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11.08.05 Conspiracy Theory

New York



Left: Arto Lindsay. (Photo: Ruth Root) Right: Jean Baudrillard.

On Wednesday night, as part of a weeklong series of talks, the art world's po-mo poster boy, Jean Baudrillard, promoted his latest text, *The Conspiracy of Art*, at the swank new digs of Jack Tilton Gallery, a former residence of Franklin Roosevelt. In the second-floor ballroom where FDR married Eleanor, Sylvère Lotringer, founder of Semiotext(e) and the major importer of French theory in the '80s, presented Baudrillard as "pretty much the rock star of French philosophy" with "a New Deal for art."

I was charmed to see the decent turnout. Baudrillard's ideas were in vogue about twenty years ago, when art came to consciousness of itself as a commodity. His writing about "the precession of simulacra" broke new ground in art blather. I wondered if he was the simulacrum of thought. The electric guitar screeches provided by No Wave veteran Arto Lindsay before and after the discussion were quaintly confrontational.

The sight of the Euro-arty-looking crowd induced a grad school flashback: The small "ballroom" was crammed with the same people who were in my po-mo theory seminar—but twenty years later! Plus art dealers. On the walls, a collegiate vibe emanated from poster-size photos, tacked up with pushpins: pictures of an open book, with pen and café crème; two Godard-ish students conversing on a sidewalk; a topless self-portrait. Had some wag installed a parody of the clichéd French intellectual and his accoutrements? The photographer was Baudrillard himself. "If art ceases to matter as art, why shouldn't Baudrillard make art too?" asked Lotringer, indicating his approval. "He's joined a group whose reason to exist he denies."

"Art is everywhere but in art," Baudrillard declared. "Art is no longer where it thinks it is." *The Conspiracy of Art* concerns how art has been infected by "the narrow proximity between artist and consumer," by the "obscenity of interactivity." "There is no more 'formal' difference between art and reality," and this is a problem. "Art has now collapsed into the aestheticized banality of everything else . . . a 'pornography of transparency' that we can only experience with irony and indifference. It claims to be null: 'I am null! I am null!' But it is truly null!" he smiles triumphantly. "Striving for emptiness when it is already empty." The problem, said the philosopher, is the fake nothings: "The snobs of nullity, the counterfeiters, must not be allowed free reign. The poetic operation is to make nothingness arise from signs." Amen, brother. But at the end of the evening, which left most of the audience scratching their heads as some lined up to have their books signed, it wasn't clear whether the "nothingness" achieved here was real, fake, simulacrum, or some combination of the above.

As this self-described "pessimist" spoke, I thought of über-modernist Michael Fried, who wrote "Art and Objecthood" in 1967 to defend art (that is, modernist art, à la Greenberg) against "objects"—the mere *stuff* invading the art world at the time (in the form of Minimalism, installation, performance, etc.). Art isn't stuff, Fried argued; it's not just a bunch of objects that interact with the viewer. At the cusp of postmodernism, Fried saw what was happening but was famously wrong about the future of art. Weirdly enough, Baudrillard has arrived at a similar place almost forty years later. Like Fried, who defended art's autonomy, Baudrillard kvetched that art is "infected with the hyperreality that aestheticizes everything" and deprived of its specialness. He called for an art lifted and separated from "value," from obscene "proximity" to the viewer, from the interactivity where "you (the viewer) are the artist.

"Art is inexchangeable," Lotringer chimed in helpfully. "It cannot be reduced to value . . . we need a New Deal where things will not be exchangeable."

I was glad to get a reality check afterward. *New York Times* writer Deborah Solomon marveled at how "all those guys, Fried, Arthur Danto, Hilton Kramer, start to sound alike about the 'end of Art.'" Don't these people have the hindsight to consider that maybe it's their point of view that's history, and that art will be just fine? "It's all over for them in the '60s," she said. "They can't see anything after Brice Marden."

How uncanny that Baudrillard's discourse lubricated big-ticket sales for art that made infinite jest about its own inflated "value" all the way to the bank. He was (mis)taken as the

cheerleader for simulacra. His discourse was used to endorse the confusion between art and commodity by branding high-end product with fancy schmancy postmodern theory. His call now for art to subvert "the banality of hyperreality" puzzled the room that evening, but he's always been a Situationist—very anti-"society of the spectacle"—an intellectual black hole aspiring to implode the system from within. They would have known that if they had actually read him. But few people did. His discourse was a fetish; "Baudrillard," a brand name. That's what people came to see tonight, and that's what they got. Most couldn't follow what the heck he was saying—and not for lack of trying. Some blamed themselves for it. Hes the antifetish fetish, but his brand identity is "difficult," so . . . whatever!

If one *only* sees art through its exchange value, Baudrillard's remarks have a grain of truth. (We've all seen how collectors, dealers, and schmoozy artists can reduce art to mere "value.") Indeed, the obscene "lack of distance" here seems to be between Baudrillard and capital, the "collapse" between his point of view and the market's. As Nietzsche says, if you gaze long enough into the abyss, you become it.

On the way out, there was a table stacked with Baudrillard books for sale, and *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*, for \$17.

—Rhonda Lieberman