PREFACE

ART BEYOND ITSELF

What's happening with art, whose death has been so frequently pronounced? What in the past few decades has turned it into an alternative for disappointed investors, a laboratory for thought experiments in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, and a resource for fashion, design, and other tactics for drawing distinctions? It's even being asked to take the place once filled by politics by providing collective spaces to deal with intercultural relations.

Since early in the twentieth century, sociology has showed that artistic movements can be understood only in connection with social processes. We can see this "external" entanglement of art more easily today because so many artworks are increasing in economic and media worth. To explain this phenomenon, it's no longer sufficient to make the sort of hypotheses that were once generated about religion, such as suggesting that art offers us imaginary scenes to compensate for our real frustrations, whether by escapism leading to resignation or by creating utopias that revive our hopes, turning art into "a kind of alternative religion for atheists," in the words of Sarah Thornton (2008: xiv).

Nor is it enough to argue, as critical sociology does, that aesthetic choices form a place of symbolic distinction. The ability to comprehend highbrow art and the surprises of the avant-garde, taken to be a gift, as Pierre Bourdieu said, eu-

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phemizes inequality and dignifies privilege. How can the role of art be reworked when there are so many other resources of taste, from clothing and design artifacts to vacation spots, for attaining aesthetic distinction, and when minority innovation is popularized by the media? Mass attendance at museums of contemporary art has thrown the distinction effect for cultural elites into doubt: in 2005–6, MoMA in New York had 2.67 million visitors, the Pompidou in Paris had 2.5 million, and the Tate Modern, London's most popular attraction, had 4 million. Worldwide Internet distribution now allows people in many countries to become familiar in real time with works of art, art criticism, and polemics about art, and so has reduced the secrecy and exclusivity of these sanctuaries.

Examples abound of the persisting social uses of art—as compensation for frustrations, as a symbolic way to draw social distinctions—but we have to look at the new roles of art that extend its activity beyond what has been organized as the art field. Other explanations, linked to the successes and failures of globalization, are possible: the arts dramatize the death throes of liberating utopias, and they renew our shared sensory experiences in a world that is as interconnected as it is divided, as well as our desire to live these experiences in nondisaster pacts with fiction.

Economics, which claimed to be the hardest social science, has now revealed that the evidence it is based on (statistics, the relations between costs and gains, between debts and productivity) are mirages. Neoliberalism, proclaimed the only form of thought capable of putting exchanges in order and keeping inflation from running out of control, has now subordinated the hard economy—the one that produces tangible goods—to money-based manias. Instead of organizing society through scientific laws, economists use metaphors to name its disorders: they put the blame on the "bubble" that inflated speculation in the benefits of digital technology, then on the real-estate bubble, then on the bubble in unbacked securities. Scientists who work with concepts and numbers have to turn to slippery images, as if they have nothing firm to hold on to in an era of labor without contracts and profits that soar and crash in a matter of hours.

Politics has also become an unconvincing display. For some time it has been unrecognizable as the place where people struggle over ways

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to truly control institutions, administer wealth, or guarantee welfare. We head out to vote every few years, trying our best to discern some politician who isn't corrupt, some promise that is credible. Skepticism prevails even in nations that have regained the right to elect their rulers after a dictatorship has fallen: there are high abstention rates in countries where the vote isn't mandatory, and where it is, we find voter nullification and cynical parodies of the game of politics on television and the Internet. A theater of suspicious simulations.

Art, in contrast, plays with images and their movements by constructing explicitly imaginary situations, with effects that we can enjoy or else cut short if they disturb us—we just leave the exhibit. Most of its interventions in society are confined to museums, galleries, or biennales. People invest in the art market for generally enduring tastes, for obtaining symbolic distinction, or for more stable returns on investment than can be found in the manufacturing or finance economy.

