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"PETER HALLEY, JEAN BAUDRILLARD AND THE END OF ABSTRACT
PAINTING"

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INTRODUCTION

The subject matter for my area of chosen study evolved initially from an interest in the "new abstract painting" currently doing the rounds in only the most fashionable of New York galleries. Reactions to this new art recently tagged as "Simulation " or "Neo-Geo" art, have indeed been mixed ranging from being referred to as one of the hottest new trends to come out of New York in several years to being characterised as art drained of its moral and spiritual substance. The latter comment is suggested in art critic, Donald Kuspit's referral to the new art as "dead on arrival". (1) Indeed it could be argued that this new work has received a great deal of critical attention largely because of its theoretical intention. Briefly, the motivation behind the new work appears to be a response to the bleak situation in which the art object approaches commodity status. Hence the artists involved, both acknowledge and express the changing position of the image and the object in the midst of a radically shifting economy and culture, where consumer society, advancing technology and the loss of political idealism have caused changes in nearly all social institutions (including the arts). In this new work, 1960's geometric abstract art is recreated as a

sign or emblem of modern painting. So as an idealistic practice, 'neo-geo' painters suggest that abstraction has come to an end. Painters such as Ross Bleckner, Sherrie Levine, Philip Taaffe and Peter Halley take as their subject the changes wrought on abstraction via the changes taking place in culture.

From the above mentioned 'Neo-Geo' painters, I have chosen as my subject, the work of Peter Halley, not because I find his paintings visually exciting, quite the contrary, but find the combination of his critical writings and visual works more interesting and far more suggestive in exemplifying the present mood of the art world in it's relationship to economic and cultural change and so to the idea of the demise of abstract painting. Peter Halley, leading light of 'Neo-Geo', author of a recent anthology of essays and self-proclaimed 'theorist'(2), is a typical example of the portion of the New York art world that is influenced by critical theory yet wants to make art that is both vivid and accessible. Halley makes paintings from an analytical base and looks to culture rather than nature as a source of content, evident in his use of geometric structure as an expression of our social order.

Halley's work has indeed received a great deal of critical attention, partly because it is allegedly based on Jean Baudrillard's controversial analysis of Postmodern culture, in which he asserts 'that in the era

of the "simulacrum" all polarities and oppositions are no more than representational "codes" used to maintain the illusion of an authentic system of social values'. (3) The era of the 'simulacrum' is best described in Simulations (1981) which is also probably the most popular Baudrillardian text with the New York art cognescenti. In his book Simulations, Baudrillard traces the historically progressive decay of 'reality' within representation. 'These would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a basic reality, it masks and perverts a basic reality, it masks the absence of a basic reality, it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (4) So what Baudrillard is simply saying is that, it is the final stage, where the image bears no relation to reality whatsoever, that describes our own era, the age of the 'simulacrum'. And Halley has actually claimed to provide visual equivalents for Baudrillard's theory! And so it would indeed be plausible to say that the only language that is adequate to describe what Halley and his followers are doing is the language of a Baudrillardian analysis of culture, - the total manipulation of media and advertising, the exhaustion of all political opposition and the death of originality etc.

In our society, our era of the 'simulacrum', art seems to be very closely linked to capitalist economics and artworks are primarily seen as commodities. In his

analysis of postmodern culture, Baudrillard tells us that the only reliable referent in the current art world is the marketplace and aesthetic value is now of little importance. This theory has led Baudrillard to suggest that there can no longer be such a thing as abstract art. Abstract paintings cannot be referred to as self-sufficient since they are inextricably tied to their commodity value. Since Halley adopts a Baudrillardian point of view in his work, his paintings appear to be commenting on its commodity status within the codes or system of signs. Halley actually claims to reduce the elements of Modernism 'to their pure and formal state and denuded of any last vestiges of life and meaning' re-deploy them in a 'system of self-referentiality which is itself a hyper-realisation of Modernist self-referentiality - though it is now detached from the Modernist dream of revolutionary renewal. The vocabulary of Modernism is retained but its elements already made abstract are finally and completely severed from any reference to say real'. (5)

At first hand, Halley's claims do indeed appear intriguing and quite presumptuous to say the least. So at this point in time, I feel it more appropriate to firstly study Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary art, in order to be able to provide a sufficient study of Peter Halley's work, especially since Halley has been accused of assuming a 'drastic Baudrillardian perspective' (6) in his work. Taking the above into

consideration, I have decided to devote the first chapter of my dissertation to a discussion of the development of Baudrillard as philosopher, the origin of his analysis of art and a step by step analysis in unravelling some of the apparent paradoxical statements contained in his controversial theory which suggests the end of abstract painting. This theory, based on a holistic model, raises such issues as the role of critical art in the age of the simulacrum and the artmarket as the only reliable value system for art. Chapter two will deal exclusively with Peter Halley, artist/writer, in the light of Baudrillard's analysis of art. It is in his critical writings that one can distinctly detect the influence of Baudrillard, with numerous references to the age of the simulacrum, post-industrial society, post structuralist theory, simulation and hyperrealization. This is evident in essays such as Frank Stella..... and the Simulacrum, Nature and Culture, Deployment of the Geometric and Essence and Model. Halley also discusses the various visual and theoretical influences in his own 'neo-geo' work, with particular reference to The Crisis in Geometry and On Line. (7) Chapter Three will consist of a brief account of the various critical and political implications of Baudrillard's theory which also subsequently raises a number of questions about the relationship between artists and the theoretical texts used to sanction their work. Since Baudrillard's theory denies the very legitimacy of art-making as an activity,

this may explain his public refusal to associate himself with the work of artists such as Peter Halley, Ross Bleckner, Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons and Philip Taaffe? The question remains, why was Baudrillard so enthusiastically embraced by the art world when all that he could say in reply to their work was 'I cannot get involved in explaining this new art of simulation In the world of simulation there is no object. There is a misunderstanding in taking me as a reference for this work.' (8) In concluding I shall consider Baudrillard's theory and Peter Halley's art in connection with the current situation of art in post modern society and will also consider some possible alternatives to the theoretical progress of Postmodernism as a reference point for current aesthetic practice.

