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A STYLE OF TIME

MARK O'KELLY

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INTRODUCTION

The contextualisation of artistic actions within history is a social effect which, in its forms of linguistic, political and technological reading, serves to transmit the idea of social progress as consistent with the very action of time movement itself.

The learned mechanics of human interaction in the exchange - relations of language, assert the dynamic of time itself as a signifying power; in which capacity time would seem to propel on the one hand - the very drive to cultural action, and on the other - contextualise and thereby present as inevitable the events which reflect and reside in its linear logic.

Moments within fin de siecle or fin de millennium culture are examined here as points at which the structures of this phenomenon appear at their most potent. The events occurring in such instances are interesting : first, in that they manifest themselves from a consciousness of the language of the ideological motion of time, second, in the instance of a fin de millennium such a coded time appears to drive its cultural forms to points of almost hyper-logic in regard to the code of language and social exchange to which they refer.

Examining in this light, the painting from the ends of the 19th and 20th centuries the consistencies and conflicts manifest in the degree of assurance embodied in the artwork of the two periods, consolidates such an argument.

More importantly, this work provides an insight into the wide social dynamic of accelerated 'movement' towards an ideological 'end' as embodied in the concept of a fin de millennium.

the language of text, and the relationship to language is essential in determining the degree which provides the historical and social context, the methodology of historical research, and the nature of progress.

This would seem to be a logical conclusion, a type of summary, or a final statement, but it is not. It is a chapter heading, and it is not a chapter heading.

CHAPTER I

Coded time as a cultural contract with history :

... activities - especially those that involve the use of time in a systematic or 'structured' way - are the result of a cultural contract with history. The cultural contract is a set of rules that governs the way in which time is used. It is a contract that is made between the individual and the community. The cultural contract is a set of rules that governs the way in which time is used. It is a contract that is made between the individual and the community. The cultural contract is a set of rules that governs the way in which time is used. It is a contract that is made between the individual and the community.

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The language of time, and its relationship to language is significant in determining the origins which provide the framework within which resides the methodology of continuous time movement, as the dynamic of progress.

Time would seem to be existent on a twofold level; a type of erratic, inconsistent measurement which is the personal internalised experience on one level, and the conceptual mechanical consistent measurement of time on the other, which is viewed as a collective externalised phenomenon.

These two notions in no way theoretically correspond. One would seem to be the antithesis of the other. In this dynamic they exist as mental polarities - opposites which lend meaning to one another by their difference or 'otherness'. To distinguish precisely this difference it is useful to use the example of sleep. In such a state internalised time seems to obey no laws of externalised time. Sleep itself in its process of unconscious thought would seem to be a complete disengagement from the external world. The mental split between the personal subjective experience and the external, public objective reality appears at its most acute in the lapse from consciousness into unconsciousness in the instance of sleep.

However, it is just such an instance that is chosen by Lacan to demonstrate the essential 'de-centered' nature of the structural forms which constitute the framework of the unconscious. In reading Freud's account of the unconscious, as revealed through an induced lapse of consciousness -

by hypnosis, Lacan provides evidence which raises questions about our basic assumptions regarding internal and external reality.

The thinking process of the unconscious for Lacan is no mere flux of primordial instincts, governed by biological pre conceptual drives - rather it is formed by the external exchange, relations acting in the primal instant of society. It is such a system of exchange in language, as existent between people which provides the fundamental point for beginning of society and for the only subsequent concept of the internal, individualised subjective self.

It is a relatively recent phenomenon according to Althusser, beginning with cartesian philosophy that this centering of the individual as the degree zero of social relations begins. This inversion is then consistently applied in the philosophy, history and social theory of the 17th and 18th centuries; and through anglo-saxon culture to the present. The development of the western free enterprize economy with its moral insistence on the rights and freedoms of the individual is a consequence itself of this phenomenon. The mythology of this is so strong as to present itself as a merely natural result of man's primitive or primordial drives.

In Lacanian theory the unconscious is categorised as a language, revealed as such by verbal suggestion under hypnosis. In this process the subject's actual sensory experience is overridden by the more potent structural

information provided by 'external' language. The subject's interpretation of events is entirely reliant on external 'suggestion' provided in the language of the hypnotist. Interpretation is no longer seen as the product of internalised sensory perception but rather internalised sensory perception is conditioned according to external force - language : interpretation and understanding are to be found for the subject externally rather than through the internal.

This reading presents the unconscious as an external construction, dependent on a system of differences (rather than senses) existing in language (as in Sussure) for its meaning.

Following on this we may say (in relation to Lacan's 'The mirror phase as formative to the function of the I') that the notion of the individual self is itself only incidental and is existent only in as much as it is formed from the outside, as opposed to the notion of a real inner sense of self. The origins of such a structure are formed after all in the subject's primary experience of an 'other' self in the 'mirror image'. It is just such an external illusion with which the subject identifies in the primary phase toward a formation of an individual 'I'.

The individual sense of time as it is perceived in relation to activity (personal history) is therefore a redundant notion; centralising the notion of time within a notion of individual activity is meaningless as the

individual is himself de-centered. Time, as we shall see, has no individuated function as it operates within language as a system of exchange.

This de-centering process is expansive in its implications. For the Artist is no longer becomes the central referent of the Art-work. He ceases to function as the autonomous context of meaning to which the work of art need only successfully 'refer' in order to help consolidate the mythology of artist as individual and origin of meaning. The work of art corresponds instead to the language system in history, and it comes to exist not by the artistic externalisation or expression of the assured 'inner-life' (an effect of the distortion which occurs in the ego-drive toward confirmation of individual selfhood), but rather by the language based rationalisation of the exchange relations existent in society.

The artist is himself rationalised in the overturn of the 'Anglo-Saxon' concept of language as merely the static tool in the communication of personalised thought ---- Indeed time itself would seem to be structured according to the forces of language as defined by the subject's experience in the Lacanian 'mirror phase'.

Language and time exist as formal parallels to one another. The moment of speech as in the moment of time is important only in as much as it relates to all the other possible utterances in the infinite linguistic system.

Likewise with time, one moment of time is significant only as it is perceived to the past history and infinite future of time.

The time of day is the moment constructed out of all the moments of time ticking forward to the present moment. A single time at any moment derives its meaning from all the 'other' times in the past. Any present moment of time is meaningless unless it is perceived as the logical addition in the present, attached to all the moments ever existent in time.

Time functions as a language and the existence of time as a fully external language gives the present its significance.

Saussure's concept of language is one primarily outside the individual. Saussure shows how systems of language inevitably pre-empt the boundaries of meaning. As the primal construction of meaning is dependant on the already existing autonomous 'code', time then (as a language type system) is not merely the measurement system of history, which contextualises actions or meanings. As a language system it confines the meanings themselves by defining as language does the perimeter limit. It is active as an effector in the process of thought as it constructs these meanings and truths.

If we understand the meanings in communicative language as generated by its inter-referentiality to signs within a signifying chain, time in formal terms

is the way in which one 'link' of the chain coils itself through another; it may not be material in context, but as a formal means of binding such a chain together it has a significant conceptual influence on the total meaning of such a chain. It provides the 'structure' of the total chain, and more importantly effects the relationship of one link to another. In short it has an effect on the total structure by affecting all the individual parts or signs.

Time is significant as an autonomous process which is unreliant on any 'individual' action for its continuum. A constructed 'subjective' experience of time must bow down before the primal infallibility of mechanical time. Time can be read as a sociological totem as put forward by Durkheim and Levi-Strauss, as a system of sociological exchange. It is a classification which exists before a subject's birth, and is both imposed on the subject by society as a way of positioning the subject and later used by the subject (the subject cannot 'individually' deny its significance as his 'self' is housed within its classification as external proof of his social existence) as a means or contract by which he rationalises the pace/momentum of his exchange relations in society.

The process of individuation comes after and only in as much as the classification of time allows; time in this context is a 'totemic system' or contract existent in a society originally collective rather than individually centered.

The sensory experience of a momentary word, a moment to moment inner life in a permanent present is an 'inner' feeling which gives way as the action of time contextualises the subjective feeling of the permanent present, so that subjectivity is inevitably and constantly returned to objectivity - its origin.

The human subject (either artist or viewer) does not understand life as a continuum in the 'permanent present' as a constructed subjectivity might lead one to, but understands instead life in terms of its broadest conceptual polarities - the dates of birth and death and in terms of the time zones through which one must pass toward death. In other words, the human subject sees life as (in language's broadest terms) language and time signifies it.

The emotional effects associated with moments of birth and death are constructed in 'inner feeling' by the referential consequences of languages' relationship to time. In this it corresponds birth with beginning and death with end.

In this rationalised understanding, beginning and end are merely moments in the greater time continuum of the permanent present; yet the language of time constructs for the 'inner self' a much more meaningful emotional symbolism out of them.

Time, from here, functions on no less a level than language itself - non-existent in terms of individual experience, neither concept is located in its true form as that constructed merely by one individual. Instead it is located in its origin in the exchange relations between social groups. It is necessary in such exchanges to the functionality of the signifier (as defined by Saussure) in that it provides the early directional essence of such a system - a necessary property should the system at this stage maintain the 'idea' at least of a message.

It is certain that we bring sense to language : at least for a large number of things it is certain, but can we say that everything that is circulating in the machine is nonsense? Certainly not in all the senses of the word sense, because in order for the message to be a message, it is necessary that there be a succession of signs, but that this succession of signs has a direction, an orientation.

(Lacan, 1973, p. 207)

This sense which provides direction to the succession of signs is ultimately a sense of time. Direction itself is a kind of sense when the direction is provided by the concept of time. Time as continuous, time as a linear logical movement into the 'future' point to point along a line directly and equally dividing the X, Y axis of what seems to be merely natural and inevitable. Time as a logical movement is a 'natural mythology' which seems to travel with the idea of progress, an evolutionary

notion of improvement (individual and social) as much inevitable as the mere continuum of time itself.

