

## Either Useful or Useless: Reviving Inventiveness

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### Useless Inventions

Have you ever heard of Isaac Peral and Juan de la Cierva? To this question one may reply: What kind of artists are they? Well, they are not quite artists, but I would like to refer to them as such to define what artists are expected to do. Isaac Peral was an officer in the Spanish Navy and constructed a submarine. Juan de la Cierva is another Spaniard who invented the Autogiro, a predecessor of the helicopter. Both of them are commemorated as inventors of international renown in their native state, Murcia, in Spain.

However, their inventiveness did not necessarily promise them a fortunate life. Also known as a climatologist, Isaac Peral (1851-1895) did make a great contribution by successfully constructing a battery propulsion submarine equipped with torpedoes in 1888. It is said that he suffered from espionage by foreign secret agents and had to overcome sabotage and a profound lack of comprehension. Although the experiment showed satisfying results, the Spanish Navy did not recognize the outcome and refused to adopt his proposal for the development of a submarine unit. Disappointed with this refusal, Peral resigned from the Spanish Navy in 1891 after patenting his invention. As a promising businessman and engineer, Peral constructed more than 30 factories in Spain, providing them with power plants of his own invention. But he died soon after, getting a head wound during his stay in the Philippines.

Juan de la Cierva (1895-1936) was born at the year of Peral's death. At the age of 25, he invented a plane with a huge propeller at the top, capable of semi-vertical take off. The invention was patented as the Autogiro in 1920 and de la Cierva moved to Philadelphia in search of business opportunities. A contract was made in 1932 for a mass produced Autogiro, and his business proved to be successful. But he was killed in an accident at the Croydon airport in 1936, at the age of 41.

Both of these Spanish inventors were deeply marked by the Golden Age of Great Inventions when they finished their short but adventurous lives. Both of their inventions were eventually applied to military purposes. And yet, Peral's submarine was not recognized as useful by Spanish Navy contemporaries. When the helicopter was put into practice, de la Cierva's Autogiro was soon forgotten as past heritage. Peral's invention was too early to be adopted, while de la Cierva's idea was technically transitory and could not survive later innovations. It is true that both Peral and de la Cierva believed in the usefulness of their own inventions. But contemporary society (in Peral's case) or posterity (in de la Cierva's case) judged their proposal to be aimless or not reliable enough. Both of these Spanish creators put their passion and energy into what was judged to be almost useless inventions. They sacrificed their lives to their doomed endeavors. Were their lives devoted to useless waste of their (in-)valuable talent?

### Art as an act of dis-interest-edness

Why did I begin this essay by mentioning these two inventors? My intention is to focus attention on the notion of uselessness. It may be said that modern art is defined as inventions of uselessness. Indeed, in his Critique of the Faculty of Judgment (1790), Emmanuel Kant defined artistic invention as a kind of human production which is deprived of any particular and practical interest. Dis-interested-ness, or the lack of concern to any practical purposes marks the modern definition of human artistic creation. Subjectively the creators may believe in the value of their own creation, but objectively the wider society would not recognize any utility in these creations. A sort of spiritual detachment from the material world's value judgment thus characterizes modern artistic creation. ("Modern" here refers to the fact that the "creation" is no longer regarded as monopolized by the almighty God.) It is simultaneously a privilege and duty of human creators to devote themselves to the creation of (physically) useless objects or (metaphysically) aimless aesthetic concepts.

However, to live such a detached and disinterested life, out of the yoke of any social utilities, demands a special environment. An environment which would at least passively accept and protect the existence of these useless people named "artists." If the society positively encourages and supports such useless people as "genius," the life of the artists would be better. The ideal of the "autonomy of art" implies such an image of artists who are detached from any utilitarian interests and are allowed to concentrate in their own disinterested (i.e. "artistic") creations.

This idea of "autonomy," however, tends to overlook the requisite necessary conditions without which the autonomy of art cannot be sustained. This is a tautological matter of course, for taking into account these necessary pre-conditions for autonomy inevitably results in the self-negation of the autonomy in question. So as to sustain the illusion of autonomy, one has to enjoy a privilege of not being bothered with the prerequisites of that very autonomy. Or one has to pretend to be detached from, and disinterested in that which makes this mirage of autonomy possible. Therefore, the so-called autonomy of art floats on a self-deception of being almost intentionally blind to, and willingly negligent and ignorant of one's own living conditions.