CHAPTER ONE

Development of Baudrillard as Philosopher

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As I have previously mentioned one cannot read anything about Peter Halley, without also encountering the name of the well-known French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard. He is one of the top-drawer post structuralist theorists most frequently quoted by those in the contemporary art scene, particularly the New York art scene. It is important to point out at the onset that Baudrillard's ideas are neither new nor entirely original. In spite of the fact that he is quoted as a postmodernist, (a term he dislikes), he considers that the major ideas of our time, in art, philosophy, politics and elsewhere date from the first twenty or thirty years of the century. His ideas emerged out of the general intellectual climate of the French New Left. After World War II, the Communist Party in France held considerable power, partially because of the leading role taken in the Resistance movement by Communist Party members. To many New Left intellectuals, modern capitalism seemed to be characterized by affluence and abundance. The working class had either been bought off, through wage increases or fragmented out of consciousness by the division of labour and increased automation in the work place. There was also a major shift from an economy based on production and manufacturing to an economy based on services and high technology, a culture referred to as 'post-industrial'. Rather than focusing on objective economic conditions,

the New Left chose to study the subjective experience of capitalist society. A key concept in many of their analyses is 'alienation' as 'alienation results from the contradiction between our technical mastery of the environment and the loss of personal autonomy that this mastery requires.' (9) Following World War II, the capitalist system underwent a basic transformation in the way it organized society and preserved dominant social relations. For the New Left intellectuals it was no longer as producers but rather as consumers that our consciousness was formed. We now no longer had access to a direct experience of 'reality' already mediated by capitalist ideology. Henri Lefebvre in his book Everyday Life in the Modern World (1968) describes the viewpoint of the New Leftists, 'alienation is spreading and becoming so powerful that it obliterated all traces of consciousness of alienation'. (10) He also describes the penetration of alienation into the process of signification itself. The process had always depended on the shared cultural recognition that a given word refers to a particular referant in the 'real' world. Yet the capitalist system seems to have taken language over to advance its own world view: 'it drains words of their meaning and fills them up again.' 'Thus the gulf between what something "means" in the traditional sense and the way that particular word or concept is used to reconstruct a dream world of capitalist ideology widens irrevocably.' (11)

We find these ideas taken up in Baudrillard's early works, Le Systeme des Objets (1968) and La Societe de Consommation (1971). However Baudrillard introduces a crucial distinction in following works. Where earlier commentators were willing to concede some final (social) reality available to our unmediated experience, Baudrillard was to collapse the referent, the real world, entirely into a simulated environment of media and advertisements. Briefly, Baudrillard informs us that we live in a world of 'simulacra', by which he means, I believe, a world in which appearances have become more important than reality, a world of signs that have become detached from the real things they supposedly represent. As a result of the ~~the~~ overwhelming power of advertising, television, and the media in general, we no longer inhabit a world of 'real' things. According to Baudrillard, reality has also been replaced by its own simulacrum. These changes in culture, politics and economics mirror mutations in the structure of representation which register the gradual loss of the real or objective world and with it the notion of reference. 'The twentieth century postmodernist period has witnessed the destruction of meaning and the hollowing out of criticism, the elevation of system, structure, and surface.' (12) Signs no longer refer to a subjective or objective reality, but to themselves. Within contemporary production, the signs of reality came to replace reality, registering the loss of power of

reference: these 'simulated' forms produce an unreal real, (fake as fake), a real without origin, foregrounding their superficial surface status. 'What simulation discloses, is a world beyond truth, reference, and causality, an artificial universe without meaning'. (13) The era of simulation according to Baudrillard begins

with the commutability of terms that were once contradictory or dialectically opposed..... In politics, of the left and right; in the media, of true and false, in objects, of utility and uselessness, and of nature and culture on every level of signification. All the great humanist criteria..... have been effaced in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable - this is the characteristic effect of domination by code, which rests on a principle of neutralization and indifference. (14)

This goes to suggest that the artist can no longer make art, he can only refer to it as part of our system of signs and one way of doing so, I suppose, is by appropriating or mimicking previous art. This art can no longer present itself as an advance notice or hope of a better civilization but it can certainly illustrate that such hope is no longer possible at least in art. What Baudrillard prescribes is a general theory of this ending of the possibility of art in relation to a general ending of reality itself in a world of endless simulation. Baudrillard consistently uses his studies of art to illustrate his theses concerning the development in contemporary society. He began his analysis of art with a discussion of Pop art in La Societe de Consommation in terms of the dramatic transformations

of art objects in the early twentieth century. He raises questions of whether Pop Art is an authentic art form of the society of signs and consumption or simply an effect of fashion and thus a pure object of consumption itself. He indicates that Pop Art, like advertising and fashion is apparently both. He views Pop art as a turning point in the history of art, the point at which art becomes quite simply the reproduction of signs of the world and in particular the signs of the consumer society which itself is primarily a system of signs. With the triumph of the sign over its referent, the end of representational art, the beginning of a new form of art, he gives the term 'simulation' art; as the simulation of models. Baudrillard viewed Pop Art as the first to explore its own status as an art object which is 'signed' and 'consumed'. For Baudrillard it seems Pop art is valuable mainly as a sign of the logic of consumer society, as a replication of the process of signification which he was at the time describing on a theoretical level. A similar interest in using art to exhibit his own theoretical situations is obvious in two essays on art in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign. The study Gesture and Singature: Semiurgy in Contemporary Art illustrates his analysis of how the system of objects in consumer, 'post industrialist' society is organised into a system of signs. Baudrillard uses the example of the painting as a signed object and a gestural object, the product of artistic gestures of practices.