It is only much later when the relative notions of signifier to signified breaks down that the notion or assumption of meaning as directional is called into question. This is evident in the work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard here identifies a sociological stage in which the sign is isolated. Lacan's model of a succession of signs is broken as the space between signifier and signified collapses. The signifier implies its meanings through the sign and the sign becomes self-referential and is capable of signifying no other meaning than its own self-signification.

It is therefore static and isolated. This state makes for Baudrillard the 'sign' merely a site of simulated meaning. Working in tandem with this transformation is the revelation that time's directionality as 'progress' is a mythology. The closure of the sign, as anything other than a simulation of meaning is directly related to the closure of the notion of time as directional progressive sociological movement.

This process of de-mystification is embodied in the end of the Avant-Garde process, itself a succession dependant for its meaning on the assumption of progress as consistent with movement of time (as understood in the context of history as the process of accumulation and change).

In the post Avant Garde, the artist occupies no centralised space, his or her actions are inhibited by structures (or the structures are the base of the actions). In a time continuum each artist and artwork in tandem with the time system, is the logical addition in the present attached to all art, out of the context of time.

If the Artist here is no longer a provider of subjective meaning, he may be merely (as is the viewer) the inhibited observer of signs and significations within culture. However, he too is affected and lives according to this language; his consciousness is also born out of this existence. In fact the Artist here has no role in the creation of 'new meaning' - authorship can at most be understood as the application of quotation marks; the brush-mark, itself the modernist mode of expressing the subjective 'inner life' of the Artist, is understood as a fetish, a mythology created by language. It is therefore available to our Artist only as a style of sign to be overlaid or 'used'. It may denote (rather than express) a conceptual idea of inner life as understood in their referral to an original form, which is tracable to other originals until it comes to lie in language itself.

By such an inevitable course of events, the Artist's involvement in the reception and perpetuation of language systems is reduced in directional input to such a degree that the Artist's role is that of a viewer. In occupying such a space, as viewer, it is also inevitable that he should

represent himself and/or the viewer faithfully. Current art has a special relationship to its audience in that it replicates the neutrality of an audience's gaze.

If the Artist assumes the role of spectator, at the outset of the production process towards an eventual artwork, the Artist is speculating - he observes the accumulation of signs within the work. In this act of observation / speculation, he pre-empts his 'own expression' by acknowledging its inevitability. In the place it will occupy in the time based history of language - his action is one of self consciousness, an action of self conscious 'speculation'. The work at its outset, before it has begun, has a pre-destined futural place which can be mapped according to its relationship to the chain of significance.

The Artist, in order to begin the work, places himself mentally at the end point (the completed work). This positioning is necessary for the very purpose of even beginning the work.

This futural aspect is the primary factor affecting contemporary art. The mental projection (into the futural space of the viewer / spectator) removes from the Artist the impossible quest towards a subjective expression, the Artist (now conscious of his space in objectivity) acts in tandem with the mechanical objectiveness of time (with all its futural aspects). The Artist is engaged in the objectifying of the subjectivity as it exists, not

in the past, or in the present, but in his projection of the future.

Art exists as the pre-conditioned futural vision of the Artist within the signifying chain. In this, the issue of time is primary as the conditioning factor, as time itself is the only factor of which the Artist is fully sure in terms of its directionality. The consciousness of the Artist is subject to the generative process of language in history; but history is understood as a process which will continue out of time, as an autonomous and independent set of meanings. The Artist is not placed to affect the continuum of such meanings, rather his positioning is structured to be affected by them.

The significance attached to actions within history by time as a generative force producing autonomous meaning is a way of approaching the phenomenon of the fin de siècle or end of century (the idea of history or actions being significant by virtue of their position in time).

A fin de siècle exists where language is such that its self-generative propensity to construct meaning by its own self-referentiality propels history autonomously; presents history as inevitable and significant only in terms of its relation to the primacy of 'numerical time'.

What is at stake in the culture of the fin de siècle is the problem of focusing, not on the subject (which is constructed inevitably by history), but on the form that is assumed or subsumed by the subject; in its active engagement with a numerical moment of time, which is significant by its 'position' as provided by the network of time - past, present and future.

An end of century or of a millennium is a symbolic moment, in itself it has no form, but in the civilization of sociological exchange it has a conceptual meaning so great that by its symbolic presence it both dominates an interpretation of the forms which exist at its moment and provides, the author argues, the style or form of the forms themselves.

The origin of the term millenarism lies deeply rooted in the mythology of christianity. It refers to a christian doctrine of the last times or the final state of the world, based on the authority of the book of Revelations. Some christians believed that after a second coming Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth that would reign for a 'thousand years' before the last judgment. According to this philosophy the citizens of this kingdom would be christian martyrs ressurected a thousand years before the final judgment. Early christians, however, interpreted this philosophy in a liberal rather than literal sense, and equated the christian martyrs as a 'suffering faithful' (themselves) and expected a second coming in their lifetimes.

It is interesting to note the five conditions which would denote salvation (achievement of harmony for the millenarist) :

- (I) Collective, in that it is to be enjoyed by the faithful as a collectivity.
- (II) Terrestrial, in the sense that it is to be realised on earth, rather than in some other worldly heaven.
- (III) Imminent, in the sense that it is to come both soon and suddenly.
- (IV) Total, in the sense that it is to utterly transform life on earth, so that the new dispensation will be no mere improvement on the present, but perfection itself.
- (V) Miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the aid of supernatural agencies.

(Norman Cohn, p.13, 1957)

By omitting the final description in the millenarist thesis on the mechanics of achieving 'terrestrial utopia', we have perhaps in its other four fifths a structure not dissimilar to a socialist / modernist projection of a collective body who in their own lifetime will achieve more than mere improvement in the present, but a continuing perfection and harmony into the future.

Just as in modernism, after the establishment of a concept of futural utopia as its social aim, milleniarism comes to denote a dynamic of progress as methaphored in the notion of ideological movement towards

a futural reality.

Indeed the history of modernism is not a history of continued debate upon the aims of its movement; rather the constant revolution of style and approach is a dialogue which sought to find a suitable stylistic or formal route to the achievement of its futural aims. The picture of presumed salvation thereby affects and conditions the practices of life. By only choosing to see actions or practices as significant in as much as they correspond consistently to the linear logic of time towards an inevitability, it is ensured that all conflicting ideologies be marginalised.

In this way the millennium was established in european, christian culture as the idealogical site of salvation. In this it provided the model, institutionalised as the only possible consequence and destiny of civilisation. In closing the space for the possibility of alternative futural visions, religious sects and in particular the millenarists concentrate not on the form of the millennium itself, but rather on the form or style of approach to such a destiny.

The act of becoming, through prayer and offer poverty is here the process which the millenarist sees as the idealogical route to salvation - (achievement of harmony). By its assertion of a millennian inevitability and its stressing the importance of progressive movement towards such a reality, milleniarism provides perhaps in the european middle ages an

ideological parallel for modernism; in regard to its underlying forms of belief, in particular its belief in progress and process in social change, as its route to a futural utopia.

The post-modern state has come about, not as a further Avant-Garde polemic - a dialogue concerning the style and manner of movement towards the realisation of modernist principles. It came about as a polemic regarding the principles of modernism, such as innovation and originality. It is the space of re-examination of modernist principles and it happens at the moment of the millennium.

Early Avant-Gardism is characterised by a 'heroic' ambition towards the creation of a future - positive. Henri de Saint Simon's notion of a unified Avant Garde of artists, scientists and industrialists formed itself in his writing of 1825 - what was to bind the various groups together was the dynamic notion of social progress, a movement towards a socialist state later provided a directional goal of movement. The traces of a millenarist spirit in such a thinking exist not only in the structure of Saint Simon's thesis, but in the christian aspect he saw as inherent in it.

He appropriated to the Avant-Garde a priestly function, that of -

Exercising over society a positive power, a truly priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of the intellectual

faculties: in the epoch of their development; this is the duty of Artists - this is their mission !

(Saint Simon, 1825, Quoted Donald Drew Egbert, 1970, p.121)

Here it is even possible to imagine Avant-Gardism acting for the millenarist role of supernatural agency as defined in the fifth condition of millenarist salvation.

Embedded in the term Avant-Gardism is the concept of distance, that of being ahead in a futural space, which only at a later stage will be experienced by the main military or social body, and distance in terms of time in a space before the main social / military body.

For the millenarist (or heroic Avant-Gardist) this futural space is understood as a symbolic territory to be conquered in the fulfillment of its own philosophic ideas. Integral to the idea of the Avant-Garde is a metaphoric attitude of inevitability, comparable to the christian sense of an inevitable millennial salvation. Movement itself becomes the object of concern; as it is accepted, the futuristic promised land exists, the chosen people, or in our case Avant-Gardism concern with the form of movement (style) and land (content) to be engaged with in the desert of capitalism.

For Gabriel Desire Laverdant (on The mission of Art and Role of Artists, France 1845) for an artist to be of the Avant-Garde, it is of primary importance that - 'One must know where humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is' - quoted by Renato Poggioli.

It is at the root of an Avant-Garde mythology to pre-empt not only the future movement (the notion of going) but the ultimate and final, thereby inevitable 'destiny' (end position) of humanity.

