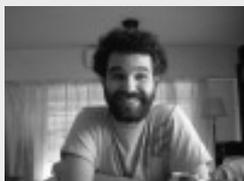


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**Mi bloringa!**

Artsound  
Germano Celant

From SOUNDINGS, Neuberger Museum, State University of New York, College at Purchase, 1981 (IS)  
Translated by Carla Sanguinetti Weinberg

It is the opinion commonly accepted by authentic libertines that the sensations communicated by the o  
most exciting and that their impressions are the most vivid.

Marquis de Sade: Les 120 Journées de Sodome

Once there was an avant-garde, and it represented oppositionally it is so totally accepted and established  
common and quotidian matter. One can no longer speak about it because the violation of the rules is r  
discourse no longer evolves within the dialectic between avant-garde and tradition, but rather between  
avant-garde or, say, between tradition and tradition. The permutability of the terms carries within itself  
progression of tendencies and movements as much as it does to the interchange between progress ar  
and reaction, development and involution, quality and quantity. At this stage, the sign is not susceptibl  
for itself a place in history without causing its antecedent to lose its place. The themes of discussion ar  
condition inquiry crumble, and an all-encompassing course is adopted in which convention embraces e  
become comparable but Subtly subordinate to the well-being of the art establishment which, with the fa  
non- involvement, is no longer differentiated from the industrial establishment. In fact, with the end of th  
characterized the art establishment during the sixties, some compromises are announced in which arti  
representation of disorder and the defeat of the imaginary.

What is produced now is no longer an agitation but an assent, the excess value of which resides in its  
reproducibility. Such a transformation could be explained as much by current consumer demands as b  
involvement that has realized the rise on the social scene of a creativity of the masses. The effect of h  
current inquiries suffer, is, furthermore, both the consequence of an overall conformity in accordance w  
reserved for personal choice has been reduced and the realm of production has been extended and of  
characteristic of a society which, in the leveling association among products, tends to abolish disassoc  
as well is associated with this process and so confounds its art-objects with decoration for the eye and  
every sign of change and vitality. Furthermore, in order not to run the risk of becoming disassociated, a  
imitation of the past, which, recycled by quotation, becomes contemporary in order to satisfy the dema  
this sense, a part of "the new" is presented as a copy of the modern and fulfills, in the post- modern, th  
which is "experimental" art based on the security of the historical model. The subject of the sale is ther  
the tradition of the avant-garde and the avant-garde of the tradition.

In the U.S., too, the acceleration of the contemporary, brought about by the consumption of art as well  
explosion of gallery owners, dealers, curators, and museum directors, has so enlarged the base of pov  
that the illusion of a democratization of art has arisen. This mirage, sustained by the National Endowm  
corporations, has taken on the appearance of an overall conformity to such an extent that individual se  
subservient to a surrendering of taste and inquiry to the masses that has no equal in history. Exhibits r  
spring up, and private galleries flood the field, but the call to debate the procedures as well as the proc  
extinguished, and the face of culture shows the terrified expression of one who waits behind the count  
command, the request of what to serve.

Along with its apolitical content, a linguistic debasement is the consequence to such an extent that, if one were to think about pattern-painting and the neo-Fauves, one would find a rise in the value of decoration and eclecticism as one escapes from every problem other than business affairs and the multiplication in quantity of the "artistic gadget" that is to be collected on the walls of the petty bourgeoisie. In this process of despoliation that confounds the nightshade, the carpet, the couch, the fresco, and the painting, the aim of art is to be at the level of all the consumer signs. In respect to art's exit from the margin and its entrance into a decoration that satisfies the common taste, one may adopt various positions. One may enact an ideological amorality, as for years Warhol has done, and in a cynical way dry up the very concept of margin in order to render it anti-heroic and commercial, that is to say, to enact the total and definitive annulment of the concept "avant-garde" in order to turn it into a subculture for the rich. Or, one may move within art with the humanistic - and therefore idealistic - hope that art will bring something good to the world. The latter hypothesis, we know, is a suicidal one because it continues to believe in the separate womb of culture where the petty-bourgeois rarities are formed. At the same time, the former hypothesis, riskier but lucid and indifferent, seems open because in letting itself be maneuvered by the stars of finance, film, fashion, and musical stage, it can reach out for the definitive leveling between industry and art in which both reproduce inexpressive and cold objects and images that are the only experiences common to millions of persons. To redouble industry in order to devour it in a system of its own may seem utopian and unreal, but it also means that the passive becomes active and the artist attempts to put himself in the place of the object.