Such is the logical as well as social magic sustaining the illusion of the "autonomy of art." On the one hand, this view of the artist as removed from society runs counter to the idea of profession which Max Weber, for example, defined in his Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism: vocation ("Beruf"), is the task imposed upon one by God. On the other hand, this view also contradicts the

Marxist idea of art as upper-structure, i.e. that which is understandable as and reducible to a reflection of the underlying economic structure. According to some versions of Marxist doctrine, the autonomy of art is no more than a vain resistance to this material determinism. It turns out that the modern idea of art not only deprived God of the capacity for Creation (ex nihilo, according to Thomas Aquinas), but also removed itself from the duty God inflicted upon human beings. Consequently art pretends to be liberated from the market principle of exchange value, or at least it (arrogantly?) assumes a superior position, floating above concerns of economic and commercial domination.

Despite such pretensions, it is impossible for a mortal to create anything ex nihilo. Nor is an individual capable of operating an alchemy of trans-substantiation, changing into gold whatever is touched. Who can, like the King Midas, make money simply by manipulating a brush (like a painter) or handling clay by their own hands (like a sculptor)? Such alchemy is possible only in the condition that the artist is successfully allied with the market system which recognizes and acknowledges the convertible monetary value in the artist's creation. It is a collective credence, a sort of communal illusion and shared belief anticipating positive outcomes of the investment which bestows upon the work of art its own social value of circulation, by which it is then appraised. Thus the social recognition in the market promises and literally creates a circulation value that attaches to the work and extends to its creator. As a result of this snowball effect, the artist may hopefully expect to enjoy an astrological/ astronomical added value in this circular structure of evaluation.

### The genius myth as a social demand

An artist cannot enjoy ideal working conditions of uniquely concentrating on their own disinterested creation, without being protected by discriminating commercial support and receiving privileged promotion, either from the state or from private initiatives (such as patrons). And it is an open question how many artists in history have ever enjoyed such ideal autonomy in their lives. Privileged people tend to accept corresponding social duties and constraints. And non-fulfilment of these obligations or deviation from expected requirements may easily result in social sanctions. The social obligations tend to become heavier as the artist's fame develops. These constant struggles in the search for celebrity and necessary compromises with the social environment are often re-interpreted in the biographies of great artists (Roman Roland may be a representative ...) as heroic battles of a solitary genius struggling against established social values or suffering from being surrounded by incomprehension and hatred, etc. Yet such a melodrama with either a tragic end or final fulfillment in triumph often does more harm than good to the comprehension of the objective situation in which the artistic creation has been executed, successfully or unsuccessfully.

It should be obvious that making a hit and winning popularity by no means guarantees an ideal paradise of artistic autonomy. Far from being welcomed to the paradise, the artist is now destined to an interminable itinerary into the purgatory (if not hell) of meeting endless demands until their popularity wanes or they are finally liberated from earthly existence. To become a popular favorite is to be exposed to the market place and one's limits are relentlessly challenged physically as well as mentally.

Physically speaking, an artist usually has only one arm with which to paint (as Leonard Foujita reminds us with the title of his book: *Bura Ippon, An Arm of Mine*). Mizuki Shigeru lost his left arm during the war and has difficulty in smoking while he is drawing. Is the eye shaped goblin, a famous character in his manga, a personification of the author's desire to compensate for his physical handicap? The thalidomide medical disaster even created a painter without arms, who put the brush in his mouth to paint. An alternative may be the case of Shiraga Kazuo of the Gutai Group who balanced his body by holding a rope, and painted not with an arm but with both legs. Katsushika Hokusai in the frontispiece of his *Secret of the Sketches* depicted an oriental master painter who makes five drawings at the same time, using not only his two arms but also two legs and mouth. This image transmits not so much the exceptional dexterity as the business of a popular drawing master in the Edo Tokugawa era. A Japanese expression goes "I want to borrow a cat's paw" to explain that and being too busy for anything else. And a painter literally borrowed the paws of a cat to paint the canvas, and the cat become more famous than the human painter himself. By a curious coincidence, "drawing" and "cat" share a similarity in their Chinese characters. If the part indicating "hand" 手 of the character for the verb "to draw" 描< is replaced by the part indicating "animal" the result means "cat" 猫 ...