Perhaps if the term Avant-Gard denotes a military, it is more suitable in the context of heroic and especially radical Avant-Gardism to think of the army as an early christian crusade and the Avant-Gardists as christian martyrs (as in the view of the artist as a primarily poor, alienated bohemian, as epitomised and celebrated in the portrayal of impressionist painters, who dominate popular culture as artistic archetypes. Also the mythologies which surround such artists as Vincent Van Gogh, Jackson Pollock or Jean Michael Basquait). A martyr allows himself the privilege of death as he perceives his cause as natural, right and most importantly inevitable, in serving the destiny of humanity.

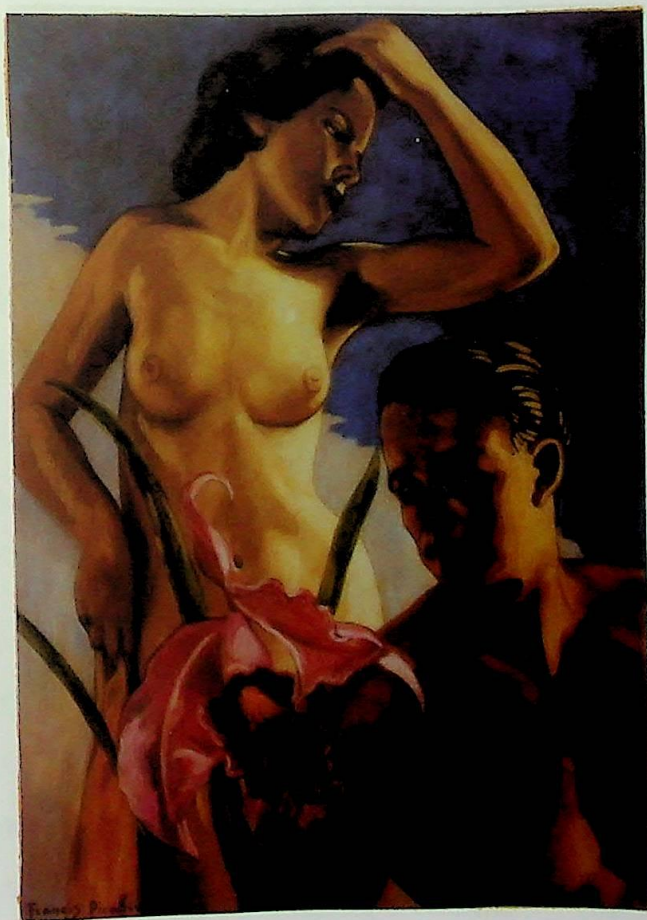
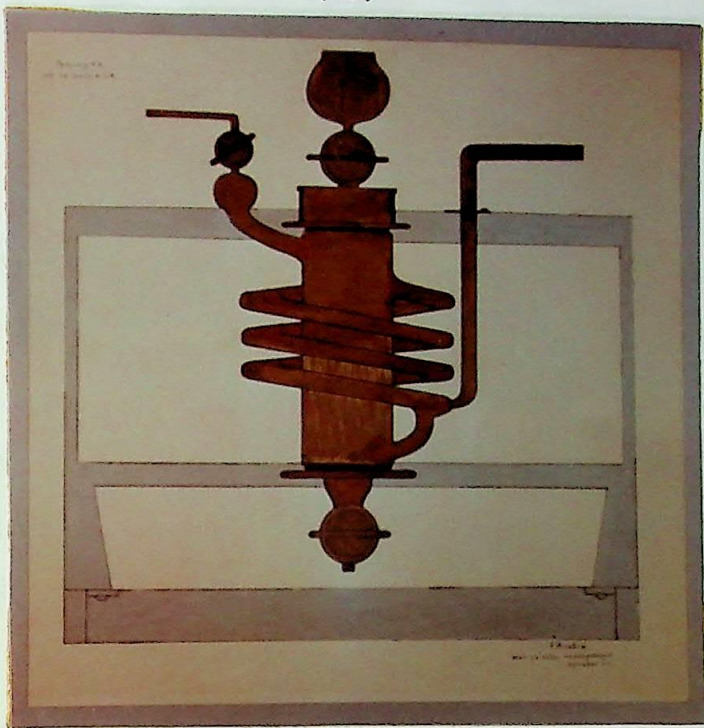
If a millenarist thesis is founded on the fundamental acceptance of death as the key to salvation, for a radical avant-gardist, socialist salvation is the destiny, death itself is a positivist inevitability. The continual pronouncement of art's death in modernism is hardly surprising when one

considers the millenarist expectancy of sudden change (death ?) in one lifetime.

The 'radical Avant-Garde' of the first two decades of the twentieth century, the futurists, dadaist and constructivists saw as necessary an objective in the progress of change - the death of art itself. To close the gap between art and life would be to assume the Avant-Garde as having reached its 'promised territory' and the gap would be closed by bringing the social body to its place. The style of movement envisaged to achieve this, would be the integration of this radical art with the society, and the destruction of the 'dead mausoleums of art where deadworks are worshiped' (Mayakovsky). The distinction between art and life would disappear as if the death of art (as a distinction apart from life) would provide for the resurrection of the human spirit now freed by socialist progress and revolution from bourgeois oppression.

The Avant-Garde came to see the death of art, and thereby their own martyrdom, as the ideological route to salvation.

The death of art as it is made manifest, is the personified action of time on language. Its site is in the inevitable face of the millenium. Time as an elemental in language presupposes the future of history and thereby contributes to the death of the present. In this death of the present, it affects the form and stylistics of the present mode.



Francis Picabia Paroxysm of Sorrow 1915. Oil on Hardboard

Francis Picabia Adam and Eve 1941-42. Oil on Hardboard.

It is interesting to note that according to a full millenarist principle the artist by social progress moves towards the future by adopting an Avant-Gardist position. Also by another millenarist principle, should believe in the imminent possibility of achieving a utopian reality, suddenly in his lifetime. Therein Avant-Gardists can be seen within their careers to have resorted to a refication of their output, a temporal superficial supposition of their work as existing in the full present as relating to a total population. However, within modernism such instances are characteristic as they seem to move in a direction contradictory to the aims and systems of Avant-Gardism.

In Benjamin H D Buchloh's essay Figures of Authority Ciphens of Regression - 1971, Buchloh describes how some Avant-Garde Artists move in the early twentieth century from methods of collage and fragmentation to a historicist figuration explained critically as 'progressive moves backwards', and argues that such a movement far from being progressive was in fact regressive and proved only that style becomes the 'ideological equivalent of the commodity' - (Buchloh, 1981, p.50). Such a movement therefore succeeds only to consolidate the forces in capitalism which seek to commodify art.

For Buchloh it is the style of this regression and not the content of the regressive works which signifies a 'loss of nerve', disguised as a 'progressive move backwards'. Buchloh goes further in this, in the idea of style becoming the ideological equivalent of the commodity by its universal 'exchangability', 'its free floating availability indicates for Buchloh nothing less than a

moment of closure and stasis'. (Buchloh, 1981, p.50)

Style is the signifying code within the artwork, it is the style which denotes for us whether the work (or culture) is progressive or regressive. Style in this sense denotes a movement in time. Buchloh rejects the argument put forward in defence of artists (such as Picasso, Carra, Cocteau, Picabia etc.) in reverting from processes of assemblage to narrative clarity 'that by looking backwards, the artist could even more dramatically look forward' (Buchloh, 1981, p.51). By the insistence on the ideological right of the artist to dip into the treasure trove of history for the 'appropriation of abandoned elements of style' (ibid). The subversive function of the original is transformed, its conventionality therein reduces it to a position of conventionality within history viewed as static. Once achieved, the artworks (or more importantly here the 'styles') do not simply disappear, 'but rather drift in history as empty vessels waiting to be filled by reactionary interests and in need of cultural legitimation'.

Buchloh's movement of closure and stasis occur in the removal from the art-historical process the idea of the Avant-Garde, as essentially a linear continuum, the adoption of past modes for Buchloh acts as a force which neutralises the subversive function of art. However, all that is in fact neutralised is the notion of the new, or Avant as subversive.

In the re-appropriation of previous styles, style is revealed as the mask

which perpetuates the mythology of time as continuous. This revelation calls to question the modernist assumption that stylist innovation is a real ideological movement, and instead suggests that it is style itself in its tangential relationship to time which is commodifiable, in its basic function.

Style cannot be subversive in the modernist sense, as modernist style functions in a relationship with the idea of a time continuum as progress. What is to be subverted is the notion of time continuum which presents history as natural and therein inevitable.

CHAPTER III

The end of stylistic discourse in the site of simulated meaning :

For Robert Pincus Witten (postminimalism into maximalism) 'style represents a moment of freeze and shrinkage' (Pincus Witten, 1980, p.258). An instant when artistic intuitions are perceived as possessing a 'consistent diagnostic' profile. For Pincus Witten it is in the overlapping, repetitious character of such diagnostic elements that makes it seem as if there is after all such a thing as style in the first place.

In modernism the forward seeming movement of artistic innovation, is only revealed as transparent style once the forms of the style themselves become repeated or overlapped. Buchloh's description of this revelation, as provoked by the strategic anachronistic positions undertaken by artists in the twenties and thirties, however, does not reveal to us the true diagnostic nature of their actions.

What may be debated then, when art of a diagnostic kind comes into view, may not in fact be a debate focusing on the current meaning of the forms within the work, but instead a debate on the relationship between the already understood meanings of the forms and the tension which exists in the re-sitting of their practice and existence.

Out of this, the art exists not to extend its referential capabilities (in the sense of the Avant-Garde by moving forever closer to moment of undiluted truth), instead makes an attempt to destroy its own terms of reference by centering its debate on the subject of referentiality itself. Truth is never

undiluted, but perhaps exists in the action of dilution. Style, for our needs, is the dilutant; it is the object of concern for us in our age if indeed such a moment of freeze and shrinkage, where practices of repetition and overlapping as means of diluting and repeating cultural meaning exist.