Now that we have a basic idea of what Baudrillard is about, we also have a ground to structure his analysis of the end of abstract painting on. As I have mentioned in the introduction, Baudrillard sees the signed artwork as a commodity in our system of signs and he believes that the only reliable referent in the current art world is the art market. And as such, aesthetic value is now of little importance. He goes one step further in his most recent book La Transparence du Mal in a chapter entitled Transaesthetics to suggest that today,

There are no more basic rules or criteria of judgement and pleasure. There is no God of aesthetics today to claim his chosen people..... aesthetic judgement and pleasure have abandoned the gold standard: they float aimlessly on the stock exchange of art and cannot be converted into anything of real value. (15)

What we think we are witnessing today is commercialization but according to Baudrillard it would be more accurate to say that we inhabit a world of aestheticization. Everything is 'aestheticized', 'culturalized', 'museumized' etc. Since art is a commodity and it is hence not autonomous of the art market, or outside the system of signs, how can there be such a thing as abstract art? Such paintings cannot be referred to as self-sufficient since they are inextricably bound up with their commodity value.

Yet paradoxes abound in Baudrillard's theory and in an attempt to unravel these paradoxes I have decided to base the next section of my study on David Carrier's excellent essay on Baudrillard as Philosopher or the End of Abstract Painting. Carrier's article is a lucid, coherent, concise step by step outline to unraveling the paradoxical Baudrillardian statements and provides a clearer understanding of his theory of the End of Abstract art and its relationship to 'Neo-Geo' painters such as Peter Halley who often refer to his theoretical writings in their work.

Since abstract painting has now existed for nearly three-quarters of a century; and has been the dominant mode of modern art, David Carrier questions the apparent skepticism about its continuing viability and the relentless attempts of critics to allegorize it, trying to read in to it some form of objective or subjective reality. Carrier clearly states in his introduction that an 'abstraction refers to nothing, and so depicts nothing'. He asks 'what could be more obvious than the distinction between a representation by Rembrandt and an abstraction by Reinhardt.' One way to undermine this distinction would indeed be to look for depicted forms in 'abstract' work. Baudrillard argues for the same conclusion but as usual Baudrillard gives us a sophisticated, highly influential account.

As Carrier regards Baudrillard to be a 'suggestive but maddeningly ellipitical writer' his first aim is to reconstruct Baudrillard's arguement. He introduces the key notion of the idea of holism, by considering a more accessible writer literary critic, Frederick Jameson. In The Political Unconscious Jameson asks, when we read a novel, what is the object we should analyse? What whole are we studying? A formalist considers only gestures internal to the novel; a traditional social historian would place the book in the culture of the time. Both assume that the novel is a self-sufficient artefact. According to Jameson both are mistaken; 'the ilusion or appearance of isolation or autonomy which a printed text projects must now be systematically undermined'. Only in 'restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history', the story of class struggles, is the goal of criticism achieved. Carrier uses Constables landscapes as an example of a similar analysis of visual artworks. 'What is missing from Constable's landscapes, it has been argued are the labouring poor who were driven off the land, in order to form the industrial proleteriat'. The absende of the rural poor therefore suggests that their real historical role has been repressed by Constable. This means then that we cannot hope to correctly interpret Constable's paintings until we acknowledge this fact. Obviously Jameson's holism is open to debate, particularly since it assumes that Marxism provides the best, or only adequate critical method.

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At this point we will return to the analysis of abstract painting. Abstract paintings are self-sufficient entities, referring to nothing outside themselves. But if paintings, like novels as interpreted by Jameson, are bound up with the social structure in which they are created, then there can be ~~no~~ such thing as abstract art. Hal Foster sums this up rather nicely in the conclusion of Signs Taken For Wonders (Art in America June, 1986). 'It is the abstractive processes of capital that erode representation and abstraction alike. And ultimately it may be these processes that are the real subject and latent referent, of this new abstract painting'. (16) Peter Halley describes the abstract processes of capital in his essay Notes on Abstraction. Halley, whose work is concerned with the industrial and public world of cultural inter-relationships, especially in the issue of how technology has affected contemporary society notes that the social is finally becoming the site of 'pure abstraction'. 'Each human being is no longer just a number, but a collection of numbers, each of which ties him or her to a different matrix of information, telephone number, social security number, credit card number'. (17) So what Foster is suggesting is that today's contemporary paintings refer to the capital system in which they are commodities. Take for example the very literal titles, such as Blue Cell with Triple





Conduit that Peter Halley gives to his abstract-looking compositions. In short the idea of holism collapses the modernist's distinction between representation and abstraction. According to Carrier, understood holistically, a Halley painting, like any old mater painting, refers to something outside itself and so really is not an abstract work.

It would be true to say that all paintings are commodities; but why should they refer to their status as commodities? In the Criss in Geometry Halley says that 'his images look like 'the simulated space of the videogame.....the microchip.....the office tower;' (18). But why does this show that his paintings are not abstractions?

This brings us directly to Baudrillard's analysis of abstract painting. The first problem one encounters however is in understanding how his analysis can be consistent. In Simulations (1981) he writes 'truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist;' if he believes that there is no truth, how can he make truthful statements. According to Baudrillard, truthful representations were once possible but now only 'simulacra' exist (an old, though not widely used word, basically a simulacrum is a fake which appears fake). How can Baudrillard consistently state that we live in a world in which no truthful representations are possible? Baudrillard's seemingly counter-intuitive statement

appears exciting because it is extreme. What Baudrillard is offering then in effect is less a description of the state of the art world than a prescription. According to Carrier, what Baudrillard's account provides 'is a vision, extrapolating from already visible grounds of how future generations will view the art of our time'. (19)

Two philosophical problems remain. First of all how can Baudrillard consistently claim that once the real could be represented? And secondly, if Baudrillard's thesis is true, how can it be exemplified, as his admirers in the art world think, in paintings? These two problems are one and answering them will help explain why Baudrillard's argument is relevant to abstract painting.

