

“On the Realization of Art and the End of Culture”¹

1.

Culture is the ideology of creativity: it prevents creativity from realizing itself on earth by realizing it in the heaven of ideas. Produced by the division of labor but revealed as a separate sphere by the historical movement in which the materiality of the relations of production betrays the materiality of human relations, culture is – with more ambiguity than other ideologies – the site of alienated subversion, the night of the human in the inhuman.

2.

As negativity, culture has, since the 16th century, fought against religious imperialism and the expropriation of economic materiality; while forging its own arms in the struggle, it claims an autonomy that is only the consequence and the awareness of the fragmentary and that which is separated. Nevertheless, its apparent autonomy grounds it as positivity, with apparently specific norms that are only the norms of the general appearance, of the ideological spectacle.

3.

The impossibility of creativity entering into production in the same way that compulsory work does has made culture into a marginal zone in which the ideas of the dominant class encounters, not their real negation, but their complementary antimony: the idea of something being free of charge. It is through this skewed angle that culture will create – to the extent that the great ideologies crumble and that the downward trend of the rate of profit accelerates – a *model* of contemplation and a cultural market that becomes generalized in the economy of consumption.

4.

Culture is the worship of the pure object that fills up the cultural emptiness of the commodity. It is the usefulness of pleasure joined with the pleasure of the useless, which culminates in the *gadget*.² When it is not stifled or mutilated, the subversive part that penetrates into culture is preserved in an object intended for contemplation. (A century was needed for Sade and Lautréamont, duly mummified, to reach the *Valle de los Caidos*³ in which the branch offices go from the supermarkets to the cathedrals, by way of the police precincts and other cultural centers.) Additionally, the oversaturation of exchange values, the sole permitted usage of which is to make something *seen*, increases in an illusory fashion the pure object’s field of availability, by reducing down to two possibilities – very clearly presented in the current world – its real usefulness, that is to say, its application to passionate ends: destruction and *détournement*. A frontier without any uncertainty thus separates the people who practice subversion and the metaphysicians of the gaze into which cultured people gradually turn – people in conformity with the dominant mindset, in the service of the henchmen of power.

¹ Raoul Vaneigem, “Sur la Réalisation de l’Art et la Fin de la Culture,” written for and presented at the 7th Conference of the Situationist International, held in Paris between 5 and 11 July 1966. Unpublished. Translated from the French and footnoted by Bill Brown, 24 December 2024.

² English in the original.

³ Spanish in original: the Valley of the Fallen.

5.

Today, culture is the market in works of art and intellectual creations that have become models of the commodity. Contemporary economic coherence is principally sought in the logic of the consumable. And so, what is the perfection of the consumable product if not its power of self-destruction? By disappearing, it in fact attains the highest exchange value, that which confers rarity upon it; though it reproduces itself, it never saturates the market. Moreover, the object of consumption is thus preserved as image and memory in the categories of the spectacle: the nothingness that disappears in consumption is recreated in the ideology of nothingness. The thing that responds the best to this requirement is the artistic-cultural commodity. The *happening*⁴ is the perfect *gadget*.

6.

The survival of capitalism depends upon a society of survival in which the commodity subsumes in that which is cost-free – here presented as the source of all freedom – the shared alienation of the one who produces it and the one who consumes it. In a phase of its imperialist stage that was, curiously, unknown to Lenin,⁵ capitalism, by colonizing culture and making the cost-free the “*plus point*”⁶ of profitability, saved itself by domesticating itself. Socially, the cost-free (that which doesn’t have to be accounted for) has always been the sign of an honorific gratification. When the work of art is transformed by the law of the [ever-widening] expansion of the market into a luxury item, the power to consume becomes the consumption of power. The annexation of culture as a marginal market so well heralds the colonization of everyday life that it paradoxically takes place under the pressure of a force that is [apparently] hostile to capitalism: the socialism that fights to democratize and extend the space-time of consumption (public education and a better distribution of goods).

The colonization of culture has been the victory of the bourgeoisie, which revolutionary movements have underestimated to the extent that their leaders – too inclined to reduce the entirety of proletarian demands to the simple conquest of the goods needed for survival – have found in the expected weaknesses of the capitalist system of production pretexts to integrate themselves into the system of consumption and even to claim the right to establish the power of theory as a theory of power.