Pincus-Witten's analysis of style in the example of analytical cubism argues that style here is the geometrical analysis of natural form. In following through its stylistic principles fully such a methodology nevertheless succeeds in destroying an essential element of its argument. Hence the history of such a movement is a reticent one, even in its dynamic movement away from iconographical elements, the artistic innovation is successful in terms of its own logic, but such a success is available only in the instant or time when representational form is placed as the basic unit of concern.

The drive behind such initiatives within modernism are born out of a need to reify speculation. If the end product, the artwork is fully disenfranchised from its representational starting point is valid, it is only valid in terms of the linear stylistic movement from which dynamic it has emerged. It is valid as it corresponds to its opposite, its origin, its source representation. Modern method assumes the symbolic appearance of dynamic movement in contrast to what is perceived as symbolically static. The static is conventionalised form, bound to bourgeois culture and ordered in the unconscious as the norm and natural, for modernisms dynamism to symbolically assert itself it is fully dependent (as in the example of analytical cubism) on the unconscious order



Pablo Picasso Fan, salt, box and melon 1909 Oil on canvas

Pablo Picasso Bowl of Fruit 1910 oil on canvas

of normality and naturalness. In post-modern culture the skepticism which greets concepts of the natural, ensures therefore a breakdown in the modernist mythology of movement and dynamism.

A culture born out of such a crisis no longer engages in a Greenbergian dialogue of the subjectivisation of objective representational reality, but this moment of closure and stasis concerns itself with the blurred distinction between objective and subjective knowledge; such a period has no inherent symbolic dynamic, as its journey has no origin (author) and no destination (normality or harmony of perfection).

Once style has been emptied of its mythological meaning as signifier of progressive movement, it exists merely as a sign. However, in this perhaps is a positive note; modern society, it is argued, is subject to a greater tyranny than that described by Marx. In his analysis of exchange value of classical economics, as that which provides the basis of man's alienation by its theory of 'Labour and Exchange', Marx is in fact himself caught up in the pre-conceptions of the system he is trying to attack. In defining the working class by its labour power, Marx is agreeing to an essence which in fact the working class was assigned by the bourgeois class. Marx's argument seems rooted in the bourgeois work ethic.

Most importantly, in relation to Marx's arguments against classical economics, Marx does not call into question, the basic conception of exchange value and

use value which exists as the basis of capitalist consumption. Marx's argument goes so far as to argue for an equivalent correspondence between the two, seeing the accumulation of a surplus (profit) which occurs out of an imbalance as being the source of economic oppression.

In the writings of Jean Baudrillard (for a critique of the political economy of the sign) Baudrillard calls to question Marx's complicity with the bourgeois class in setting the exchange value / use value dynamic as 'a proper system of equivalences', in the first place. What denotes more strongly than anything else for Baudrillard is the way in which everything in the system is coded and measured and regulated according to an economic value. This is the real tyranny at work, in that it strikes on the level of human exchange. Going beyond the exchange control of material goods, this order of systemisation extends to every aspect of human exchange relations.

Capitalist economics have moved from form-commodity to form-sign. The new tyranny is more subtle than the exploitation of labour, and in its destruction of social relations more totalitarian. It is achieved, according to Baudrillard 'not so much by the ownership of the means of production, but by the control of the code' (Baudrillard, 1975, p.122)

The way out for Baudrillard is not simply a return to a pre-signifying nature (which is impossible), but rather by the intensification of the signifying

process itself. Baudrillard sees the masses' position in relation to consumerism as a position which will provoke the self-destruction of 'the sign'. Essential to this thesis is the realisation of the sign as existent (in contemporary culture) independent of signifier and signified, the sign by relation to the mass (and this is equivalent to the position of the sign) is no longer seen as a referent in an action of relating to any equivalent meaning (either positive or negative). The sign exists in the here and now as a mere spectacle of meaning. Consumption under such a position of cultural meaninglessness becomes a game and politics a theatre.

This hyperlogic by which the sign comes to function after overuse, eventually presents it as literal, when read by the masses 'literally' the sign itself cannot function in relation to a political system which demands at least, the presumption of meaning. This isolated extreme, disconnected position of the sign as merely sign, inevitably results in the destruction of the code itself.

Relating the emptiness inherent in the closure of a stylistic discourse within modernism to the disenfranchised position of the political sign, the free floating availability of style in its freedom to subsume content in post-modernist art acts as a metaphor for the predicted / inevitable millenarist's picture of salvation. Style being the effect of the sign, and time more crucial to the overall structure of the chain or total code, this

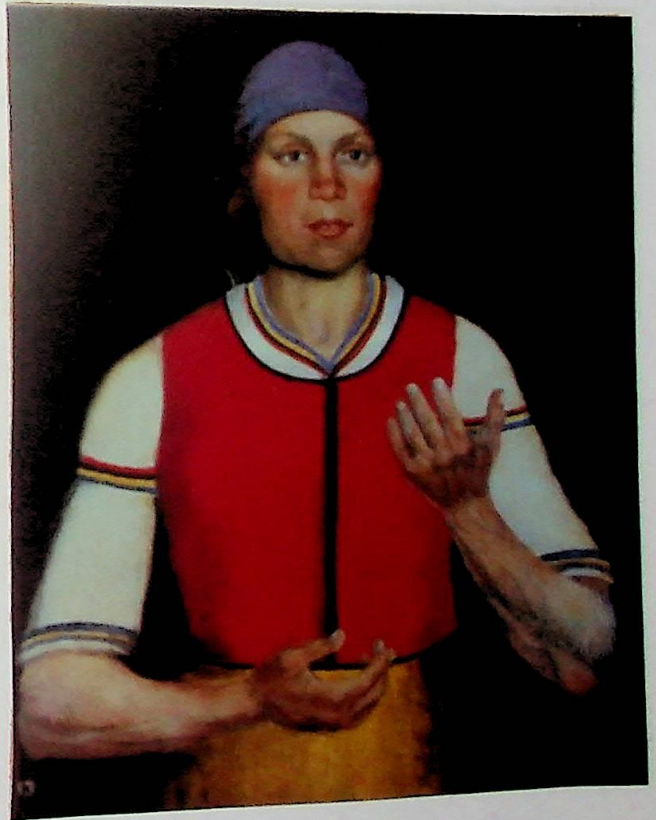
free-floating spectacle of style is the precursor to the demise of our theoretical time, as simulated meaning in the sign is the precursor to the demise of the code.

This vision is classically apocalyptic, in that it envisages the tyrannical control of the code's existence as the only possible system for change should such a tyranny achieve a complete monopoly on the generation and distribution of meaning. The codes can only destruct once it has achieved total control of human-exchange relations. In its final state (before our redemption) it exists as an antichrist of significance.

CHAPTER IV

The fin de siecle spectacle of consumption, a celebration of the new :

(31)



Kasimir Malevich Black Cross oil on canvas late 1920s

Kasimir Malevich Female Worker oil on canvas 1933

Returning to Buchloh's essay it is important to understand that his purpose in centering his critique on the past historical practices of early modernists, is not merely to provide a new critical angle on a historical practice, but rather to relocate and ascribe such attitudes of practice to the present.

For him the practices of Picabia and Malevich are regressive, in that they avoid engagement with their present realities and thereby evade cultural input which might be constructive in the creation of positive social change. He is wrong however to draw such a clear line from there to here. For it is precisely in the focusing of contemporary artists upon a present reality from which the necessity of a strategic stylistic regression emerges.

Post modernism is characterised in the first instance, not by stylistic shifts of emphasis (as manifest in the new painting of the early 80s) but such a stylistic shift is a symptom of the shifted object of concern, in artistic practices polemic with the dominant culture. As an industrial age becomes a technological one, the process of cultural commodification changes not only its form of action but the style and language of its systems also.

After Baudrillard we realise, the dominant culture, not only as the face of capitalism, but as the source of language meaning and the origin of systems

of equivalence which run just as neatly through the philosophy of modernism as the populist or low-art, which seemed to be the totemic manifestation of regressive capitalism for so long.

A concern with marxism, centers itself no longer on the alienation resulting from the extraction of a surplus value of labour; instead the blurred distinctions, which define such an alienation are examined in the deconstruction of the assumption of value and use value, a common denominator equivalence system which operates across ideological and politically opposite positions.

The acceleration of the code's progress to the stage at which the sign is isolated, provides a society in which a consumer culture is a space where alienation, communication and pleasure co-exist, to such a degree as to be indistinguishable from one another; as the power of signification for diverse signs is founded upon the same equivalence system, a proper means of understanding differentiation emerges.

As we approach such a degree zero, of cultural assurance, it is hardly suprising that artists should focus on the areas of contemporary culture where the distinctions of alienation are perhaps at their most blurred. Artists in the 1980s such as Eric Fishl, Cindy Sherman and David Salle and Jeff. Koons enter into such a debate, where the irony of their works often stems from the viewers problem in distinguishing what response , emotionally or intellectually is suitable. Such art by presenting precise, discontinuous

pieces of our visual environment provokes in its viewer the experience of the problems in language differentiation, the route by which the contemporary alienation becomes indefinable.

It is no coincidence that such a focus existed in the work of artists such as Manet and Degas at the end of the last century on the eve of the twentieth century, and that such a re-evaluation should take place now after the adventures of modernism in our own 'fin de siecle'.