Trends in art do tend to be fleeting, but a broad segment of society has grown used to the idea that these fluctuations are part of the game. We can find pleasure in innovation or can adhere to particular trends and feel that a preference for Picasso, Bacon, or Bill Viola works for us. Jumping on the latest wave, or the one before it, or on earlier waves, which sometimes come back into fashion, presents fewer risks for social exclusion or personal collapse than investing in your own country's currency, U.S. dollars, or shares in some transnational corporation.

Does the success of art reside in its being "harmless" or ineffective? Let's explore it through a different hypothesis: art is the place of imminence—the place where we catch sight of things that are just at the point of occurring. Art gains its attraction in part from the fact that it proclaims something that could happen, promising meaning or modifying meaning through insinuations. It makes no unbreakable commitment to hard facts. It leaves what it says hanging. Dora García's exhibit in Santiago de Compostela in late 2009, titled *Where Do Characters Go When the Novel Ends?*, offers this reader's guide to her works: "A good question should at all costs avoid getting an answer."

I don't want to backslide into the discourse about the immateriality of artistic representation (the rain depicted in a painting doesn't get anything wet, an explosion on the screen doesn't hurt us). Or into the

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argument that the art field is insular, so that relations among the actors in that field follow a different logic than those in the rest of society. By saying that art is situated in imminence, I am postulating a possible relationship with "the real" that is as oblique or indirect as that in music or abstract paintings. Works of art do not merely "suspend" reality; they situate themselves in a prior moment, when the real is possible, when it has not yet broken down. They treat facts as events that are about to come into being.

This hypothesis must be tested not only against what's happening in museums; we can look for it too in the art spreading beyond its own field and becoming blurred as it mixes with urban development and the design and tourism industries. We can see how the predominance of form over function, which once defined the art scene, now characterizes the way things are done in politics and economics. The programs that differentiate between reality and fiction, truth and simulacrum, fall apart. Long after the era when culture was reduced to ideology and ideology to manipulation by the dominant, simulations appear daily in every section of the newspaper.

Dozens of Greenpeace activists climb to the top of buildings owned by Expal, a Spanish corporation that sells cluster bombs. On the fifth floor, they ask whether the workers have weapons in their offices, hand out a video of Cambodian children mutilated by bombs, cover the ground with silhouettes of bomb victims, and distribute amputated legs.

Guerrilla performances by people dressed up as police officers or soldiers used to take place only in a handful of countries that were rocked by "subversion." Now newspapers and television reporters in every city where there are active drug trafficking and kidnapping rings document gun battles between groups dressed in identical uniforms, whether because one side is wearing disguises or because they all belong to an organization that has been infiltrated. In Mexico authorities have known for years about "leaks" from oil and gasoline pipelines, but investigations into drug networks revealed in 2009 that some 30 percent of the 557 illegal taps into the pipeline system were made by the Zetas, the armed branch of the Gulf cartel, with the help of Pemex employees who supplied them with official vehicles and uniforms to carry out the operations.

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FIGURE PREFACE.1 Still from Dora García, *¿Dónde van los personajes cuando termina la novela?* (Where Do Characters Go When the Novel Ends?), two 14-minute videos, color, stereo, in Spanish with English subtitles. Produced by CGAC (Galician Contemporary Arts Center, Santiago de Compostela, Spain) y FRAC Bourgogne (Regional Contemporary Art Funds, Dijon, France), 2009.

What's the right section for these news reports: politics, police blotter, economics, or entertainment? If these zones are hard to differentiate, can artists still stake out a space of their own? The spread of simulacra creates a landscape in which some of the pretensions of art—surprise, the ironic transgression of order—become diluted. The various indefinitions separating fiction from reality grow confused due to the decline of totalizing visions that could assign stable positions to identities.