The artist's identification with an undistinguished and easily recognizable entity (it could be a hook, record, film, photograph, advertisement, etc.) may be considered the norm of the mass-society in which the factitiousness of mass-consumption and of the fetishism of the signals does not mean losing oneself not- negating oneself, but keeping up with the times. And because the cadence is accelerated, one has to make the signals denser rather than rarer. The repetition carries with it a disturbance of the unique, but it increases its identity with the mass. Now, it is not surprising that contemporary artists identify themselves with everything that the artist of yesterday "lacks," in particular, the circulation of his wares and his signals. Here they are, then, taking into consideration the possibility of a total diffusion through mechanical and electronic repeaters. with which they might lose themselves in the fields of television and radio. The goal for the artist is to divest himself of whatever is predestined and humiliating in his creativity, and to make of this predestination and humiliation, not a praxis of ruin, but of success.

The first step consists in discovering the threshold for crossing from one establishment to another so as to be able to circulate freely in the diversified fields of both the star establishment and the art establishment. The first breakthrough seems to have occurred in music and in the production of scores and records. Many artists today seem to address themselves to passing from an artisan to a machinelike function in order to translate their "dexterity" into consumption and money and their imagination into a warehouse from which business emerges. Now, there is no richer nor more fashionable field than music - a territory in which the "signed" sign produces an economic and mythical acme. The idea of taking music-recording technology as a model for our own alteration dates from the beginning of this century when the Futurists and the Dadaists, renouncing using themselves as a unit of measurement, trusted themselves to radio and the cinema like ecstatic lovers. The process continued up to the seventies\* but always within the ambit of the experimental.

Today, instead, the Process seems to flood throughout the music industry itself, where the image of creativity is subservient to the work done by Ralph Records or RCA. In a kingdom of sounds, there once artists occupied a small reservation, art seems to have carved out for itself a domain. This is a proof of power, and for this reason art's intolerableness is today considered to be its uniqueness which can, however, be multiplied into millions of copies of either records or tapes. This attitude, by now common among artists and persons interested in art, is disquieting to those who have a horror of multiplication and reproduction, but it excites instead all those who are interested in the perfect ion of the "transmissions" because the absence of error typical of reproduction in a review or book serves to obliterate the difference between direct experience and indirect information. This coincidence occurs in records and concerts. For a generation educated via cable and satellite, which provide at home all the data and all the patterns, both narrative and cinematic, what counts is reception - because expression transformed into image and sound must result in perfection - since it is perfection that determines attention even more than content. The passion, in fact, turns on the quality of the recording and of the reprinting, and it is on these that the eye and ear express their judgment. All hits of information, insofar as they are expressed, recommend themselves for their reproductive and receptive qualities. What is consumed, sitting in front of a television and a movie screen, or walking or roller skating with the earphones of a cassette-recorder, is ever less a statement or a story and ever more an inexpressive and uniform image and sound. One might even say that the real stereotype travels in photographic and musical disguises. Those are the ones that are trustworthy as being objective-because they are controlled technically - more than the accounts of the human eye and ear.

The exasperating minutiae that these new realities form offers great interest today. Compared to the silence and opaqueness of painting and sculpture, music seems sensational-owing to a certain fashionable dazzle which fascinates-because it corresponds to quotidian reality. Each sound is an absolute entity, born out of fixed points, but it renders the world something unheard of. The unusual, which the frame or the pedestal used to send forth, today originates from loudspeakers and the projector. For this reason the greatest measure of the contemporary artist is that of self-expression in order to be a painter, a photographer, a filmmaker, and a musician like Robert Longo and Mayo Thompson, Alan Vega and Laurie Anderson, Jack Goldstein and The Residents. Their needs are relegated, in fact, in accordance with the imprint left on the paper, the film, and the record, on which

one is able to incise a perfect sign. In addition, the original matrices shape the world itself, because from them thousands of copies-consequently millions of images and sounds-are derived which circulate everywhere in the eye and ear of all. Now, since artists have always been interested in shaping reality, or at least in influencing it, what better process is there than to reproduce their own ideas in limitless quantities? As may well be seen, after the opening up of the media that has taken place in the last twenty years, all the artists are now armed with cameras and recorders. To them, to click a shutter or record a tape is a normal process; it serves to tranquilize them, since they are able to take away with them any image or sound whatsoever, on the instant, without designing or composing it. The identification between trace and real world renders the world a box of sounds; therein lies its own existence, the rest does not count. And so it is perfectly logical that artists today react to their own restricted existence, and they start to roam like vagabonds in the space of electronic and filmic images. On this ground, the location is not fixed, as it is in painting and sculpture, but spread out, since the panoply of figures and noises pours out through gigantic sources of emission. It is not surprising, then, that following the historic example of the Velvet Underground, the artists working at the beginning of this decade have broken away from the marginalization of art and have passed from the "personal show" to the "music show" in nightclubs and on television.