There is a certain dread which accompanies a beginning; the optimism of a beginning is tinged with the dread of an unknown, the concept of a future appears even more spectre-like still, when our means of definition from pleasure to pain and labour are impaired. On the eve of such a beginning an endgame of re-defining the present begins so that we would be equipped to recognise at least the possibility of a future. As James Hall has written -

Post-modernism is apocalyptic in nature, and makes little or no provision for the future, it is fixated on the present and the past. (Art International Neo geo's bachelor artists, 1989, p.30)

It is a fixation which comes about out of the re-positioning of the viewer. In order for the future to be possible the past and present must be neatly perceived and rounded off to a completion in the present, it must be fully consumed. In order for the viewer to fulfill such a position of consumer, the painting in such an age; for example, the work of the German neo-

expressionists, deals with history in such a way as to celebrate in material terms the re-ification of ideas and ideologies; the form of the work is such that according to critics such as Donald Kuspit (discussing the work of Anselm Kiefer).

We watch those signs, still hauntingly contemporary - of German historical and cultural power, being laid to rest in the German collective consciousness by being treated idealistically as unconditional sources of artist power. (Kuspit, 1983, p.47)

It is in the production of objects of artistic power that for Kuspit the future is laid bare, the consumption of history in the present by its eclipse into an object which might be bound voo-doo like to the prison of the modern cultural consumption centre, the museum, so that people may in the words of Kuspit be 'authentically new'. 'They can be freed of a past identity by artistically reliving it' (Kuspit, 1983, p.47).

It is intrinsic to a culture driven from the position of the consumer, that the objects of concern in such a culture are seen to be significant only at the moment of their being consumed, contrary to the modernist practise of concentrating critical attention on the means of production and the importance of process. In a consumerist culture we celebrate the 'end' of the production process; we focus attention on the object in its full moment of spectacle, its moment of consumption.

Consumption is, in a sense the end of the object in a capitalist economy; it is the final step of the production process, more it is a step more extreme than the advertising or publication of an object.

A consumerist culture is a culture which celebrates the essence of an 'end', by focusing attention on the moment at which the object loses its referential meaning by extraction from the chain of events which brought it into being. The act of consumerism is then, a type of endgame, in which objects are dislocated from their process of production (modernist meaning) which lends their meaning to them. It is here where the signifier is separated from the signified.

This is, of course, a consumer lead capitalism (as predicted by Baudrillard). It is not as Marx would have conceived, a society structured according to the production process. The production process is instead structured according to the consumer society, its essence resides in the notion of the consumer. No experience or event becomes whole, until it is finely consumed in the spectacle of its own end.

It is possible to relate phenomena such as the contemporary fetish for retro-speculation, tourism and fast-food to such a theory - however it is more interesting to observe parallels in the french urban society of the late nineteenth century.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century Paris had established itself as a commercial centre. Its department stores, arcades and international expositions provided focal points to the city's desire for consumption, the urban landscapes of commodity display, as evidenced in the shops and great expositions of the day were finely balanced by the public displays of new lifestyles and taste brought about by industrial chance.

The poetry of Baudelaire as discussed by Benjamin (The Paris of the second empire in Baudelaire) provides an active critique of the mass tendency to consumption in this age. Benjamin recognises the work of this artist as engaging with the paradoxes and implications inherent in the public manifestations of parisian identity. Baudelaire provides in his recognition of the prostitute, dandy, the bohemian or the flaneur, for example an identification with models of behaviour who personify the ambiguity of heroic individuality in the space of commodification and increased automation.

T.J. Clarke in his writings, asserts the importance of industrialisation and its effects on the changing lifestyle and priorities of the parisian classes. Clarke emphasises the cultural importance in the depicted content of impressionist works. Once referenced, the regattas, resorts and parks of impressionist paintings begin to throw up questions never referred to in the stylistic discourse which would usually accompany such work.

Stylistic concerns, the effects of fragmentation in depicting the 'moment' come about, it can be argued, out of an effort to describe a Paris of change. In its own view, Paris had come to see itself as a dynamic modern centre, but more especially it saw itself as being in a constant state of momentary flux. Its sense of itself as part of a historical continuum propelled by industrial innovation, provoked a social climate, in which social signs and significations became increasingly indistinguishable from one another. Edgar Degas' painting 'Place de la Concorde' (Vicomte Lepic and his daughters), his stylistic decisions and devices suggest to us such a social reading of the painting. Rather than existing merely as a passing topographical study of Parisian life, this work goes beyond its mere context of place, ie - geography, and beyond its description as a portrait. Instead Degas has painted at once, the essence of 'time' (as a real subject) and its effect on social reality.

The old Paris, as evidenced in the boundary wall of the Tuilleries, the eighteenth century mansions, and indeed the 'Place' itself, are disturbed and compressed by Degas' insistence on placing the subjects (of movement) in a wide empty stretch of space. The Place becomes defined in its essence not by the geometry or particularity of Degas' rendering but rather by the manner in which the movement of Vicomte Lepic, his daughters and the other passersby move across it; the city becomes less the subject and more an arena. It is not, however, as if the portraits in the piece are in themselves the subject.



Edgar Degas Place de la Concorde (Vicomte Lepic and his daughters) 1875
oil on canvas (destroyed)

Vicomte Lepic himself is a baudelarian character, a dandy whose existence with rather than without his children on the streets indicates a further ambiguity. Some years before such a man would be in the city alone, his family in the country. However the rebuilding of the city in the 1850s and 60s provided a modern metropolis which attracted whole families. The Viscount's identity itself has fundamentally changed, this change is also evident in his lifestyle with the presence of his children. Within such a new metropolis his position as 'dandy' or 'aristocrat' begins to lose its glamour and relevance through greater democratisation.

Such a reality is fully consistent with Degas' sidelong glance at the Viscount, and his vertical depiction draws the viewer to a figure on the vertical left, setting up a system visual equivalence. The Viscount's portrait is both public and ambivalent. The disjunctured composition and forms of the piece, in displaying urban change, present 'time' (the open-ended possibility of movement to another place) as the subject; the persons depicted in the seeming randomness of their movement (Lepic's daughters face his opposite direction) serve merely to exaggerate the physical emptiness of the piece. Degas' stylistic devices make it impossible to imagine the image as a 'still', it evokes and implies a continuum beyond the picture's edge. However, the essential emptiness or openness of the image suggest that such an implied movement is the movement defined by time.

The stylistic effects were therefore not the innovative response to a mere

formalist debate, but rather a means to consolidate a language capable of expressing the 'moment' of fin de siècle power in the deconstruction of societal structures.

The blurred distinctions between classes which came about through greater industrialisation were visually manifested in the leisure activities of the bourgeoisie and the aspiring bourgeoisie. The bars, parks and theatres of Paris provided the arena for such a play of aspiration, as such diverse class groups shared the same urban facilities for leisure. At first glance it would be impossible to distinguish to distinguish in the throng of people walking in the Tuileries Gardens, the exact class groups to which any person (Viscount Lepic for instance) might belong. As T.J. Clarke has written :

The world of leisure was thus a great symbolic in which the battle for bourgeois identity was fought. (T.J. Clarke, 1985, p.204)

Far from the proposed alienation of Marx' worker the use value of the worker's income provides the means to dress the figures seen in impressionist works in their bourgeois clothing.

In this sense the action of consumption and a lifestyle which accommodates the display or spectacle of consumption is perceived collectively as a dynamic component in social progress. The accumulation of buying power is seen as the means to radical social change.

Such a reading of this age would echo Baudrillard in his vision of the codes progress towards its inevitable end.

Manet's 'Concert in the Tuilleries Gardens' of 1862 seems a little like a depiction of an alienated work-force. However, comparing it to a similar scene by Renoir 'The luncheon of the boating party' of 1887, Manet's tone and purpose become quite distinct in contrast to the idealogical purpose of Renoir (both artist in a sense here focus upon the spectacle of the commodity at the moment of its end in the act of consumption).

Renoir's work celebrates uncritically a world of bourgeois pleasure, although some of its compositional devices in its perspective and colour are modern. This work owes its allegiance to the tradition of sensuosity in french painting leading from Watteau. It is however merely intriguing narrative of innuendo - most importantly however, Renoir in his stylistic delivery has concentrated so much attention on the materialistic description of texture and effect, for example in his rendering of the still-life on the table, that in practice he encourages the viewer to enter into the particular in his work rather than as Degas does in the 'Place de la concorde' forces the viewer out of the work. Renoir ponders the qualities of the materials of bourgeois culture, whereas in Manet's concert at the Tuilleries he describes such a culture in order to see beyond it : to understand its essential directionality.



Edward Manet The concert in the Tuileries 1862 oil on canvas

Aguste Renoir The luncheon of the boating party 1881 oil on canvas

Manet's work is a democratic depiction of the Leisure world of the new buying classes and aspiring bourgeoisie, whereas in Renoir's work we are allowed in such a scene of leisure the illusion of being capable of distinguishing one individual class of character from another class. In Manet's work no detail is rendered too closely so as to detract from the overall mass image. His stylistic delivery is such that groups of people are rendered broadly, to indicate more the changes from moment to moment, than what is most static and constant. The viewer's movement across the work is characterised by an abruptness of beginning and end, both in terms of narrative and stylistic content. No central motif holds the piece together as Renoir's still life does; rather the abruptness of this freeze like format is consistent with the real experience of seeing in an unedited rather than edited way. Such techniques are employed as a means to connect with a psychic and social idea of the 'present' as significant.

Momentary movement or action becomes the subject in this description of an affluent mass. The object of consumption itself - the concert band who will provide the spectacle are not depicted, this is in marked contrast to the spectacle of consumption provided by Renoir in his luncheon - still life.

Although (unlike Renoir's painting) Manet does include portraits of distinguished individuals such as Baudelaire, Theophile Gautier, Jaques Offenbach, his brother and Manet himself, one could never imagine such portraits as the



Edward Manet The concert in the Tuileries (detail) 1862 oil on canvas

mere reason for the total work. Indeed no single head is described more fully than another in a need to create an overall, if fragmented, effect - a curious equality of emphasis spread between the description of the elements of nature, physiognomy (heads) and the accoutrements of bourgeois lifestyle (clothing).