Within the limited life span which rarely exceeds one hundred years, and within the constraints of 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, many artists were forced into heavy labor beyond the limit of their physical and mental capacities. Either broken down by chronic fatigue or becoming depressive with the exhaustion of one's talent, or falling into toxicomania, pharmacomania, alcoholism and other mental problems, many ended their lives as victims of market exploitations and capitalist usurpation. As posthumous compensation, the public and mass-media awarded these victims such attractive titles as "prematurely dead child prodigy" or "tragic genius."

Was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart a prodigious child who died prematurely? At least it must be pointed out that such an image of genius is an anachronistic and preposterous projection of the modern artistic value judgment onto a society which was still alien to such "modern" value judgments. According to Norbert Elias, the essence of Mozart's creation was articulated by the mismatching between his bourgeois origin and his inferior status in the court culture. The gap between the all mighty mundane prince incapable of fully recognizing or estimating the musical talent of his servant and the servant incapable of making proof of his exceptional talent because of his subordinate position of musician hired in the court is the basic condition without which Mozart could not compose any

piece of music. These structurally depressing conditions, combined with his ambivalent relationship with the father, were the necessary (if not sufficient) conditions for the manifestation of Mozart's musical creation. It would be a mere fantasy to suppose that Mozart could have been still better, were it not for these social and familiar constraints which prevented Mozart from fully developing his potentiality.

Then how about Vincent van Gogh? Nathalie Heinrich, in her *La Gloire de van Gogh*, interprets the genesis of a hero, as a supplied image replying to social demand. Despite the current stereotype of an artist as rejected by society, Vincent van Gogh's painting were remarked upon and even celebrated in the critiques immediately after his death. It is therefore in opposition to the historical reality that our common sense misunderstanding of the life and death of van Gogh as rejected genius has been fabricated as a myth. This selective misreading of his career has continued since his earliest critical celebrations, in accordance with the public expectations of the role of an artist as outsider. Rather than destroying such still prevailing myth as fallacy, it is more important to understand the circumstances which gave birth to the mythology and allowed its propagation. According to Heinrich, a kind of spiritual compensation was felt necessary so as to repay the earlier (mythological) incomprehension of which van Gogh was supposed to have been victim. This compensation resulted in the glorification of van Gogh as a mythology, on the one hand, and also economically encouraged the rise of price of his works in the art market, on the other hand.

Naively believing in the greatness of a van Gogh implies involvement in the reinforcing and propagation of the mythology of male genius. Such an unthinking involvement in the avant-garde myth was severely criticized by feminist scholars in the 80s. Applauding Paul Gauguin or Pablo Picasso was almost criminal, as it was tantamount to accepting and celebrating colonial usurpation of the native Tahitian women (in Gauguin's case) or to triumphantly identify oneself with Picasso who is supposed to have brutally repressed his numerous female partners, a number of whom committed suicide. Between the naive modernist belief in the male heroism, which unconsciously contributes to the dominant power structure, and the opposite accusation of modernism advanced by feminism, Nathalie Heinrich, as a critical sociologist, proposes a third choice of critically analyzing the process of profane theology through which certain individuals are elevated to objects of worship and veneration. For nothing else may better characterize the Modern era than profane theology.

It seems as if an efficient sociologist of art were requested to serve as an able adviser to an ambitious artist. More than a usual art critic, it may be the task of a sociologist to become a sharp analyst of the art market. Armed with a deep knowledge on the market mechanism, they may be capable of becoming a successful promoter of new artistic trends. Well versed in the creation process of art worship, a critical sociologist of art may be capable of proposing a market strategy and may be employed as consultant by advertising companies. The only problem is that scholars are notoriously lacking in the ability to predict. They are relatively good at analyzing a-posteriori the reasons for what has already happened, but a self-fulfilling prophecy which bridges probability and eventuality is not what we can expect of academics. Moreover, you may clearly explain the reasons for your own failures but success almost always lies beyond the limit of possible analysis. ...