The list of artists or persons coming from the art world who have formed groups is today very long; it goes from Red Crayola (dubbed Art & Language) to the Disband of Martha Wilson, from Cabaret Voltaire to Alan Sui, front Brian Eno to Glenn Branca, from Rhys Chatham to David Byrne. For these, imagination or the process of conceptualization has made everything useable, to the point where they urge the creation of an indiscriminate catalogue of products. This attitude is premonitory of a change in the artistic establishment as well as in the musical establishment, as if it were aiming at a spectacular tune-up of the avant-garde. It is not by chance that the Talking Heads have put into MUSIC poems by Hugo Ball and that Cabaret Voltaire has used the Sonorous poems of Marinetti, or that Phil Glass "translated" himself in Polyrock.

Besides, music is an industrial sector; it permits expansion toward the audience and the direct verification of its reactions. In contrast to the sepulchral silence of exhibition spaces, the actions induced by music are explosive, almost like an exorcism of a dead painted or sculpted object. Each sound eradicates, in fact, the knowledge of the body, to the point of revitalizing the blind and spent pupil as well as the atrophied arms of the spectator of the show.

Might the mechanism which was formed in these years of musical wandering now be called "inversion," which is to say, substitution of one establishment for another? One might say, no; one might, rather, speak of equivalence, due to the fact that industry entered into art, and art, instead of being passively present at its own despoliation, has entered into industry. In addition, if the musician allows himself the luxury of artistry, he does it because art "acts" on the audience, and it (and then be put on the stage. The musical rite is, therefore, complimentary to the artistic sacrifice, except that the artist hides behind the object, does not transcribe himself, and remains separate from the senses of the audience, while the singer and the musician do not. In some way, if artists form bands, from Peter Gordon to Arto Lindsay and Pere Ubu, it means that art aspires to the destruction of the limits that condition its systems of traditional reception. It attempts to sacrifice itself, sweats and howls, in order to be accepted and adored by thousands of spectators, to whom the "diversity" of the rite gives pleasure. All forget, in fact, that the aspiration of every artist is to penetrate the castle of society and to be recognized; now, from 1968 to 1977, with the feeling of shame caused by political involvement, this chance was just missed unless they had recourse to the "tragedy" of "decoration." And yet if it is moralistic to declare oneself rich, as well as poor, today no one wants to oust himself from the world, and artists least of all.

So, now that they no longer seem to have anything to do with politicians, they have been infiltrating the shows, first in performances and in the theater, now in concerts. Since the show is made to be seen, the jump from visual art does not prove unnatural; in addition, the event occurs for everyone, in a way that replaces the loneliness of art with a mass-participation that is further augmented by the circulation of records. Welcome, then, to the exchanges and collaborations between artists and filmmakers, musicians and photographers, who tiled together at the Mudd Club or the Rocky Lunch in New York in order to set tip gigs with Blondie and Lydia Lunch, Steve Pollack, the Bush Tetras, and DNA. Naturally, debarking in the terra incognita of music is not easy. We understand, then, the trust in chance and improvisation that characterizes the musical products of the "new wave." The vagabondage of persons educated within the avant-garde of Futurism and Dadaism, of metaphysics and Surrealism, cannot be pre-directed, but must be found, like a readymade. Many musicians neither know music nor know how to use traditional musical instruments; they often trust themselves to toys and gadgets, which, along with gestures, lights, and filmed hits, become resounding instruments on a par with percussion instruments and the guitar. The horizontal convergence of "diverse" sonorous apparatuses, even if bound together by their "immateriality," does not alter the status of the artist, who, operating in the Minimal and the Conceptual, is accustomed to carry to the extreme any "material" whatsoever that results in the sensitive or the insensitive, expressive or inexpressive, so as to satisfy the spectator and the audience, who today scent more and more interested in sustaining the opinion of de Sade.

NOTE \*Germano Celant, *The Record As Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art* (Fort Worth, TX: The Fort Worth Art Museum, 1977).

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