It is as if no individual, signified by either class or appearance seemed sufficient to focus upon, at a time where the inevitable change from moment to moment alone would generate its own history, historically, it seemed gathered its momentum from its dynamic of psychic movement : such a movement it seemed defined the parameters of social progress and movement itself.

In short, as if the depiction of the action of time in its momentary eclipses of light upon form, had a power of its own to act as signifier upon signified to provide the sign of age.

This disintegration of class structures occur here, as the mass involves itself in the production process. It is by this process that the mass acquires the taste and aspirations which eventually evolve into our own highly sophisticated consumerism.

The symbolic essence of a concept of time as a linear, socially progressive movement, is an essential essence in the transition of a society into an

industrial machine age. A belief in the significance of a moment of time as being a threshold to social improvement is an idea present in the collective unconscious of Parisian society at the turn of the century. The individual's subscription to the code of time operates as his subscription to the code of language does, and thereby pre-empts and ensures the efficiency of its influence on history, the newness of things.

The dress and ambience of Parisian citizens are in a way metaphoric for such changes in the popular thinking of the age. Indeed the Eiffel Tower of 1889 is on the one hand a symbol of a new machine age, and on the other it is a monument to the concurrence in the closing of one century and the beginning of a new one.

The cultural artefacts of such an age from painting through clothing, to the Eiffel Tower, although seeming to reflect only stylistic fragmentation, class and industrialisation, do in fact substantiate also a type of symbolism for change, as the process of time independently provokes in a fin de siècle culture.

Such a fin de siècle is facilitated in the mass faith by subscription to the meanings implied by (the novelty of the new) the cultural output is accommodated here within an industrial culture and therefore its cultural output is consistent with such a structure in its positioning of production and progress as its vehicle of desire.

It was Baudelaire who envisaged history as a chain along which each individual art approached its essence. He was aware also of the obstacles placed in the way to such an essence by industrialisation. Understanding such obstacles as the contexts within which the commodification of the art-work becomes possible, Baudelaire saw the artwork as being transformed into art-commodity or even artifact. Rather than the object existing as a source of generative meaning; industrialisation, leading art into an arena of consumption, provides objects desirable for their materiality and ability to be consumed.

The objects and attitudes of the age, their beckoning of a new beginning, are a landmark in the great tradition of the new, or novel. This is the tradition of novelty subscribed to in Avant-Gardism of the 20th century, by Greenberg and indeed by Buchloh. The necessity of such an instinct towards the new, grows from an unwillingness on the side of modernism to allow for any possibility for the commodification of art.

If we can say then that the notion of art as travelling within time / history is not negative in itself, as it implies a progress towards essence - through its continuing progress of production. The process of industrialisation would seem therefore (at least in the Paris of the late 19th century) compatible in its dynamics to such a progress.

However the reification process inevitable within capitalist production in its essence and powerful ideology provides the germ which in its spreading

mythology allows for the commodification of culture.

In Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's concept of the new (Paris capital of the 19th century) he writes :

The villification which things suffer by their ability to be taxed as commodities is counter-balanced in Baudelaire's conception, by the inestimable value of novelty. Novelty represents an absolute which can neither be interpreted (as an allegory) nor compared (as a commodity), it becomes the ultimate entrenchment of art.

(Benjamin, 1939, vol VI, p.71)

Such a cultural belief in the currency of newness and novelty derives in origin from Baudelaire.

However the cyclical methods of modernism to provide for novelty relied on the same ideological machinery for its output as capitalism; the modernism of process into production (as evidenced in analytical cubism) as a means of progress, narrows the movement towards an essence to merely a movement toward the quest for the absolute new (as in later Greenberg writing).

Benjamin, understanding such a contradiction wrote of Baudelaire's concept of the new -

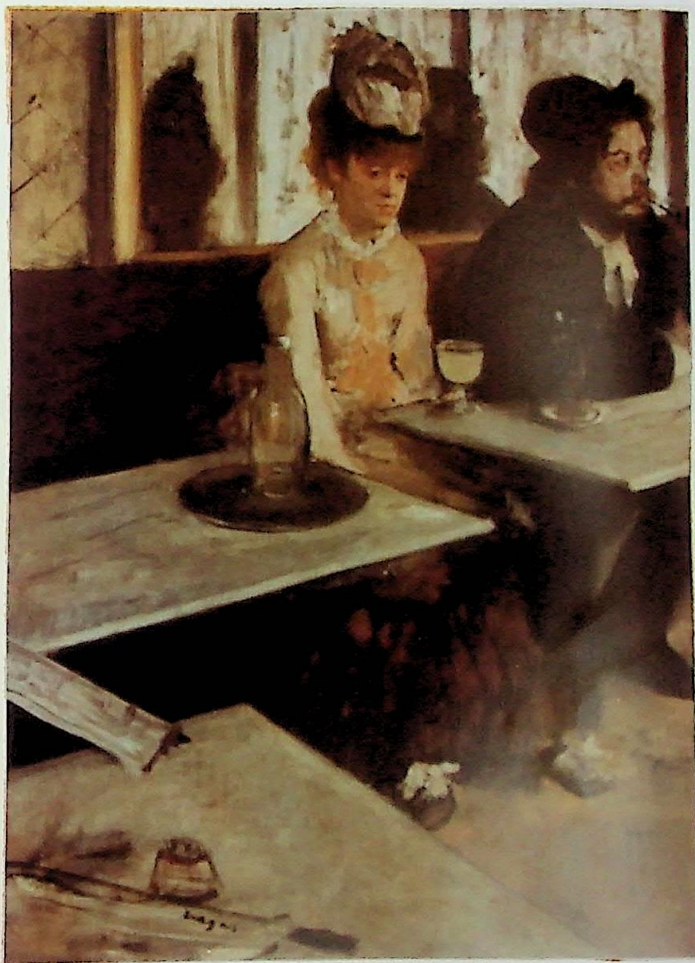
that the last defense of art coincided with the most advanced line of attack of the commodity. This remained hidden to Baudelaire.

(ibid, p.71 - 72)

In the work of Edgar Degas such paradoxes are an inherent feature of his attempt to provide a critique and depiction of bourgeois 19th century culture.

Degas' avant-gardism is an awkward effect, his movement toward an essence is curiously stumped by an unwillingness to shrug off the effects of a classical ingresque tradition. In *L'absinthe* of 1876, the overall de-centered effects of perspective exist in curious conflict with the carefully drawn and modelled lead of Ellen Andree, the broadness of the surrounding radical composition; its cutting forms drive in their generality towards this particular passive passage of observed modeling. Degas' insistence on such passages in his work exists as a refusal to deny a certain historicism in his work, unlike Manet in his *tuilleries*, Degas in his stylistic depiction of Andree lacks the general effects of the work to a particular individualised moment of time. The blandness of her expression expresses no complex alienation : it marks merely the passage of time around her, she is a static form caught in the structure of a shifting surface. Her face is a moment of freeze and shrinkage in the centre of an incoherent, asymmetrical movement of white, umber and ochre. This head binds the image fully to history and defines it as a Baudelarian novelty.

Baudelaire's urge towards the new, which is a directional impetus within modernism is a perishable concept, newness and novelty are the guises of capitalist commodification and the quality of novelty is itself essential to the fetishistic essence of the commodity form, or indeed the artifact.



Edgar Degas L'absinthe

1876 oil on canvas

Degas' curious modernity in co-existence with a world of bourgeois privilege and convention implied in his Ingresque Classicism, therefore, is in one sense a cipher of Buchloh's 'regression'; yet understanding the paradox of Baudelaire's thesis, it is precisely such a regression that qualifies Degas' work as radical fin de siècle departure ; although fully acknowledging his bondage to the language of history, his work embodies the conflicted elements of stylistic and ideological change.

If then the 'end of art' is the commodification of its products and practices, the final spectacle of its meaning should come about after the search for novelty, in its consumption as a fetishised commodity form. Benjamin writes - (of Paris of the second empire 'in Baudelaire') :

But once modernism has received its due, its time has run out, it will become apparent whether it will be able to be antiquity.

(Benjamin, 1938, p.81)

This final fetishisation of modernism in order to commit it to antiquity is a facet of the post-modern sensibility (the term post-modernism itself implies the end of modernism and thereby our own 'present' age is identified from a continuing negation of modernity).

The millennium as an end offers the moment for Benjamin's administration of modernism to antiquity - the death of modernity in the symbolic moment of an apocalypse of consumerism and cultural consumption, in the indulgence

accompanying the celebrated end of the 20th century.

Here we have the artist as a provider not of icons of movement toward its essence, rather the artist is the provider of the spectacle of meanings as envisaged by Baudrillard. A period of packaging the commodities of the modern production process provides a space for the commodification and reification of our century's cultural production. This positions the artist as spectacle maker, the spectacle of his meaning may be as Buchloh has written :

This carnival of eclecticism, this theatrical spectacle, this window dressing of self quotation becomes transparent as a masquerade of alienation from history; a return of the repressed in cultural costume. It is essential to the functioning of historicism and its static view of history, that it assemble the various fragments of historical recollection and incantation according to the degree of projection and identification that these images of the past will provide for the needs of the present.

(Buchloh, 1981, p.51)

CHAPTER V

The spectacle of the end : the artwork consumed in the enactment of the millennium present :

If there is a blatant contrast between the dynamic of movement and progress over the threshold of the last century, and the 'dynamic' of stasis and end at the approach of our millenium, it comes about by changes and shifts in the role of the individual in society. The transition of society into industrialisation and onwards to a technology age shifts the role of labourer to spectator, the role of producer becomes the role of consumer.