### Artist as Self-Promoter

So far we have sketched the social environment in which the worship of artistic creation has been fostered. The idea of the modern artist was elaborated in the second half of 18th Century Europe and was practically implemented in the West by the beginning of the 20th Century. Let us now cast a glimpse on the current state of working conditions of the contemporary artists.

Modern art, both in idea and practice, consists of an almost absurd misconception of taking the useless, impractical excess of society for a noble, refined and (in-)valuable outcome of the human spiritual activity. Still the truth of this magic of alchemy seems to have been revealed with the end of Modernism. The disillusioned post-modern artists are no longer allowed to be intoxicated in the happy dream of absorption in their own creations. They cannot assume an affected posture and be satisfied with the self-image of a talented artist accepting the respect of the public and the flattery of critics or journalists.

The daily life of contemporary artists mainly consists of self-promotion and self-management. Organizing one's own show or taking part in the group exhibition. Overcoming conflicts within the group and trying to take initiative. Selling one's work as commodities with the imprint of a personal message and patent. Appealing to the art market with one's own name and shooting at target customers on any possible occasion. Searching for patrons and protectors so as to maintain one's living and to develop business opportunities. Inventing marketing strategies, and making friends with museum curators. Renewing mail address books and sending invitation cards. These routine acts are among the daily time-consuming customs in the life of an artist. The business burden has become so heavy that many artists put more time and energy into public relations, self-promotion and marketing, rather than their artistic creation (or more precisely, the fabrication of merchandise).

A schizophrenic situation has become part of the artist's everyday life, as they have to be their own business manager. Simultaneously actor, their own secretary as well as director of the company in which they belong, each artist has to play and fulfil multiple roles unless they employ at their own expense the necessary manager, paymaster, publicity agent, etc. From domestic industry to joint-stock company, the scale differs from one case to another. And yet, larger investment has become indispensable so as to encourage and support the circulation of one's work as profitable merchandise in the art market. Without such enterprising efforts, combined with professional management skills and experience, it has become almost impossible to expect any massive

capital investment in and financial return on an individual artistic creation.

Thus the model of a capitalist enterprise manager has replaced the classical (and quasi-mythological) image of modern artist, as an isolated individual creator (with an additional flavor of hermit-like undertone in the Orient, including Japan). Unwillingly undergoing self-alienation, the manager-artist has assumed a double (and split) personality of being simultaneously an employee (as creator) and an employer (as manager). No one can say any more with certainty which of the two functions is more important for a successful art business. To a certain degree, it has become more important to be a good owner of an artistic production company than to be a simple employed "talent" of the company.

Naturally, this does not imply that no talent is needed to sell profitable merchandise. Each piece of work with the artist's own distinctive logo mark should be constantly exposed to the curious public eye and continue to attract efficiently critical attention at every occasion in rivalry with other exhibitors. A subtle dose of seasoning is also indispensable; each piece shows notable elaboration and the latest innovation while it must be clearly identifiable as the work of the same creator. Stimulating critics' appetite to write about the piece and the artist is no less important than to surprise the non-initiated new customers. And offering a suitable subject to a newspaper and paying attention not to lose popularity among the repeaters, etc. Such concerns are, of course, the necessary conditions for business but they are never sufficient conditions for a commercial success. The danger is that a shrewd commercial promotion and marketing strategy may easily promise sensational success, even to mediocre pieces of work of secondary importance.

### Anemia of Art and its Origin

Since when has the contemporary art been suffering from anemia? The caricature of the art industry sketched above may suggest a hint, if not an answer, to this question. It was not until the artist has become conscious of the marketing mechanism that artistic creation is affected by the very awareness of the marketing strategy. The ups and downs of commercial conjunctures is no longer a factor outside artistic creation. The market mechanism directly influences the creator's choice and more than half of the intellectual and physical investment of a creator is now devoted to the commercial and business affairs. As an inevitable and logical consequence of this displacement of the center of gravity, not only the works of art but also its creators gradually gave way. They have lost their vital importance in the social ritual of "art" and are reduced to a secondary role in the theatrical performance of artistic promotion.