If our world is unrepresentable, how could that be shown in any representation? These problems were anticipated by Nietzsche, whose claim that truth no longer exists, is, if correct, seemingly impossible to state. Hence, according to Carrier, a discussion of holism may provide a way of unpacking Baudrillard's paradoxes. Firstly Baudrillard's holism leads him to reject two traditional dualisms. [1] Saussure's signifier/signified distinction and [2] Marx's contrast between use value and exchange value.

Basically, Saussure was interested in the relationship between signifier/signified. As a structuralist, he posited a direct correlation between 'signifier' and signified', word and meaning. But it was by arbitrarily splitting up language, he discovered that signs no longer refer to specific objects but to the meanings with which they are invested, resulting in the 'arbitrariness' or 'abstraction' in the relation of language to the world. Baudrillard, whose work is grounded in post-structuralist theory, denies the one-to-one relation of signifier and signified - signifiers refer to one another in an endless, associative chain. He suggests that the 'arbitrariness' that Saussure's theory claims to find in the relation of language to the world is less a fact about language or the world than the function of the way Saussure had chosen to analyse them. In A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign Baudrillard says that 'The sign as abstract structure refers to a fragment of objective reality', and that the error of Saussure is to fail to understand that these fragments can only be understood as part of that whole. 'Reality' is an abstraction which exists only when we split apart language and the world and then ask how they are related.

Baudrillard also criticizes the Marxist distinction between use value and exchange value. Marx asserts that a commodity is a 'thing that by its properties satisfies human needs of some sort or another'. But when commodities are exchanged 'their exchange - value manifests itself as something totally independent of their use value'. Today Baudrillard asserts that Marx's notion of needs is obsolete. In A Critique of the Political Economy of The Sign he states 'use value no longer appears anywhere in the system'. Baudrillard believes that Marx assumes that needs simply exist, ready to be satisfied, rather than, recognizing that needs are always a social creation. Marx, for Baudrillard, is caught up in bourgeois preconceptions such as the work ethic and this concept of need. What is more interesting to Baudrillard is the manner in which everything in the system is measured and pinned down to an economic value, 'the systematization of the whole social totality, the control of the code'.

Baudrillard's critique of Marxist economics is relevant to the current discourse on art. Carrier states that the art market is a perfect model of a post-Marxist system of exchange. In our society art works serve no function in the way for example a Renaissance piece may have served a religious function. Today artworks are non-functional objects which nevertheless have exchange value. According to Baudrillard 'Artworks

have become nothing more than consumer goods and only self-deception permits us to think that today there can be anything more to art.' (20) Baudrillard's philosophy of art is concerned with what he thinks is the only significant remaining question about art, its role in the system of exchange. So accordingly, as an old master work is a sign for what it represents, according to semiotic theories of art, so today, an 'abstract' painting is a sign which can be exchanged. If this is so, a Rembrandt refers to what it depicts a Halley then refers to its own exchange value. This is why Baudrillard denies that there can be any abstract art. In the market, all works are signs, objects which refer to their exchange value in that market. So according to Baudrillard's theory, artworks are consumed neither because they have any intrinsic value, nor because there is any need which they satisfy, nor because they serve to legitimate the interests of the ruling classes. Once art satisfied needs, today it is much more interesting to study how the art market functions.

Let's look at some of the features of the art market, it is unpredictable, there is no relation between supply and demand nor between cost of production and exchange value. One historically novel feature of our art world is that the system of production, promotion, selling and display of art can be as fascinating as much of the art distributed in that system. Take for example, 'Simulationist' or 'Neo-Geo'

painting, it seems that it's economic success was indicated by dealers and buyers, rather than critics and curators. Jeffrey Deitch, art adviser to Citibank, comments, 'The role of key collectors in putting this (Simulationist) together as a package of identifying it as a new aesthetic, was crucial'. (21) Hence, we can learn much about some currently fashionable art by studying the marketing system.

As I have previously mentioned, Baudrillard was heavily influenced by Warhol. Because some of Warhol's creations were physically indistinguishable from non-artworks, critic Arthur Danto concluded that the history of art had thus ended. They both agree that we can no longer think of art as did writers from Vasari to Michael Fried. The interest in Warhol's creation, 'as art lies wholly in what they tell us about the art market'. (22) Baudrillard is thus concerned with the art world system, but analyzing it permits him to describe the individual artworks which are exchanged in that system. The question that remains is that how can Baudrillard's theory that there is no reality to represent be exemplified in works of art? Once again Carrier uses an example from literature. He compares the novels, Ian Fleming's James Bond and Delacorte's Diva. The former, a relatively straightforward reworking of the Classical myth, creates a sense of reality by relentless accumulation of details, plot variations on a simple theme and a clear-distinction

between good and evil. Diva on the other hand treats violence etc., ... like he treats commodities (not dwelling on details) plus complex plots and a blurred distinction between good and evil. 'Delacortes novels appropriate the shells of myths or well-known works while also refusing to provide even the illusion that the re-use of those forms, commits the reader to believe in the reality of his fictional characters'. Carrier suggests that we might apply to Delacortes novels Baudrillard's words, 'Here the referent is only "symbolic",, the principle of reality having passed over into the code'. (23)