It isn't only art that loses its autonomy when it is imitated by disguised social movements. The murky mingling of the illusory and the real also harms the art market, as we will see in ethnographic descriptions of art auctions, where billionaires hide their unexplained profits by speculating on artworks. The secrecy surrounding buyers and collectors, the boom in art prices and their cyclical declines (as in 1990 and 2008)

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make one suspect that there are more complex intersections between art and society, between creativity, industriousness, and finances, than the ones that fueled the clash between economic value and symbolic value in classical aesthetics. There are more processes inside and outside the field, and in their interactions, contributing to the "de-definition of art" than there were when Harold Rosenberg (1972) coined that phrase.

The interweaving of art practices with everything else throws doubt on the theoretical tools and methods that have been used to understand art in modern sociology and postmodern aesthetics. Are the concepts of the "art world" (Becker 1982) and the art "field" (Bourdieu 1996) at all useful when there are plenty of signs of interdependence between museums, auctions, and artists, and the major actors in economics, politics, and the media? Do Bourriaud's (2002) analyses on relational aesthetics help, or are Rancière's (2010) critical suggestions about distinguishing between the aesthetics of consensus and those of dissent more productive? What roles do artists such as Antoni Muntadas, León Ferrari, and Carlos Amorales play when they reconsider these same ties of interdependence in their works and stagings?

From Transgression to Postautonomy

Artists, who have fought hard for their autonomy since the nineteenth century, hardly ever got along well with borders. But the meaning of borders has changed. From the days of Marcel Duchamp to the close of the twentieth century, one constant in artists' practice was transgression. The ways they did it tended to reinforce difference. The contemporary history of art is a paradoxical combination of behaviors devoted to securing independence for one's own field and behaviors committed to doing away with the limits that separate that field.

In utopian moments, the border that separated creators from the everyday world was breached, and the notion of being an artist was extended to everyone, the notion of art to every ordinary object—whether by engaging the audience in the artwork, by insisting on everyday ways of creating things, or by playing up the appeal of trivial objects (from Pop art to political art). In deconstructive moments, content was drained (monochrome painting from Kazimir Malevich to Yves Klein) or the container was dissolved (paintings escaping from their frames: Jackson

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Pollock, Frank Stella, Luis Felipe Noé). To break down the borders of taste, Piero Manzoni exhibited ninety cans of *Artist's Shit*, selling them by the gram based on the daily price of gold. Other artists urinated or self-mutilated before an audience (the Viennese Actionists) or burst into museums and biennales with the carcasses of dead animals and bed sheets covered with the blood of drug-trafficking victims (Teresa Margolles).

Introducing "vile" objects or actions into artistic spaces generally ends up reinforcing the singularity of those spaces and of the artists. Two tactics have been used in an effort to escape this closed, self-referential circle, which can be understood only by those who share the secrets of the avant-garde.

One tactic has been to relocate ostensibly artistic experiences in profane places. In the economics section of *Le Monde*, Fred Forest and Hervé Fischer of the Sociological Art Collective offered investments in "the Artistic M^2," plots of one square meter each on the border between France and Switzerland, promising to give each purchaser the honorary title of "citizen" of this territory and the right to participate in public gardens, spaces for reflection, and protests. The other tactic was adopted in 1989 by Bernard Bazile when he had one of Manzoni's cans of *Artist's Shit* opened and demonstrated "not only the disconnect between the reality of its contents (exhibiting a bundle of fibers), the imaginary of the container (the most impure fragment of the artist's body), and the symbolism of the two together (one of the purest moments of transgression on the borders of art)" but also the added value that was thereby achieved and finally the increased value of the Manzoni can opened by Bazile, which was sold by Galerie Roger Pailhas in Marseille for twice the price of the original can (Heinich 1998: 92).

Is the art field doomed to be eternally absorbed in the repeated desire to pierce its borders and, as in these last two examples, rush through via simple second-rate transgressions that change nothing? Neither bringing the world into the museum, nor going out of the museum, nor emptying out the museum and the artwork, nor dematerializing the work, nor leaving the artist's name off the work, nor trying to shock and provoke censure can overcome the queasiness caused by this vacillation between the desire for autonomy and the inability to transcend it.

