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BAUDRILLARD ON TOUR

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There may never again be a year in Jean Baudrillard's life quite like 1999. Baudrillard the French philosopher, is best known for his theory that consumer society forms a kind of code that gives individuals the illusion of choice while in fact entrapping them in a vast web of simulated reality. In 1999, the movie "The Matrix," which was based on this theory transformed him from a cult figure into an extremely famous cult figure. But Baudrillard was ambivalent about the film—he declined an invitation to participate in the writing of its sequels—and these days he is still going about his usual French-philosopher business scandalizing audiences with the grandiloquent sweep of his gnomic pronouncements and his post-Marxian pessimism.

Earlier this month, he gave a reading at the Tilton Gallery, on East Seventy-sixth Street, in order to promote "The Conspiracy of Art," his new book. The audience was too big for the room—some people had to stand. A tall, Nico-esque blond woman in a shiny white raincoat leaned against the mantelpiece, next to a tall man with chest-length dreadlocks. A middle-aged woman with red-and-purple hair sat nearby. There was a brief opening act: Arto Lindsay, the onetime Lounge Lizard, whose broad forehead, seventies-style eyeglasses, and sturdy teeth seemed precariously supported by his reedy frame, played a thunderous cadenza on a pale-blue electric guitar.

Baudrillard opened his book and began to read in a careful tone. He is a small man with large facial features. He wore a brown jacket and a blue shirt. (Some years ago, he appeared on the

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stage of Whiskey Pete's, near Las Vegas, wearing a gold lamé suit with mirrored lapels, and read a poem, "Motel-Suicide," which he wrote in the nineteen-eighties. But there was no trace of the lamé Baudrillard at the Tilton Gallery.)

" 'The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion,' " he began. " 'After the orgies and the liberation of all desires, we have moved into the transsexual, the transparency of sex, with signs and images erasing all its secrets and ambiguity.' "

After he read, Baudrillard expanded on his theme. "We say that Disneyland is not, of course, the sanctuary of the imagination, but Disneyland as hyperreal world masks the fact that all America is hyperreal, all America is Disneyland," he said. "And the same for art. The art scene is but a scene, or obscene"—he paused for chuckles from the audience—"mask for the reality that all the world is trans-aestheticized. We have no more to do with art as such, as an exceptional form. Now the banal reality has become aestheticized, all reality is trans-aestheticized, and that is the very problem. Art was a form, and then it became more and more no more a form but a value, an aesthetic value, and so we come from art to aesthetics—it's something very, very different. And as art becomes aesthetics it joins with reality, it joins with the banality of reality. Because all reality becomes aesthetical, too, then it's a total confusion between art and reality, and the result of this confusion is hyperreality. But, in this sense, there is no more radical difference between art and realism. And this is the very end of art. As form."

Sylvère Lotringer, Baudrillard's longtime publisher, who was there to interview him, added, "Yes, this is what I was saying when I was quoting Roland Barthes saying that in America sex is everywhere except in sex, and I was adding that art is everywhere but also in art."

"Even in art," Baudrillard corrected.

"Even in art, yes. The privilege of art in itself as art in itself has disappeared, so art is not what it thinks it is."

Many people in the room wished to ask Baudrillard a question. A gray-haired man wearing a denim cap and a green work shirt, an acolyte of the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, wanted to know whether, even if art was no longer art, as such, it might not still function as useful therapy for the wounded narcissism of artists. A middle-aged man in the second row who had been snapping photographs of Baudrillard with a tiny camera raised his hand.

"I don't know how to ask this question, because it's so multifaceted," he said. "You're Baudrillard, and you were able to fill a room. And what I want to know is: when someone dies, we read an obituary—like Derrida died last year, and is a great loss for all of us. What would you like to be said about you? In other words, who are you? I would like to know how old you are, if you're married and if you have kids, and since you've spent a great deal of

time writing a great many books, some of which I could not get through, is there something you want to say that can be summed up?”

“What I am, I don’t know,” Baudrillard said, with a Gallic twinkle in his eye. “I am the simulacrum of myself.”

The audience giggled.

“And how old are you?” the questioner persisted.

“Very young.”

— *Larissa MacFarquhar*