Similar comparisons can be made in the visual arts. I have dediced to compare the work of Halley to that of modernist painter Lichtenstein. Older literature on Lichstenstein identifies his sources and discusses his modifications in an art-historical sense. Halley's relation to his sources eg. previous geometric art and his positioning of it in a post-industrialist context is not so clear. His rendition of hyper-realization is based on the premise that in Post-Modernism, the elements of Modernist art are hyper-realized. 'They are reduced to their pure formal state and are denuded of any last vestiges of life or meaning' and are 're-deployed in a system of self referentiality and now detached from Modernist dream of revolutionary renewal'. (24) This idea of taking pure form and considering it devoid of content and meaning and re-deploying it in

this way is indeed questionable. Aesthetic theorists such as Adorno and Marceuse would not agree. They would believe that one cannot separate meaning from form. Content has become crystalized in the form itself. This is best understood by looking at an art form which appears to be more abstract to the real, music. Within a piece of music the form contains the content, just as within a painting, the method of painting should contain the content, eg. Cubism can only be understood as revolutionary with respect to the aesthetic of painting. Therefore by this logic it's form is also its content. Therefore Lichenstein stands to Halley as a James Bond novel to Diva. Lichenstein can paint a picture of any picture in his style, for his sources are always identifiable. Halley shows images whose place of origin is as mysterious as it is revealing. For Halley, as in Delacorte, popular and art-historical references function less to refer to real things than to constitute deliberately unreal art works.

Let us consider for a moment the political implications of Baudrillard's theory. Just as there are no needs independent of what consumers have been trained to desire, so this implies that there is no independent public opinion apart from what the public is taught to think. 'What Baudrillard is in fact doing, is making a political point no image can do justice to the irrationalities of our society. (25) Baudrillard

states the relationship between art and society in the following account 'modern art..... is exactly an art of collusion vis-a-vis this contemporary world.... It can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it, it never disturbs the order, which is also its own'.

(25) Baudrillard denies that there is some reality outside the system of representation of reality. But what about the role of 'critical' art? Holistically speaking, the history of art cannot be understood apart from the society in which it is created and 'critical' art is as much a part of the development of that society as any other form of art. Even today, critical 'issue based' art, in attempting to avoid colluding with the contemporary art market, it too ends up in commercial gallery exhibitions.

Hence abstract art can only exist in a society in which the development of art is relatively autonomous of the art market. Greenberg described these social preconditions for the creation of Abstract art, while arguing that art can evolve independently of that larger society. His analysis was convincing where the art market for contemporary art was undeveloped. But now the belief in the self-sufficient development of art is no longer acceptable. By definition an abstract painting refers to nothing outside itself; abstract paintings are signs which are not part of some larger code. Now such signs can no longer exist. An individual painting may seem to be a self-sufficient

object. Yet, when we recall Jameson's idea that Constables paintings are incomplete until related to a larger whole, the society in which they were produced so too, an abstract painting is incomplete until placed in its social context.

CHAPTER TWO

Peter Halley in the light of Baudrillard's analysis of art

It is precisely at this point that I feel I can now discuss to some extent the work of Peter Halley in relation to his Baudrillardian influence. This influence is exemplified in the comments of Hal Foster when he states ' Halley assumes a drastic Baudrillardian perspective, according to which our new-dynamic of electronic information and mass media has made of social space a total system of cybnetic networks, at all levels of which is repeated one model 'Cells' connected by 'conduits'. (27) Halley does not attempt to 'represent any objects or social reality, but simply reproduce hyperreal models or simulations through abstract representations of signs that simulate or pastiche former paintings in attempting to represent models of cybernetic languages'. (28)

Since Halley has been influential as a critic as well as an artist, one has direct access to his views on art as well as his own art practice. Asked whether his ideas came to him as pictorial thoughts or as connections with recent readings of Foucault or Baudrillard, Halley replied 'I get them both ways. I'll be making a painting or I might be thinking about a painting and all of a sudden I realize some relationship between it and something I've read or thought about'. (29) According to Halley, such cultural underpinnings makes his works more

interesting. It was Barbara Kruger who introduced Halley to the writings of Baudrillard, whose ideas seem to clarify Halley's own ideas. Prior to this, Halley's work had

tended to vacillate between an interest in Pop art and an interest in artists like Newman and Rothko who dealt in transcendental or existential themes. But his belief in transcendental themes broke down and he began to see that his work was no longer abstract or minimal it was about those things. (30)

Nowadays Halley, is known for his geometric, day-glo canvases which evoke a sort of utopian idealism while simultaneously denying it by referencing prison cells, computers circuits etc. He is primarily interested in the issue of how technology has affected contemporary society. It is in his flat geometric paintings done in day-glo (a hyperreslization of colour) colours that often incorporate sections with a raised stucco surface, that Halley provides a visual image of what he refers to as ' the geometrization of modern life'. (31) In On Line Halley points out that in today's urban society, the individual is connected to the outside world via a bewildering array of complex networks involving telephones, televisions, computers, electrical circuits and highways 'conveyed' in his paintings as rectangular "cells" connected by means of linear "conduits". Halley describes his work as an effort to reinstate geometry as tied to the social world manifested in power and control but one also tends to get the feeling that

Halley views geometry, 'as an insidiously pervasive structure rather than as a product of social relations at a specific historical junction'. (32)

Halley's recognition of the influence of structuralist or post-structuralist writers on the art world is evident in many of his writings. In an essay entitled Nature and Culture Halley attempts to understand how and why, around 1980, did a group of French texts written ten to twenty years earlier by Barthes, Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard suddenly gain favour in the intellectual climate of the art world. Briefly, he pinned it down to a discussion on the relationship between cultural change and events in the development of industrial society and of capitalism. Accordingly, structuralism and the new art both reflect a transition from an

industrial to a post-industrial society; from a society of expanding markets to a society of stagnant growth in which wealth is more redistributed than created from a culture in which production, innovation and individualism are mythologized in the name of creativity to a society that stresses the manipulation of what already exists, be it capital or cultural signs. (33)

According to Halley the conditions of such a post-industrial society have existed in Europe since the end of World War II, but have only appeared in the last few years in the U.S. It was with the arrival of post-industrial conditions, that a new structuralist-oriented art practice has appeared in the U.S.: Also Halley recognizes a number of troubling questions which are provoked by recent structuralist art practice? First, there is the question of how artists can address the world of the Simulacrum. If the post-industrial world is as Baudrillard suggests, characterized by signs that simulate rather than represent, how can an artist communicate this situation? Is it possible to represent a simulation? If not, it only remains for the artist to engage in the practice of simulation himself or herself, but by doing so, an uncertain situation is set up. In this way, the practice of simulation can be seen as an endorsement of the culture of simulacra. We are once again reminded of Baudrillard's view of modern art, as an 'art of collusion vis-a-vis the contemporary world.... it never disturbs the order which is also its own'. Baudrillard has consistently denied the critical and negative function of art and has seen it surrender to end collusion with the existing society as a fatality, a necessity of the current situation. Indeed, artists who subscribe to a serious structuralist direction still seem to be in the process of answering this question.

