constant change – there is no centre around which things could condense, solidify and settle.

If you look through the glossy magazines or the equally glossy attachments to even the most serious newspapers, you will see that every issue offers a variety of advice regarding what you must do, what you must have, what you must wear and so on. But often, immediately on the next page, there is advice of a different kind: what is out, what must be discarded. Liquid modernity is a condition in which the distance, and the time span, between novelty and waste, between the origin and the dumping ground, have been drastically shortened. The result is a convergence into a single act of destructive creation or creative destruction. It reminds me of one of the invisible cities of the great Italian writer, Italo Calvino (1974), the one

he called *Leonia*. The opulence of the residents of Leonia is measured not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, bought and sold, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. The joy of getting rid of, discarding and dumping, is Leonia's true passion.

This applies to the things that we use, buy and cherish, only to dump them without compunction or regret when more glittering prizes come around. Once they have been displaced it becomes shameful to be seen with such items. This disposability also applies to humans. If this seems hard to grasp then watch, as most of the dwellers of Earth do, the most popular television shows today, the so-called 'reality' shows: *Big Brother*, *The Weakest Link*, *Survivor*, *Pop Idol*. People are glued to the screen because they recognize their own experience, the secret of their own condition, their secret fears and nightmares. All these shows are public rehearsals of disposal; the disposability of humans and things. They are actually put in the same position, part of the same process.

Los Angeles exemplifies this knack for taking today's fame and turning it into tomorrow's forgotten fad. A large architectural company in Los Angeles, Marmol Radziner and Associates, did something extremely unusual for Los Angeles. They took a house built in 1946 – and since then, of course, changed and rebuilt and rehashed and overhauled again and again. The house, recently owned by Barry Manilow, was restored to its original 1946 condition. Unexpectedly it became a tremendous success, and Marmol Radziner became an extremely profitable architectural company, with people queuing to get their services. Recently, Marmol Radziner were interviewed, and they said that they were subscribing to a romantic notion; the dream of creating something timeless. And they explained: what we dream of is to build beautiful buildings that will still be standing in twenty years' time. That is the meaning of timelessness (see Ogundenhim, 2003).

Our society is often termed a consumer society, but we tend to understand consumerism in the wrong way. Our imagination is still in the grips of a tradition which we vaguely remember from our youth or from old stories. Consumerism is assumed to mean greed for acquisition; the wish to accumulate things, to have more and more. Is this still true? It now seems that it is the rapidity, the promptness of disposing of things, which is the secret of contemporary consumerism: not accumulation, not acquisition, but change. Disposing of things which were there before, replacing them with other, newer things. You would have to search quite hard to find any advertisement for a product which recommends it for its durability. The only products advertised for their durability, for their virtual indestructibility, are recording tapes and recording disks; but their indestructibility is not an argument against them. On the contrary, it is in their favour; what it promises is that you can go on and on erasing your past recordings and putting new recordings in their place.

Liquid modern life is a daily rehearsal of universal transience. Today's useful and indispensable objects, with few and possibly no exceptions, are tomorrow's waste. Everything is disposable, nothing is truly necessary,

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nothing is irreplaceable. Everything is born engraved with the brand of death. Everything is offered with a use-by date attached. All things, born or made, human or not, are until further notice dispensable. Paraphrasing an old and famous statement, I would say that a spectre hovers over the liquid modern world, over its denizens and all their labours and creations; and that is the spectre of redundancy.

So, running after things, catching them in full flight when still fresh and fragrant, is in. Settling for what is there already is out. Harvard Business School professor John Kotter advises his readers to avoid being entangled in long-term employment of the so-called 'tenure track' (1995: 159). Developing institutional loyalty and becoming too tightly engrossed in any given job for a long time to come is ill-advised when, as he says, business concepts, product designs, competitor intelligence, capital equipment and all kinds of knowledge have shorter life-spans. As Alberto Melucci used to say – 'We are plagued by the fragility of the presentness which calls for a firm foundation where none exists' (1996: 43ff).³ When contemplating change we are always torn between desire and fear, between anticipation and uncertainty.