At the same time, the market mechanism for promoting individual artists and their creations has become so gigantic, that is beyond the control of any individual player. Artistic creation is no longer an individual business but part of a huge contracting business work, conducted by professional suppliers and underwriters. On such a huge stage of inhuman scale, an individual artist can no longer make an efficient performance of their own within the limits of human creativity, physically as well as mentally, without being dependent on the image screened by management. A romantic belief in the capability of an exceptional individual and the democratic illusion that such an exceptional talent and remarkable achievement may be universally acknowledged by the public and citizens has already lost its credibility. Even artists who have clung to such a romantic dream and believed in democratic selection are afflicted with disillusionment and suspicious of the (fallacious) promise of the harmony to come, which, in reality, would never be realized.

It would be dumb to cling to the solitary fabrication of a (self-believed) masterpiece in the baseless and self-deceiving hope that one day your talent will be recognized by society and that you will be covered by honor and weighed down by public acknowledgement. Instead of making solitary effort for the fabrication of an unknown masterpiece, it would be much wiser to increase your own promoters, curators and protectors who would help you obtain social fame and recognition. And if you prefer, it is not forbidden to condemn the hypocrisy, fakery and fallacies of your rivals who have performed successful self-promotion. As a contestant, a victim of social abuse and injustice, you may also accuse dominant power players and authorities of wickedness and vice. You may also propose an alternative to the dominant market system. Anyhow, you are requested to mobilize your sympathizers and to organize a systematic counter-attack using your own initiative. Escaping into one's own privacy is not a rational choice.

Such a prescription may anticipate at least two opposite reactions. On the one hand, ambitious artists, eager for social recognition, tend to follow the capitalist manager-artist model by mobilizing a maximum of cultural capital. It must be remembered that the number of those who can successfully survive this race for fame may be limited because of each market's saturation capacity for celebrities. On the other hand, those who are not eager to accumulate cultural capital and are unwilling to compete commercially turn their backs on such a predetermined course of embracing celebrity as upward mobility. While the first group regards art and their artwork as tools for their promotion, the later group considers art to be useless, faithful to the definition of modern art as a disinterested activity. While the first group with their orientation to business has an utilitarian view of art, the later group tries to keep intact the autonomy of art by not requiring any collateral exchange advantageous to their own creation. However the autonomy in question is constantly menaced by the impracticability of such a creation, for evident lack of economical support. If the former is treacherous to the cause of Modern art, the latter is faithful to the cause but the faithfulness cannot be maintained without running the risk of bankruptcy and professional suicide.

Daring to promote these candidates of self-willing suicide is merely a deviation from the rational program of market principles. And yet the perversity of investing in those who are not worthy of investment is a privileged extravagance monopolized by prominent patrons. Exhibiting one's own benevolent capacity to make a massive and ostentatious waste is a manifestation of the spirit of pottlach, which may gain unexpected public approval. Once again beneficiaries of such a benevolent extravagance are quite limited in number and their artistic quality remains questionable, due to the capricious nature of the almost incidental favor: the indiscriminate discrimination of talent.

The permissible margin for such an aristocratic whimsy of aimless investment becomes shallower in stagnating economic recessions. Due to the recent reinforcement of accreditation and external estimations, there is only a slim possibility of receiving a sudden promotion without previously convincing investors of the utility, aim and expected outcome of the investment. And yet an aimless self-indulgent fantasy is not entirely deprived of the chance of being promoted as a rare exception.

Though statistically marginal, this capricious margin is the only room for freedom, for it is a convention that modern art is highly evaluated when it openly violates or at least chooses not to respect established rules. The margin is by definition marginal, and the remaining room is still getting thinner, because the "rule" of "not respecting the rule" has by itself contributed to the super-sophistication of contemporary art marketing strategies. This sophistication has also stimulated an enterprising spirit among ambitious young artists. How to dodge and get through this double bind is one of the crucial behavioral questions in the current art scene.