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Perhaps the answers to this question will come not from the field of art but from what's happening when it intersects with other fields and becomes *postautonomous*. By this I mean the process that has taken place over the past few decades in which art practices based on *objects* have increasingly been displaced in favor of practices based on *contexts*, to the point that works are now being *inserted in the media, urban spaces, digital networks, and forms of social participation where aesthetic differences seem to dissolve*. Many works are still exhibited in museums and biennales, are still signed by artists, and are sometimes awarded art prizes, but art prizes, museums, and biennales share their roles of spreading information and anointing works as art with popular magazines and television. The signature, the notion of authorship, is subsumed by commercial advertising, the media, and collectives that do not belong to the art world. It is not so much the efforts of artists and critics to break through the shell as it is the new locations that have been given to what we call art that is pulling it out of its paradoxical experience of encapsulated transgression.

Acts of transgression presupposed the existence of oppressive structures and of narratives that justify them. Being stuck in a desire to end such an order, while insistently cultivating separation and transgression, implies that these structures and narratives remain in full force. What happens when they start to run out of steam?

Walls and Social Narratives Come Tumbling Down

We reached the end of the twentieth century with no paradigms of development and no explanation for society: it was said that all we had left were multiple narratives. We have begun the twenty-first century with scattered, fragmentary stories. Some are believed by Islamists, others by Christian fundamentalists, and the rest by followers of some strongman or other. These stories often lose their followers, allow dissent to undermine their efficacy, or crumble into self-parody.

The next-to-the-last great (Western) narrative, promoted by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, imagined that there would be a single world with a single center—the United States—and that its style of capitalist modernization, in the formulation of Francis Fukuyama, would become homogeneous across the planet. This Grand Story lasted until the next Great Fall, that of the Twin Towers, turned our gaze to the arguments of

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Samuel Huntington about the persistence of civilizations in conflict, the division of power between English and other languages, and economic and cultural multipolarity. Both formulations found echoes in artistic representations and in the social imaginaries about the globalization of symbolic markets—going from the perception of New York as the world's only metropolis to a recognition of multifocality and multiculturalism. The profusion of biennales on every continent, which has led to interaction among distinct forms of modernizing, of globalizing, and of portraying these processes, cancels out globalized abstractions. When I speak of society without a story, I do not mean that there is a lack of stories, as in the postmodernist criticism of metanarratives; I am referring to the historical condition in which no one story organizes diversity in a world whose interdependence makes many people wish that a single narrative did exist.

In November 2009 books, magazines, television programs, and exhibits celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the Deutsches Historisches Museum of Berlin, the exhibit *1989–2009, the Berlin Wall: Artists for Freedom* recited an official reading of what took place on November 9, 1989: the fall of the Wall as a liberator of unstoppable flows of human beings. Nevertheless we now have our doubts about who benefited. What can be said about the walls that have gone up or that have grown taller since that time? The website of the *Artists for Freedom* exhibit remains mired in too many clichés: German reunification, a new structure for Europe, the end of the bipolar world order. Strictly speaking, the world order had long since ceased to be bipolar: China and Japan were growing, Arab capital was flooding into the West. A geopolitical reordering was moving forward that cannot be condensed into the fall of the Wall. The most productive celebrations are those that problematize the meaning of what they commemorate.

If we look at it from Latin America, contemporary democracies have more to do with other dates: the end of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone and in Central America in the mid-1980s; the economic crises of 1994 and 1995; the abandonment of national projects such as Mexico's after 1982, a change that was consolidated after 1994 in the North American Free Trade Agreement. These are events that increased inequality and the breakdown of capitalism in this region.

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The twenty-first century had two beginnings. The al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, forced onto the political and media scene the displacement that some studies had already been talking about: we went from multiculturalism, understood as a recognition of the differences within each nation, to intercultural conflicts in a global geopolitics where all societies are interdependent. Cultural criticism and artistic practice, which had already been addressing these globalized tensions in their interethnic investigations, as well as discussions on borders and migrations, devoted books, artworks, whole issues of journals, and websites to elaborating the new situation.