Having briefly and superficially looked at art in the face of liquid modernity, we can return to art to understand it better. Philosophers of art have always struggled with the problem of beauty. The idea of beauty was at the centre of aesthetics. Philosophers of art, however much they differed and quarrelled about virtually every other aspect, agreed that beauty is something altogether distinct from ephemeral fads. Beauty is something very nearly immortal; certainly very long-lived. You recognize beauty by its enduring life-span; and also by its claim to universal validity. So beauty is both timeless and universal. Philosophers try to answer the question: 'What is beauty about?' The ideas and descriptions which crop up most often are those of harmony, proportion, symmetry, order and suchlike. They all share something in common, and they suggest very much the same thing now as in the time of the Renaissance, as Leone Battista Alberti suggested when he defined the idea of perfection. According to Alberti, perfection is a state in which any and every further change would be change for the worse. So perfection is the product of change which itself eliminates the need and desirability for any further change. So the end product, the ideal destination of all change, of all creation, is the end of creation, is the end of change. This is the state of perfection in which nothing could be further improved, and every attempt to tinker with what exists will result in adverse effects. When you look at the classical modern, modernist, art you will see the very clear traces of this sort of tendency and understanding of the purpose of artistic creation. Look at the canvases of Mondrian, Matisse, Arp or Rothko. They tried to achieve the final, the ultimate composition, in which nothing can be improved. Take the *Dancers* of Matisse, for example, cut out each figure separately and try to arrange them in a different order. You will see that every other arrangement is inferior to the one that Matisse presented. The same applies to Mondrian. Take his rectangular figures of different colours, cut and separate them, and

try to rearrange them. You will see that all other arrangements are again inferior, less aesthetically satisfying. Once you reach perfection the world comes to a standstill. There is nothing else to do, and nothing will change. But we are all liquid modern; and so perfection, in which everything will be evermore the same, is not an ideal, it is a nightmare.

So the idea of beauty which guided the art of the solid modern era is in a deep crisis, because there is this apprehension of stagnation: the end of change; the end of novelty; the end of experience; the end of adventure. This gives weight to and also explains my earlier statement, namely that you have a situation where you have aesthetics saturating the world in which we live, but no object of art, no works of art. There are still some around, but their place is in the museum; and I suggest that what graveyards are to living humans, museums are to the life of art. They are selected places, which are visited by selected people on selected occasions. They are also removed from the hurly-burly of daily life. In museums, just as in cemeteries, one doesn't talk loudly, one doesn't eat, one doesn't drink, one doesn't run or touch the objects of the visit. One rehearses by mimicry the stillness of the exhibit. The context of daily life is different: unlike the cemeteries, it is the stage of shouting and running. Unlike the museum, it is the site of aesthetics, not objects of art. Frailty and transience are the names of the game played there. Michaud writes of the 'new regime of attention which privileges scanning over reading and deciphering over meanings' (2003: 120–1). The image is fluid and mobile, less a spectacle or a datum than an element of a chain of action; a reallocation of images.

To conclude, this reallocation of images from the centre of attention to irrelevance and virtually invisibility – the portable refuse bin of attention – is random. I will give you just one final example, an installation called *The Promised Land* in an art gallery in Copenhagen. It consisted of a series of television screens put in a very nice arrangement; rising, enlarging, getting smaller and so on. And what was shown on every television screen was just the inscription, 'The Promised Land'. I found this installation very thoughtful and thought-provoking, and I stopped to think about the meaning of it, what message it conveyed. My interest was enhanced by the fact that, at the end of this row of television screens, there was a broom and a bucket standing in a corner at the end of the whole series. But before I had time to think through the meaning of this part of the installation, a lady cleaner came to collect her tools, the broom and the bucket, which she had put in the corner for the duration of the coffee break.

Notes

1. This refers to Auto-Destructive Art, a term invented by Gustav Metzger in the 1960s. The summer 1962 issue of *Ark* carried his article 'Machine, Auto-creative and Auto-destructive Art'. It is exemplified in his work starting in the late 1950s, where he would spray acid onto sheets of nylon as a protest against nuclear weapons. This caused the nylon to change shapes, until it was all consumed. The work was simultaneously auto-creative and auto-destructive.

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2. Robert Rauschenberg, the famous American artist, once erased a few of his colleague de Kooning's sketches and put them on sale alongside the original sketches; the erased and complete.

3. This is an extended version of the Italian original published in 1991 under the title *Il gioco dell'io*.

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