The work of french artists such as Manet and Degas sought to develop a language capable of a dynamic input into society. It sought to change, by the development of a new visual language capable of provoking a range of responses that an approved language was incapable of initiating. Current cultural practice possesses a different directional dynamic; it is constructed in a way that positions the viewer, its audience is its primary impetus, and artwork is made according to its moment of proposed consumption by the viewer. It is perceived directionally in its manufacture from the vantage point of the viewer; the viewer in turn will readily consume the work, and at this moment of public spectacle the process achieves at least the illusion of a unity. In Lacanian terms the 'succession of signs' is perceived as having fulfilled its direction, an orientation.

Referring again to Pincus Witten's term 'a moment of freeze and shrinkage', which it seems implies both the dislocation of the sign as envisaged by Baudrillard, and the stylistic implications of an enclosed, tightly contrived art which in its freeze, fixes on the present and in its shrinkage metaphors

the commodification of the artwork itself.

Given this as a context, the art of this post-industrial, consumer orientated society, becomes neatly transparent in its rhetoric, a rhetoric which reflects its submission to the inevitable effect of an millenarist language on its interpretation.

The paintings of Eric Fischl are a case in point, a transparent choice in itself when one considers its parallel in a time / language proximity to the fin de siecle in France of the late 19th century.

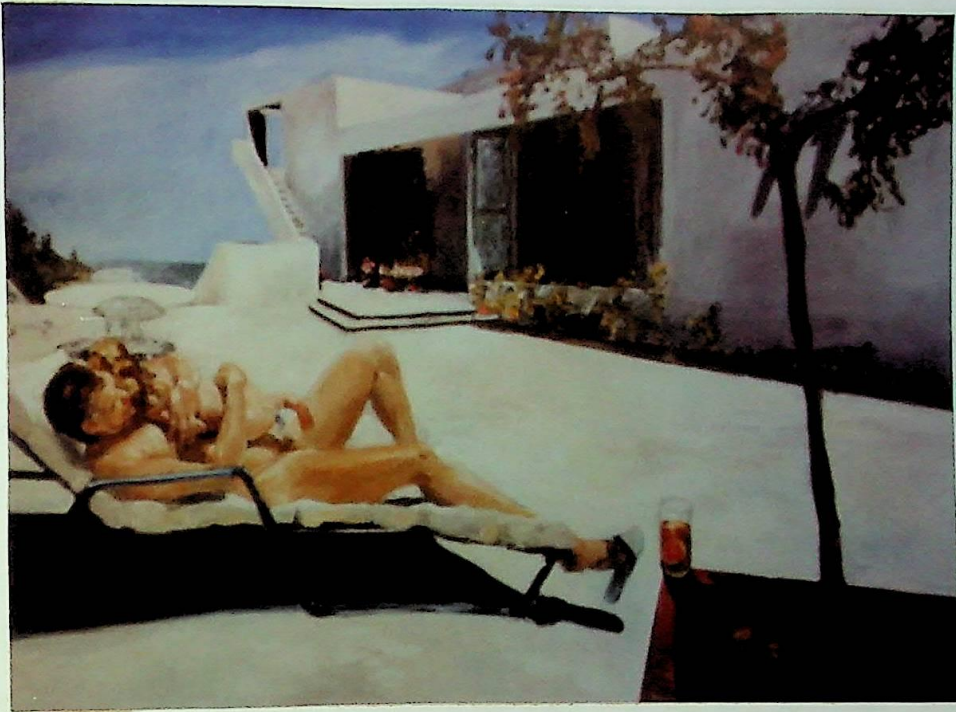
Eric Fischl is an impressionist of the technological age. His paintings in seeming to revive an obsolete convention of figure-ground relationships, succeed in creating fictional reference in which the figure exists as the illusion of naturalness. In doing so, Fischl brings to trial at once, the artificiality of art and thereby the wider systems of artificiality employed as the agents of meaning in the technological world.

His paintings are as much a self-conscious critique of artistic stylisation as they are an investigation into the stylistics of contemporary life. In the modernist critique of impressionist production, the endeavour to define the formal stylistic development of the movement provided a hierarchy of significance which denied the deconstruction of their output.

Fischl's work, by deliberately employing a reactionary style, seeks to reveal the emptiness of it as a metaphor. He succeeds in employing the painted mark only to present a style of surface and depiction by the weight and density of his content. The style of the work, though not by deliberation incoherent, is successful if only in its demonstration of the limitations of stylistic expression.

Such a position is in evidence in Fischl's 'Daddy's Girl' of 1984. It provides a counterpoint to Degas' 'Vicente Lepic and his daughters'; however Fischl here places us not only in an artificial space but also in a socially and psychologically private space. The style of the work by comparison to Degas is of a bland failed realism, it is as if the artist having described as minimally as possible the structures and forms of the paintings motifs refused to comment gesturally on what is a loaded image. The ambiguity inherent in such a delivery leaves the sour taste in the viewer's mouth, yet the coolness of Fischl's approach allows the viewer no reason to reproach the artist himself for an endorsement of his meaning. The air of calm in this work seems to mock the innuendo Fischl invites, the viewer is forced into a position of moral judgment. As we have already seen however in Degas' family piece, slanting forms provide in themselves a moral and social statement which merely deliver to rather than challenge the viewer.

Fischl's practice attempts a warholian neutrality - the images derive from photographic sources, and the finished look derives more from the method of



Eric Fischl Daddy's Girl 1984 oil on canvas

Edgar Degas Place de la Concorde 1875.

transfer from photo to glassine sheets to canvas surface than to an adherence to a belief in an emotional expressive power of transference employed in a brushstroke. Unlike impressionist painters of a century ago, Fischl does not paint from the environmental reality around him. Fischl's realism comes from a system of editing possibilities for depiction, which employs the predicted vantage point of the viewer as a method of measuring the significance of such choices.

Our post-modern understanding of the implications inherent in the practice of a representationalism through the contrived and masculinised medium of paint, is exploited by Fischl, as we are forced to question the implications of his choice of stylistic delivery; in such a context of content, the impossibility of style as a singular referent to the author as primary source of meaning becomes apparent; and in the space provided through such stylistic ambiguity, the spectator subscribes to the process of meaning generation.

The intellectual position necessary to the provision of such a role for the spectator, demands of the author a cool detachment. A detached neutrality which favours the viewer as a source of content over the author, as the unified center of meaning. Fischl's abrupt soap-operatic system of delivery is fully consistent with such a distance. As Donald Kuspit writes :

The Hollywoodesque air of his practices, their blandness, is a version of a warholian neutrality.

To see Fischl's work as a text is useful here. As a text we view it in its complete light as that which is under constant completion in the space of the viewer. The neutrality of his position of author allows for the type of 'play' as that described by Roland Barthes (from work to text 1971) to be indulged by the viewer or reader. Barthes distinguishes between the work- a totally holistic concept as operating on the level of a sign and the text- which is the constant 'play' of the signifier. For the artist to set about a work in the way that a viewer sets about a text is to envisage a discontinuity, a narrative with no centre and no end, such a field of play or text is that which is set up by Fischl. The essential technological differentiation between the work of Fischl's fin de siècle and that of Parisian 19th century can be to define Fischl as text and impressionism as the work.

The difference is the following, the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a portion of the space of books (in a library, for example); the text on the other hand is a methodological field. The opposition may recall (without at all reproducing term for term) Lacan's distinction between reality and the real: the one is displayed and the other is demonstrated (*la realite, se monde le reel se demontre*); likewise the work can be seen (in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses) the text is a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules) the work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the moment of discourse (or rather it is text, for the very reason that it knows itself as text).

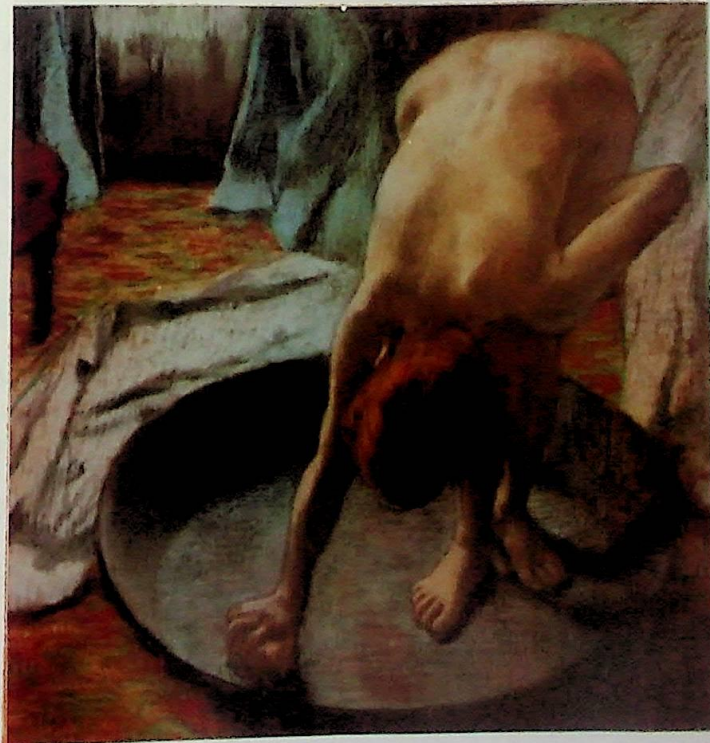
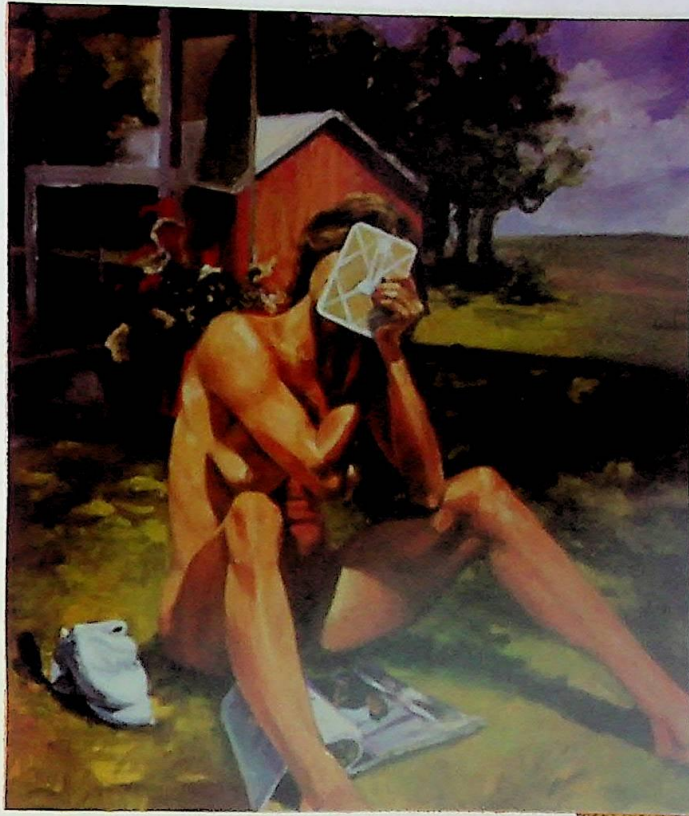
(Roland Barthes, 1971, p.156)