This political and cultural agenda was shaken but not cut short when the century began a second time on September 15, 2008, the day when the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy dramatically brought to a head the neoliberal disorder on several continents. Millions of people lost their jobs, their investments, and their savings in a matter of weeks; consumer demand contracted; cascading bankruptcies spread through stores, factories, and other banks. Many foundations suspended their support to museums, cultural projects, and scientific research. Philippe Vergne, director of Dia Art Foundation, wondered aloud during a lecture he gave in St. Louis in mid-2009 about the meaning of the fact that September 15, 2008, was also the day when Damien Hirst "earned 198 million dollars by staging his own personal art auction at Sotheby's," bypassing the usual galleries. "It's a provocative coincidence," according to Anthony Huberman (2009: 109): on the same day that "the market dramatically proved itself to be imperfect and unpredictable—'subject to extraordinary delusions and the madness of crowds,' as Krugman says—an artist's strategic maneuver" to escape "the euphoric follies of the art market" for his own purposes had the refreshing and cynical effect of redrawing the rules of the art business.

Obviously only Hirst and the ten or twenty other top-selling artists could get away with such a gesture of autonomy from the market. That aspiration could not extend to the collective projects and art institutions that saw their financing collapse. The hesitant moves of first-rate museums after the 2008 crisis demonstrate instead their dependence on the market and their uncertainty about how to avoid being swept away by the economic chaos. Should they concentrate on star exhibits with lots

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of marketing, like the Tate Modern and other British venues? Sell franchises, putting up replicas in Abu-Dhabi that have been spectacularized by famous architects, as the Louvre has tried to do in that United Arab Emirates city by contracting with Jean Nouvel, and the Guggenheim with Frank Gehry?

The theoretical model of the *art field*—which, as we will see in Bourdieu, is associated with an era when it still made sense to analyze art movements as parts of national cultures—became less and less productive as we grew ever more globalized. The notion of nomadism, imagining a world without borders, is not very convincing either. Images flow transnationally at different speeds, depending on whether the countries they are coming from are economically powerful or impoverished. There are more barriers blocking the movement of people, including artists, than their works. Two grand abstractions—the universality of creativity and the autonomy of art—prove insubstantial whenever new walls go up, whenever more visas are demanded from workers than from the commodities they produce. Some producers of culture use their resistance to these forms of discrimination, or their insistence on their own difference, as material for their art. But these multidirectional interactions and obstacles no longer have a single organizing narrative. Although I will look at artists who use resistance and intercultural translation in their work, who critique the dominant narrative structures, detotalized narratives are what are growing now, fragments of a visuality without history, especially among young people. The period since the Soviet collapse, the period of recurring capitalist catastrophes, is an "end of history" in a different sense than Fukuyama had intended: a loss of historical experience. This "presentist" organization of meaning is made more acute, both in art and in daily life, by the obsolescence of technological innovations.

Art became postautonomous in a world that doesn't know what to do with the insignificance or contradictions of narratives. When we talk about this art, disseminated in a globalization that hasn't managed to articulate itself, we can no longer think of a directional history or of a transition state of a society unsure of which model for development to choose. We are long past the time when artists argued about what they should do to change life, or at least to represent its transitions by

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talking about what “the system” was concealing. They can hardly even act, like victims of a catastrophe who try to organize themselves, in the imminence of what might happen next, or in the barely explicable ruins of what globalization has destroyed. Art now works in the footsteps of the ungovernable.

On one hand, many art movements lost interest in autonomy, or they interacted with other areas of social life—design, fashion, the media, immediate political struggles. On the other hand, the paradigms that once constrained socioeconomic vicissitudes expired, and promises of revolution or comfort had the rug pulled out from under them. With art and society in analogous states of uncertainty, art cannot reestablish a place of its own, and perhaps its task is to see “what lies beyond the outer limits: the extra-artistic, the outside world, history as it is happening, other cultures,” as Ticio Escobar (2004: 148) writes in an article that bears the same title as this introduction.