7.

Artists feel the incompatibility of creation and production too strongly to make poetry out of the norms of work. But, on the contrary, everything encourages them to consume. They dream of an ideal universal participation, of a contemplative community, of a religion of the object in which they would be the magi. The society of the spectacle responds to this dream: a socio-economic system in which the work of art becomes a commodity to the extent that the *gadget* becomes a work of art obviously predisposes artists to assume the role of the organizer of ideological spectacles and to convert themselves into sociologists. The subversion that the fight for creativity still contains here becomes the guarantee of the revolutionary project abandoned on the political battlefield, but in a fragmentary fashion and thus false.

⁴ English in original. Though the first happenings in America took place in the 1950s, it wasn’t until 1964 that the term appeared in the French mass media.

⁵ Cf. V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917).

⁶ English in original.

From the moment that their love of the “gratuitous” gave value to their works, the accursed artists of 1900 knew the posthumous glory of having been failed merchants; but it was during their lifetimes that the will to subvert was what paid them the best in terms of prestige, provided that they succumbed to the fetishism of their work.

8.

Public education is the point of access to ideological and cultural consumption. It is an ascending and descending route that can, nevertheless, lead to poetry, which is why a cultural police force is necessary. In a society dominated by the imperatives of production, one’s role in the productive apparatus delimits useful knowledge and defines the educated person. Useless knowledge belongs to the artist and his or her public, the possessors of a cost-free thing that is sufficiently stylized to be recognized by the managers, who produce the essential, the merit of granting them the accessory. Respect for the cost-free and what authorizes it protects the artist and the cultured person from subversion. While the educated person becomes a specialist, the cultivated person becomes, in a society dominated by the imperatives of consumption, a consumer of spiritualized material goods and materialized spiritual goods (the society of consumption dissolves the old battle between idealism and materialism). Due to the nature of things, the specialist loans his or her culture to the very sources in which the cultivated person specializes: the pre-cybernetic organization of power. Culture is henceforth the most coherent project of an ideological ecumenism in which the chaos of values (intentional confusion, self-destruction, repetition) has the function of harmonizing the mechanisms of oppression and submission. Either culture will be decolonized and rendered unusable or it will find its point of dissolution and its inutility in the cybernetic production of conditioned reflexes.

9.

Since what one is allowed to see is, today, what one is allowed to live in an illusory fashion, the artist’s alibi can no longer reside in the fact that he or she makes things visible, not even that which is prohibited: there is no revolutionary spectacle, no spectacular revolution. Similarly, the extreme approach in which the art of destruction and the destruction of art are blended together still obeys the logic of the consumable, which can only be brought to an end by the *destruction of the work of art as a commodity*.

We can hardly see how a painter, a sculptor, a writer or a filmmaker who denies the fact that he or she plays a role in the supermarket of culture can escape the scorn that is heaped upon a worker who denies the fact that compulsory labor is alienating. When avant-garde art divvies up advancements in social promotion, poetry can only join up with the poetry of global contestation and its project of coherence. Inspiration passes through radical critique. There’s no living art outside of the art of living. Art will be subversive or it will no longer exist.

10.

The SI will explain to the artists that it can lead them back to creativity, from which they are currently distancing themselves with a lack of awareness that runs the risk of exposing them to the resentment of the true defenders of creativity. The best of them must create an art of agitation that is commensurate with the poetry that is made by all: immense graffiti, paintings on the exterior walls of factories, graphic commentary on the facades of administrative, repressive and religious buildings, songs for striking workers, lessons in subversive *détournement*, the orchestration of hostile shouting at demonstrations, in comics and on posters, *anti-happenings*

such as raids upon large-scale exhibitions, critics, collectors, and painters who serve power, the defacement of exhibited canvasses and, in general, all forms of practical opposition to commercialized and socially adapted art, and the encouragement of the blossoming of anonymous art that has no commercial value.

Simultaneously, we will study the possibilities for agitation in and against contemporary education⁷ (texts for use by high-school students, even picture books, that explain our options in today's world). We will especially push for the sabotage of cultural centers.

⁷ Only a few months after this text was written, the SI would orchestrate a scandal at the University of Strasbourg with the writing, funding and publication of *On the Poverty of Student Life*.