### How to save Art from Anemia

The cultural power of bringing into existence extravagant things which people do not know how to use: I have so far tried to analyze the reasons why this power has dwindled. Let us take the case of Christo. People are no longer surprised by his wrapping, whatever object he chooses to wrap. The main effort of the artist is no longer oriented to the object to wrap -- be it the Berliner Reichstag or the Parisian Pont Neuf -- but to the complicated process of difficult negotiations through which the artist manages to come to terms with different law systems which are integral to each country with which his project has to be attuned, each time differently. This reiterated effort amounts to a tremendous waste of physical as well as intellectual energy. And the sum of futility indicates the greatness of his endeavor. In addition, this extravagant waste also accounts for the mechanism of the society with which the artist tries to negotiate and reveals the limit of the social conventions.

If you find such an effort ridiculous or absurd, it would not be useless to think about the ultimate alternative proposed by Akasegawa Genpei almost simultaneously. Akasegawa removes the external label as well as the tinned salmon contents and attaches the label again on the interior side of the can, before tightly soldering the can. The artist then claims that he has successfully wrapped and confined the entire world into a tiny metal can, with the only exception of a small...let alone a small portion of about 100 cm<sup>3</sup> of the air which still remains floating "outside" the can. This masterpiece of conceptual art mischievously became the largest container ever existing in the world. The Japanese artist took advantage of the (topo)logical trick of inside out so as to surpass Christo's achievement.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the remaining margin of any artistic creation is confined between Christo's megalomaniac endeavors and Akasegawa's minimalist conception. In between these poles, recent patent applications are concentrated in nano-technology lying beyond the limit of human perception. Most of the technological inventions are made by professional researchers belonging to public bodies or private enterprises, and the probability of inventions by independent individuals has also shrunk to a tiny percentage. From youngsters to the elderly alike, people have already lost the desire and hope of inventing anything marvelous using personal initiative and their amateurish inspirations.

In our everyday life, we are now bound to innumerable restrictions. Even a re-appropriation of abandoned household garbage and domestic wreckage may be sanctioned as illegal, if you remove them from a public dumping ground without permission. For the wrecked structure should be only removed by authorized professional cleaning team, etc. Moreover, if you invigorate these thrown out objects for your own domestic usage, you will be welcomed by the anger of your wife [or housewife] (rather than husband, at least in the contemporary Japanese society), which is preferable to avoid. Even a modest entertainment by a Sunday carpenter runs the risk of being charged as violation of construction regulations. Handicraft has lost its field of practice to such an extent in Japan that the younger generation (mis)takes the development of virtual cyber space as an extension of the potentiality of the real world. In reality, however, the retreat into the so-called virtual reality is a response to the suffocating repression contemporary society imposes upon citizens.

The shrinking of inventiveness goes hand in hand with the decline of handicrafts. The marvelous dexterity of manual skills that Japan once boasted is now threatened with extinction. Due to insufficient profitability in the commercial market, many traditional arts and crafts have disappeared. The deteriorated natural environment makes it difficult to obtain indispensable materials. Just take one example from the decorative lacquer painting of Wajima nuri. The most delicate lacquer painting requires a special brush made of wild mouse fur. The wild mouse has diminished in number because of construction reinforcing the banks of the Biwa Lake, and the wild mouse skin market was closed. These brushes is now out of stock, and the lacquer painting craftsmen can no longer practice. The metier will be exterminated with the death of the present generation craftsmen, etc. The same is true of silk textiles in Nishijin,

and no successors can be found in such fields as gold leaf, ivory sculpture and hand made Japanese papers. The transmission of tradition is no longer assured and necessary measures cannot be found to avoid the irremediable loss. Such is the proof of the weakening cultural power and the poverty of the contemporary society at the beginning of the 21st Century.

How Japanese society is suffocating may be easily recognized when examined from abroad. Accumulated regulations reveal legislative incoherence and piles of incompatible laws and ordinances entangle us in trouble. Lack of inter-ministerial cooperation and chronic shortages in administrative adjustment are commonly noted. The low mobility of society makes any meaningful urban re-development practically impossible. To perceive the absurdity resulting from the layers of Japanese regulations, it would be enough to try to design your own house in Japan. While many of your good ideas may be pushed back and prevented from realization because they clash with safety regulations. If you are clever enough to elude the regulation network, you are legally allowed to construct a house which may make your neighbors frown, freely disrupting and spoiling their precious living environment.