In such a context, Fischl's work operates out of its totemic system of exchangeability in the viewers relationship to it. It is crucially incomplete and its space is defined more by what it is not, rather than by what it is seen to be.

In voyeurism / American style, Kuspit asserts Fischl's strategy in placing the viewer as an adolescent voyeur. In such a role the viewer parallels the lancaian model of the child in his initial subscription to a language system; the adolescent is placed in a position of alienation, he sees his position as that which is outside the adult world, he does not fully understand the value of adult activities due to a lack of experience; yet he will engage in the primary means of accessing such experience in the action of looking - a tentative but committing way of subscribing to the systems of belief toward which he is inevitably drawn.

When one engages with Fischl's pictures, in such a role the text is understood as beyond a mere moment of possible personal closure and completion, yet our enfranchisement to the systems of meaning-generation in language is assured. In our play of consumption in the external realities of the text, we are however ensured of our bondage and contribution to their eventual consequences of meaning.

Fischl's "Vanity" also of 1984 illustrates perfectly such a consolidated approach, Fischl here toys with the total concept of looking, and one level



Eric Fischl Vanity 1984 oil on canvas

Edgar Degas The Tub 1886 oil on canvas

it is the voyeuristic energy of the viewer which is channelled as the fuel of the work and on another, a deeper lacanian consequence of looking toward self-objectification (in a mirror) is engaged. This work in its totality acts as a mirror to the consciousness of the viewer, unlike Manet's Olympia the viewer's gaze is unreciprocated and instead the depicted female's gaze is directed toward a mirror blocking the view of the viewer, in a single action Fischl's 'Vanity' plays as a text might upon the theme of closure and completion. We are placed perspectively in direct confrontation to the figure in the image and thereafter denied access to the face, our practiced lacanian focal-centre for moral and self objectification. This painting is significant in successfully locking the viewer into a rhetorical dialogue which in its lacanian structure of viewing ultimately puts the viewers consciousness on trial for the art of looking itself.

Comparing Fischl's oeuvre to the art of Degas, the subtle differentiation in their orientation toward the viewer becomes clear; both artists in dealing with the topography of everyday bourgeois life have felt it necessary, consciously or unconsciously to adopt the role of the voyeur. However whereas in the case of Degas, the initial artistic strategy is to place himself personally in the space of voyeurism, and to practice such an art as a means of depiction. For Fischl such a responsibility in the self-consciousness of his actions is clearly avoided, and by his stylistic and practical neutrality, such a responsibility is placed solidly upon the shoulder of the viewer.

The representational intention as evidenced in the output of the two artists offers some obvious parallels - the choice of Montmartre as a site for depiction, in its capacity as an outlying dormitory suburb of Paris in the late 19th century reflects Fischl's interest in a possible equivalent in a technological age, the suburban town, and the shared emphasis upon the inhabitants of such places as indulgent in a tranquility and abundance of well being which may exist only as a thin veneer.

The strength and consolidation of such parallels however seems to emphasise more fully the stylistic shifts and difference in pictorial method and composition which the two artists employ - differences which indicate a disparity in the underlying assumptions held regarding the relationship of author to spectator.

This disparity pivots on the issue of naturalism, whereas Degas is celebrated for the perceived naturalness and thereby normality of his images, by contrast Fischl's work is a discontinuous narrative of contrived fictions, constructed to present a false naturalness; as Fischl's painted stroke reveals itself to be a carefully contrived symbol, the discontinuity of his representation creates an unease which methaphors the masquerade of superficiality which is being described.

Degas, on the other hand, in 'The Tub' of 1886, seems to be the embodiment of naturalism - each gesture and stroke is faithful to an accurate portrayal

of a single moment. The uncomfortable pose and nakedness of the figure do not confront the viewer, rather they create a perspective which places the viewer in a position of physical power over the viewed object. It is not simply these factors which contrast most strongly with Fischl's vanity; it is the emptiness of the piece as a potential space for dialogue with the viewer. The objective distance generated by Degas' convincing naturalism suggests it has a formalist study and thereby contradicts itself as a depiction of a specifically bourgeois middle class woman's bedroom.

By his stylistic displacements in this delivery; the acute angles, the play of light and the depiction of details which lead beyond the picture's edge, Degas suggests a greater narrative which continues beyond the picture's edge.

In short his 'dishonesty' is the pretention that what is being portrayed is a 'slice of life'. Here he leaves no room for Barthes play of the signifier, as this art operates as a sign rather than as a text. As the play of the reader is inhibited, Degas' work operates to cajole the viewer into a suspension of disbelief and thereby begin to correspond to the author's desire.

By such a process the centered nature of the author's role is affirmed and the consumerist role of the viewer in active play with the text is impossible (as a possible stage in the process of meaning).

Fischl instead, in indulging in the possibility of a 'textural play' allows for a staginess of effect, the result of which, a self conscious irony of ambiguous morality is achieved by the placement of the viewer centre-stage as one who is on trial.

In 'Time for bed' (1980) a post-industrial alienation is described. The african fetish object which appear on the left of the work, is at once a phallic symbol for the symbolically castrated father (signified by his maimed arm). It exists as a commodity consolation in a space of broken communication. This de-centred family compensates for their accumulated meaninglessness in the material ownership and consumption of ideological symbols; in their most exotic or spectacular forms. The exoticism of the masculine fetish contrasts sharply with the more local superman outfit of the young boy.

In such an ambivalent climate both cultural signs exist merely as meaning spectacles of male phallogentric power. The scene is a party; the totemic dance of the people outside the windows seem to mock in their bonding activity the dislocation of Fischl's nuclear family.

This dislocation of father from family and children from adults is a play which acts out a fundamental breakdown in the realm of human exchange relations. The systemised or coded nature of suburban lifestyle here, is the alienating force applied to human exchange, and not the marxist surplus in value exchange of labour.



Eric Fischl Time for Bed 1980 oil on canvas.

If Fischl is indeed provoking a critique of late 20th century culture in the process of depicting such a genre, his methods and motivation clearly reflect a millenarist orientation.

The american dream itself is a kind of fantasy of terrestrial heaven. Fischl's work presents such a utopia turned sour in our own time. His land of suburban closure and stasis exists as a metaphor for the idealogical meaninglessness which inevitably accompanies technological advance.

The siting of his plays in the suburban is significant, as such an enviroment rather than willing itself closer to a center of social exchange (marketplace, workplace, civic centre etc) (as Montmarte would) exist precisely to dislocate itself from the usual referential centres for social meaning. It is a space in which the separation of individuals from the centers of social exchange is possible.

In this, it is a geographical symbol for Baudrillard's dislocated sign, in the breakdown of a linguistic reality by the sign as existing independent of a proper referent.

In re-positioning the viewer as the pivot of meaning, Fischl attests to the basic and fundamental logic of meaning as an externalised force, de-centered as in time and as in the code of languages directionality.

The work therefore evidences more than the mere play of a fin de siecle logic in providing a distance which allows for the fragmentation of 'movement' within the work and in a greater time contiuum of social progress. His work fully confronts the apocalyptic concept of finality in the breakdown of codes of human exchange through industrial and technological advance. Fischl's work exists to constitute a logical en-actment of a millensrist end.

CONCLUSION

It is here attributed to the conceptual movement of time, a significance equivalent to the importance of language structures. As a sociological construct the ideology of times continuing movement provides at once a means to define the limits of reality, and the means to re-present such realness as a linear history.

Re-understanding time as a mere system of exchange rather than the logical pace civilisation's history, it is implied that reality itself has no particular context, but more crucially that the history of the real has no ideological direction or no future.

The directionless state is revealed in the instances of stylistic ambiguity within modernism; a style reveals itself as the signifier of progress in a modernist discourse, the anacronistic stylistics of post-modern culture grows out of the problematic activity of identifying an ideological 'present' in post-industrial culture.

The de-centered face of our fin de millennial culture reflects in its cultural forms the fin de siecle Paris of the late 19th century; however whereas the industrial consciousness of Parisian society lent itself easily to a futural consciousness and thereby anticipated the dynamics of modernism, the commodification of modernist style in technological society provides that

a fin de millennium does not culturally progress towards a future through stylistic innovation. Instead the apocalyptic nature of the codes closure ensures a society fixated on the present, indulging in the mere spectacle of an 'end'.

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