Frederic Jameson has observed that cultural analysis is today dominated by two separate trends. On one hand, there is the theory of the Simulacrum as developed by Baudrillard. On the other, there is the work of Michael Foucault, who sees contemporary culture as a place in which the technologies of surveillance, normalization and have ever broadening control over social life. In his earlier paintings of Prison Cells, Halley was directly influenced by Foucault as he stated,

Even though my work is geometric in appearance, its meaning is intended as antithetical to that of previous geometric art. Geometric art is usually allied with the various idealisms of Plato, Descartes, and Mies. My work, in fact, is a critique of such idealisms... Informed by Foucault, I see in the square a prison; behind the mythologies of contemporary society, a veiled network of cells and conduits. (34)

I am more concerned with Halley's most recent work which is directly related to Baudrillard's theory of the Simulacrum and the End of Abstract Painting as such. Indeed Halley does question the reason why artists and theorists today have been attracted so exclusively to Baudrillard's rather than Foucault's interpretation of social relationships. 'One wonders if perhaps Baudrillard's brilliant world of surfaces is not more seductive than Foucault's bleak excavation of the spaces of regimentation. And one wonders if artists and audiences, reduced by this shimmering world have not

an environment in Baudrillard's words where 'the distinction between cause and effect between active and passive, between subject and object' (36) has ended. An environment in which Foucauldian confinement has been transformed into Baudrillardian deterrance, in which the 'hard geometrics of the hospital, prison and factory have given way to the soft geometries of interstate highways, computers and electronic entertainment'. (37) The 'neo-geo' generation of artists no longer attribute to art the role of privileged experience where art was seen to have a transformative effect on society. The geometric art of the Eighties (Neo-Geo) however mocks the mechanisms of this art response. For these artists there can be only a simulacrum with 'orbital recurrence of the models (nostalgia) and simulated generation of difference' (styles). (38)

Halley proceeds to explain how his own work fits into the new geometric abstraction or Baudrillard's theory of the Simulacrum. 'My own Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber emphasises the role of the model within the simulacrum'. In Simulations Baudrillard states that 'simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all models around the merest fact'. The simulacrum is a place where the real is confused with the model, it is the 'total universe of the norm, a digital space, a luminous field of the code'. According to Halley, in his work,

been deflected away from the investigation of crucial issues about society's structure'. (35)

So how do the limitations of Baudrillard's thought serve the ideological needs of a postmodern artist and critic such as Peter Halley? 'Neo'Geo' art is apparently based on Baudrillard's assertion that in the era of the simulacrum all oppositions are 'no more than representational "codes" used to maintain the illusion of a system of social values'. In "The Crisis in Geometry" Halley believes that it no longer seems possible to accept geometric form as either transcendental order, detached signifier, or as the basic gestalt of visual perception. Instead we search in a structuralist manner for the 'veiled signifieds that the geometric sign may yield'. In this essay he examines geometry in relation to its changing role in cultural history rather than as an 'a priori' ideal of the mental process. Also in this essay, Halley focuses on two relevant texts, Foucault's Discipline and Punish, which is most relevant to the geometric art produced during the seventies and Baudrillard's Simulations. We are primarily interested in Baudrillard's text which is crucial to an understanding of geometric art that has appeared in the present decade, namely 'neo-geo'. This generation of artists, as we have already mentioned, is no longer connected to an industrial environment where experience is not of factories but of subdivisions, not of production but of consumption. These artists describe

an environment in Baudrillard's words where 'the distinction between cause and effect between active and passive, between subject and object' (36) has ended. An environment in which Foucauldian confinement has been transformed into Baudrillardian deterrance, in which the 'hard geometrics of the hospital, prison and factory have given way to the soft geometries of interstate highways, computers and electronic entertainment'. (37) The 'neo-geo' generation of artists no longer attribute to art the role of privileged experience where art was seen to have a transformative effect on society. The geometric art of the Eighties (Neo-Geo) however mocks the mechanisms of this art response. For these artists there can be only a simulacrum with 'orbital recurrence of the models (nostalgia) and simulated generation of difference' (styles). (38)

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'space is considered as just as much a digital field in which are situated "cells" with Simulated stucco texture from which flow irraadiated "conduits".... and space that is not a specific reality but rather a model of the "celluar space" on which "cybernaticized social exchange" is based, which irradiates the social body with it operational circuits'.(39)

Halley goes on to say that his paintings are executed with a variety of techniques lifted from the Hard Edge and Colour Field styles. For within the simularum, nostalgia alone remains. For Halley, those styles, used as a reference to an idea about abstraction and an as ideology of technical advance, replace reference to the real. Halley also sees the yielding to the social as a way of getting deeper inside the social. Halley sees his relationship to previous geometric art with an analytical and a synthetic aspect. It's analytic because he sees his work as being a deconstruction of themes on Mondrian or Donald Judd - (eg. Mondrian's response to a growing geometricization of culture and of the city in the 1920's and 30's and Judd as a response to mass production in it's most developed form in post-industrial culture). It's synthetic, because he is not so much appropriating motifs form such art as he is hyperrealizing them - in other words, 'taking themes that have a certain reality in one social setting and sort of boosting them up into another reality'. (40) Halley also puts his own painting in a self-defined tradition of the post-modern that borrows in part from the form and colour of Frank