Foreign observers are often amused by the incredible Japanese capacity for patience and endurance. Instead of trying to appeal to the legislative renovations, most of the common people obediently respect the laws and regulations without complaining or questioning them. And avoiding questioning is taken for the law-abiding spirit, strongly recommended and repetitively taught in educational system of disciplinary reproduction, and transmitted from generation to generation in a marvelous succession. So as to break up this social custom, pressures from abroad seems indispensable (from American occupation after the W.W.II to the nomination of Carlos Gome as President of the Nissan Automobile Construction Company). And ironically enough, the reliance on foreign pressure and alien instruction further contribute to the aggravation of repressed nature of the Japanese ...

### Diagnostics, Syndrome or Cure?

How to overcome these symptoms of structural repression? Here must be the duty (and freedom) reserved to Art as a Modern invention. Art has the duty and freedom of inventing useless ideas and fabricating not for profitable devices. And this freedom must be guaranteed and dutifully respected and encouraged so long as it is not harmful to the earth and to its inhabitants (including animals and plants). Japanese press and mass media have long repeated that contemporary art is difficult to understand, as if to justify their own incomprehension and to prevail the same lack of understanding on the public in general. Artists, for their part, seem to have so obediently accepted this social incomprehension that they have molded and armed their work with the shield of incomprehensiveness.

These overlapping prejudices confined the contemporary art work to seclusion and artists withdrew into this protective shell. This self-imposed self-satisfying seclusion easily encouraged them to become reluctant about sending their message to the general public. Resignedly supposing in advance that whatever they try their message is destined to be rejected as incomprehensible and not quite interesting, they clung more obstinately to the project of making their work even more incomprehensible and still less interesting.

What opens new and still unknown possibilities along with the risk of remarkable failure? Such was the duty as well as the freedom that Modern Art had to enjoy by its very definition. However the generally repressive mode of society and the highly commercialized market management system seem to have deprived the artists of this fundamental duty and privilege. The artists themselves tend to feel it forbidden to meet this original expectation, and find easy satisfaction in their autistic self-imposed seclusion. Miming for the resulting limited audience, it seems as if their attitude predicts the prevailing autism of the youngsters and mirrors the repressive state of the surroundings. Mere prognostics and reflection of the society are less than the half of what one is entitled to expect of the contemporary Art.

During the avant-garde era (roughly from 1910 to 1970), art found it a duty of its own to criticize social conformism and did not hesitate to manifest its resistance and opposition to the dominant regime. In the following postmodern era (1970-1990), contestations and transgressions have been socially legitimized and political manifestation of the unfavorable or the handicapped enjoyed benefit from the dominant class which searched for their own political justification in their ostensible act of beneficence. Thus in the last ten years, the pretension of being marginal and the assumption of being in the minority have become efficient weapons in the media wars. And paradoxically enough, even the open accusation made by the so-called marginal anti-regime activist-artists against commercialized mercenaries of being "merchants of death" has become a strategy of a self promotion? resulting in the creation of? authoritarian hero(in) artists in the "politically correct" art market.

It is undeniable that such socio-political engagement has played a significant historical role. Still, the ethical polarization between justice and injustice was in a sense politically abused so as to reinforce another polarity between successful and unsuccessful artists. Instead of contributing to the acceleration of such ill-omened polarization, between self-imposed seclusion and mundane exposure, between autism and exhibitionism, and eventually, between oblivion and glory, why not expose and exhibit the very mechanism of such a polarization through the artistic creation and exhibition as a social process? Questioning the significance of one's own artistic creation amounts to criticism of the social system in which the fortune and misfortune of the pieces of art work is determined. Art may be an indispensable experimental observatory of the disease named human beings, even if it cannot cure its patients (when cured, not only human beings but also art would no longer exist).