Art has left its autonomy behind in several ways. The best known of these has been its incorporation into a large-scale art market (more than $8 billion in sales in 2008), under heteronomous rules, sometimes like those that apply to the circulation of common goods. This market stretches from the centers of the Western establishment—New York, London, and Berlin—to China, Russia, and the Arab Emirates. It mingles with both capitalist and mixed markets, authoritarian and democratic regimes. The mysteries of art are transmuted into secrets of the auction, the prices of artworks are compared with those of stocks, bonds, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average (Artprice 2008).

Another place where we can judge the postautonomous situation of art is in the many ways that artists insert themselves into society. I will discuss one of the emblematic contemporary cases, that of Takashi Murakami, whose paintings resemble the clothing and handbags manufactured by Louis Vuitton, while his other artworks show continuities with manga and video games. But we should remember that earlier figures associated with transformational political forces, such as Frida Kahlo, were turned into symbols of feminism, subjects for commercial films, and cover images for magazines about politics and culture, tourism, and fashion. At an earlier time there were those who indignantly defended the proper uses of these symbols in the face of their degrada-

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tion; later on one has to wonder whether there was something in the script of Kahlo's life that made it suitable for taking on so many jobs at once, and why manufacturers of clothing, tennis shoes, and watches have discovered in her a handy mechanism for giving transcendent meaning to their seasonal best-sellers.

Studies on the critical fortunes of artists, both during their lives (from Picasso to Hirst) and after their deaths (Van Gogh), with the intervention of people in the media, politics, the tourist industry, and the art market, reveal how aesthetic values are combined with other motives for admiration. Nathalie Heinich's book *The Glory of Van Gogh* (1996) showed that, far from being ignored or misunderstood during his lifetime, Van Gogh was celebrated by critics, and his tragic end cannot credibly be ascribed to any professional disillusionment. This finding has not stopped biographies and studies of his work from creating resonances with religious motifs drawn from the repertoire of saints' lives, building up a sense of collective indebtedness to the "great singular figure" sacrificed for his art, "while various forms of individual atonement are developed: through purchasing his works, through gazing upon them, through one's presence in the places where the painter lived, which have become cult places" (Heinich 2002: 58).

The job for sociological analysis, Heinich argues, is not to demythify beliefs nor to denounce illusions, but to understand the reasons why particular forms of singularization and regimes for creating symbolic value were formed in the modern era. As viewpoints multiply and the links between subjective experiences and globalization are deciphered, a new understanding of the place of art in the restructuring of meaning can be opened up.

Multiplying our points of view: we are distancing ourselves from the sociological reductionism that naturally irritates artists and researchers attentive to the specific nature of aesthetics. We must try out a view of the art that has spread into so many areas of social life without forcing it to represent "strategies for creating distinctions," to exercise "symbolic violence," or to show the domination of "the lawful authorities" over everyone else. It's a matter of seeing whether exploring the diversified links between creativity and the market, between aesthetic dissatisfactions and political discontents, can illuminate the correspondences be-

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tween an art that is having trouble redefining itself, societies in which the sense of having a choice between left and right has diminished, and the social sciences that are trying to study this landscape with different tools.

This book seeks an analytic framework for studying contemporary art that pays attention to the art itself as well as the cultural and social conditions under which its postautonomous condition has become possible. I pay attention to artworks, to artists' singular projects, and to attempts to sustain a certain independence from religion, politics, the media, and the markets. Between the inevitability of being inserted into society and the desire for autonomy, what is at play is the place for creative transgression, for critical dissent, and for that sense of imminence that makes the aesthetic something that doesn't just happen, doesn't attempt to turn itself into a codified profession nor into profitable merchandise.

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