Stella's art, beginning with his alluminium paintings. In Halley's writing and painting, there is frequent reference to the 1960's and the dangers posed by the events of that decade to society and culture as it was known previously. In Halley's interpretation, Stella's graphic lines, consciously or not, suggest such new systems as the inter-state highway, as an abstraction of social reality. By the time of his Moroccan series, Stella had introduced day-glo paint, which in Halley's terms, is the 'hyper-realized simulated equivalent of colour'. (41) According to Halley it was Baudrillard who allowed him to understand why he was using day-glo colours. Asked what he means by hyperrealization - Halley replies 'Baudrillard says that in postmodern culture everything is hyperreal, more intensely real than real'. (42) Finally, it is important to Halley that his paintings imply - through their specific presentation of forms - a reinterpretation of 60's and 70's abstraction and minimalism. Basic to his appropriation of this tradition is his re-reading of it's content in the light of post modern theory.



I believe at this stage, that it would be fair to say that 'Neo-Geo' art, one of the hottest new trends to come out of New York in several years, has indeed received a great deal of critical attention at least in part because it is based on Baudrillard's controversial analysis of Postmodern Culture. And this subsequently resulted in him becoming a major theoretical guru in the world of modern art, increasingly referred to and cited in discussions of the contemporary art scene, as in the case of Peter Halley. So it is indeed understandable to some extent the reaction of shock caused when Baudrillard publically refused to associate himself with the work of the 'neo-geo' artists, at a lecture in Columbia University (1987). This refusal does indeed raise questions about the relationship between artists and the theoretical texts used to sanction their work. 'Neo-Geo' artists such as Halley recognize that the terms in which their work is discussed are instrumental in determining its art world success. By turning to Baudrillard, Halley is able to dominate the discourse surrounding his art. Did Baudrillard not like the work with which his theory was being associated, was he reluctant to promote any artistic movement or did he just believe in the separation of theory and art? If we are to consider his theory, we can understand that he cannot possibly associate himself with this work, since his theory, as he points out himself denies the very legitimacy of art-making as an activity! Baudrillard

said that he could not get involved with this new art of simulation because there would be a misunderstanding in taking him as a reference for this work. In a more recent interview, Baudrillard explains why he didn't get involved with 'Neo-Geo' artists. Apart from meeting Peter Halley once, he never had any close ties with any of them. He didn't really want to get involved with 'Neo Geo' because he was asked for all sorts of things, prefaces, endorsements, alibi-type texts - and he didn't want to be used as an alibi. He also suggests that the 'Neo-Geo' artists seriously misunderstood his use of the word 'simulacrum', in the sense that it was used like a leitmotif and a slogan and not at all as an idea. Baudrillard rarely refers to individual artists with the exception of Warhol whom he believed to be the origin of the simulation. After Pop art and Hyperrealism, Baudrillard believes that there was not much more to be said about art, at least as far as the problematics of the simulacra go. He admits that he doesn't dislike or have a negative judgement of 'Neo Geo' artists. However, he believes that simulation is not an original process but what about the 'Neo-Geo's' who simulate simulation in an endless world of simulation? Obviously there seems to be a great deal of confusion in taking the theoretical program of Postmodernism as a reference point for current aesthetic practice.

In the interview Game with Vestiges (1984), Baudrillard claims that in the sphere of art every possible artistic form and every possible function of art has been exhausted. Further more, against Benjamin and Adorno, Baudrillard claims that art has lost its critical, negative function. Baudrillard describes Post Modernism as

the characteristic of a universe where there are no more definitions possible..... In reality, there is no more reference to forms. It has all been done..... all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces - that is Post-Modern. (43)

Before concluding I feel it necessary to clarify what Baudrillard means exactly when he refers to the end of art, end of history etc. He is prescribing rather than describing the current situation. When he says that art has disappeared and that everything is becoming aesthetic, he doesn't mean the end in the simple sense of the word, he is simply trying to describe the whole complicated process of reaching saturation point and of the scattering and regrouping of history. Baudrillard's theory of the ending of the possibilities of art on the contrary greatly influenced the art world. His use of the word 'simulation' could be adopted for a simple reason. It was a concept through which things could still be made, a visual idea. It prescribed a reproducible technique for making artefacts which suppose a general theory of no longer of art, to be sure, but of its end.