## Souvenir Goods for the Future Generation?

What will be the future surplus of society, named art? Cast aside from efficiency-oriented industry, usually discarded as a useless obstacle and disturbance, art still manifests itself as scarcity value while remaining unclassifiable, as long as it remains outside market speculation. Void of the social system, art indicates by itself the empty slits of society. Just as the marginalized and the handicapped are potentially capable of revealing what is lacking in the social welfare, so art sheds light on the margin of efficiency. Proliferating in the margin, art fosters tools and utensils that contemporary people do not yet know how to use. Deprived of determined purposes, these artifacts remain price-less and in-valuable, in the two opposite connotations of the words. And it would be part of our duty to leave this useless heritage as a relic for the future.

This reflection on utility brings us back to the aesthetics formulae elaborated by modern Oriental aesthetics thinkers, Okakura Tenshin and Yanagi Muneyoshi.

Reserving a space for objects without any objective function may serve as an index of the maturity of a society. And if this evaluation is valid, it turns out that the Japanese archipelago still has much room for maturity. Let us recall that praise of emptiness was a central thesis formulated by Tenshin, Okakura Kuakuzo in his *The Book of Tea*, for the benefit of foreign readers, almost one hundred years ago. If Okakura's message is our heritage, why is it justifiable to forget making necessary room for emptiness in our social system?

The European Modern notion of Art is constructed on the opposition of usage and beauty. Kant's philosophical definition of art as dis-interested-ness also supports and consolidates the idea that beauty consists in the lack of utilitarian concern of usage. And these metaphysical prerequisites have dominated for a long time the basic management of the art museum as institution and container of the pieces of art. One of the most eloquent opponents to this Western art philosophy and museology was Yanagi Muneyoshi. Declaring that everyday use could give birth to a special form of beauty, Yanagi applauded the notion of popular craft (*mingei*) and highly evaluated handmade utensils made by unknown craftsmen, with a modest spirit, untainted by the signature of individualistic egoism of the modern Western creator. Departing from this fusion of beauty and usage, Yanagi in his final years attained a state of mind where no distinction is made between beauty and ugliness. Clearly reflecting a medievalism with the return to Oriental tradition, Yanagi's idea was also the modern invention of a tradition. Further, it must also be noted that the idea of popular craft was by no means contradictory to contemporary Western functionalism, as both of them searched for a rational beauty in functional efficiency. In this sense Yanagi's *Mingei* ideology was undoubtedly representing the era of the Avant-Garde in search of the beauty in pure formality.

Based on Okakura Tenshin and Yanagi Muneyoshi, it would not be forbidden for us to show a purely logical possibility of reversing the formulation. As a reaction to the age of functional beauty, it may be permissible to reserve a room for useless utensils and recognize once again a beauty in dis-interested-ness. The material space for emptiness is also a mental space of reservoir, and we may afford a margin for the freedom of our spiritual treasure house of imagination, as a space of rehabilitation between the Western and Oriental view of the art consciousness. To reserve a marginal biosphere for those objects and acts which are not reducible to exchange value is to assure an indispensable margin for the rotation of commercial circulation.

The margin for kinetic rotation is called "jeu" in French or "asobi" in Japanese; both meaning "play." Therefore it is a logical and physical conclusion to maintain that the art museum must be reformed into a playground according to its initial aim of aimlessness by overlooking mercantile profitability. Cannot we spare a room to what we can spare? Or cannot we spare what we can spare? If we cannot, the shrinking margin of the playground convincingly predicts that we have no future and that the future cannot find any relic of our age. Can our future children find something similar to such relics of our time as Juan de la Cierva's autogiro which is no longer allowed to fly in the air, or Issac Peral's submarine which was ordered to stay out of the sea for the rest of its existence? Can we leave to the posterity relics of our age, memorizing our respect to the lack of profitability and praising uselessness in an age of profitability? How do our posterities cherish the superfluous-ness of our age? What kind of cocoon filled with unrealized dreams and fantasies can we bequest to the future?

All of a sudden we noticed, at the margin of our capitalist hegemony, that the time had already come to select the souvenir goods of the 20th Century on behalf of, and in the interest (or dis-interested-ness) of the future to come.

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