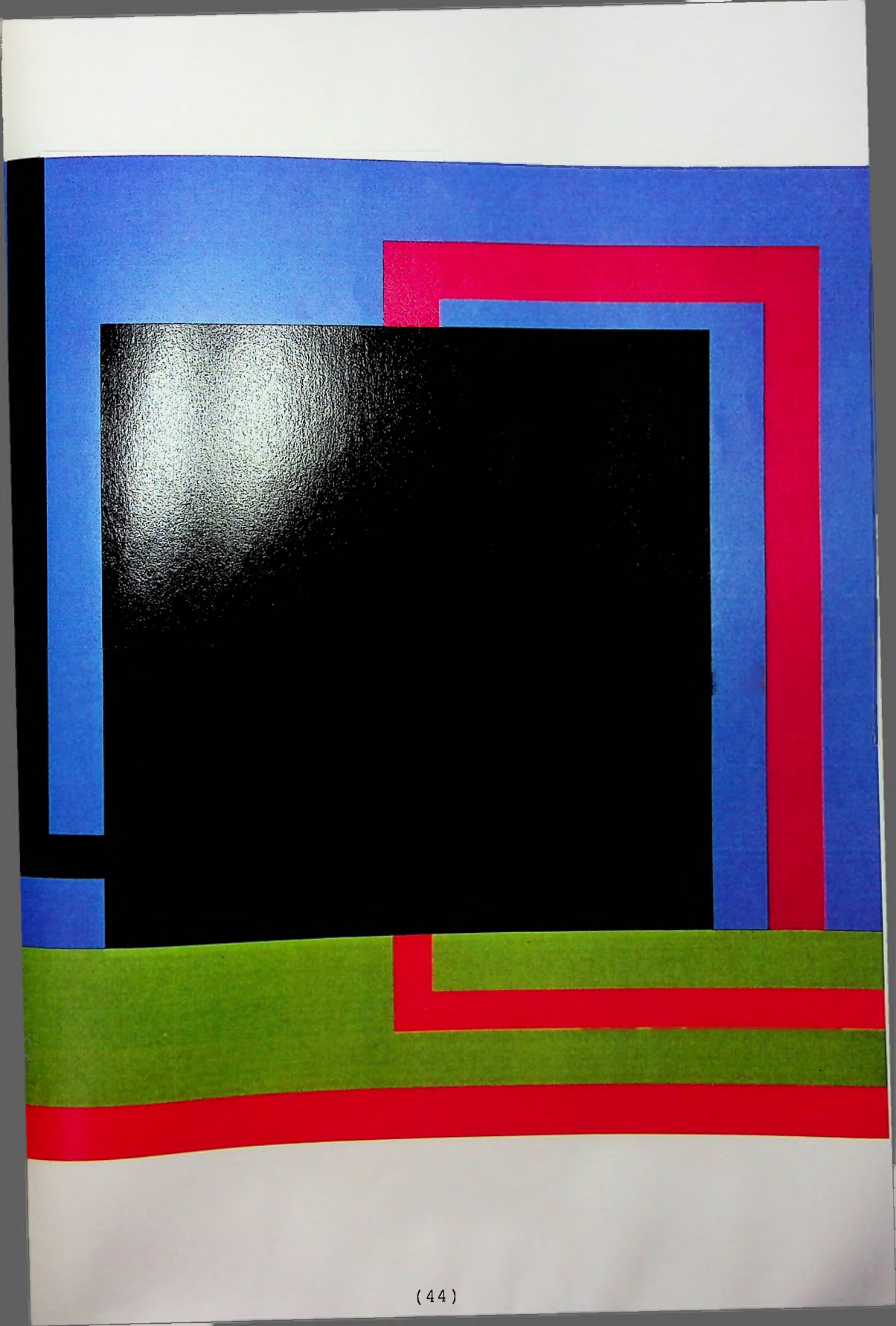
So when Baudrillard says that now 'signs refer no longer to any nature, but only to the law of exchange', he offers one interpretation of contemporary painting. Carrier argues that surely there must be more interpretations. It has been suggested that the end of Modernism (if we are to believe that Modernism has ended or that it was just badly formulated in the first place) has been marked by the demise of master-narratives. Abstract painting had an identity when it had a place in that master-narrative. Today the story about the development of art has ended. As we can see in retrospect, the end of the story about the development of painting (Douglas Crimp) (44) did not imply the end of painting as a practice as such. David Carrier in 'Artwriting' explains that we are confusing the mere end of a narrative with the end of art's history as such, which automatically leads to confusion, lack of direction, anxiety, uncertainty. We are in a period which is analogous in some respects to Roman artists circe 1600, when Mannerist artists set about breaking all the aesthetic rules that had been established in Vasari's time.

One may indeed wonder why Baudrillard's Nietzschean nihilism is so attractive to so many people in the art world. In On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche wrote 'we would rather will nothingness than not will'. Today it is evident in 'simulation' art (neo-geo) in the

concept that something could still be made, and in agreement with David Carrier that we would rather accept Baudrillard's nihilism than accept that we have no theory of art at all. So there is still a grain of hope in that will. Today there is undoubtedly some interesting abstract painting being made, but no adequate theory of art. Also in agreement with Carrier, I believe that what we need are new narratives convincing enough to establish a critical consensus for our time and until a convincing narrative explains how present-day abstract artists, such as Peter Halley, develop further the traditions of earlier abstraction, Baudrillard's account, which implies that no such tradition can exist will be influential.

At present, artists and intellectuals are creating a commentary on a universe of 'simulation', on a universe without a Text, as we have seen in the case of Peter Halley. It seems to be a real case of critical writing influencing art, these days, with painting becoming of secondary importance, only to the writing. I believe that the expectation of painting is too high nowadays. Consider just for a moment the questions Hal Foster poses in relation to the 'new abstract painting' - 'Can it (simulation art) seriously engage issues of a technoscientific, postindustrial society in a medium like painting, based in preindustrial craft? (45) Also today, art which used to imitate life, now feels that it should imitate life in the art world, commenting on art

itself as a product for sale, reflecting the close relationship between art and commerce. The creation of radically new forms of art can only occur however in the promotion of positive values, credible positive aesthetic values that are not so closely tied to commodity economics. Halley's art is a reflection of writing influencing painting in the way he is influenced by Baudrillard's theory. This is only one interpretation, however I believe that as long as the desire for painting still exists and that this desire is relatively autonomous of the artmarket, we still have some hope. It is this desire that is the sole factor for the future of painting. Hence there remains a grain of hope for the development of positive values which could possibly result in an acceptable positive aesthetic theory relatively autonomous of commodity, capitalist economics, and a place on the map of a new narrative, moving in a forward direction, - Possibly an end to the continuous revolution of what seemingly appears as production of regurgitated parody. Finally one cannot hope to present a final answer as this essay is concerned with art in the making, about ideas of the moment. So only with time can we look back and in retrospect examine the implications of this era of confusion and disillusionment. Perhaps the best that can be done at the moment is to encourage those elements within Postmodernism that have a critical potential as opposed to those which are supportive of the values of industrial capitalism?



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