

*Jacques Camatte*

# Beaubourg: Future Cancer?

1997

Whether as a trick, a diversion, or core-work within a well-established project, the Beaubourg Cultural Center occupies a point where a number of phenomena converge. Its existence is significative of the transformation of the community of capital. All that cannot be considered here. I will restrict myself to pointing out some fundamental parallels between art and capital.<sup>1</sup>

Art developed at the moment when human beings were separated from their community. There was no art in the long prehistory preceding that event. The term isolates the materialization of a cognitive means for people to represent their world, from which they weren't separated. It was part of a nonabstracted knowledge, that is, not presented solely through abstraction, as occurred later. It was what Leroi-Gourhan called a drifting knowledge:<sup>2</sup> a radiant, multidimensional thought in sympathy with its surroundings, since the break hadn't yet occurred. So, in contemporary terms, this art was simultaneously language, science, magic, ritual, etc. At the same time it was part of a whole that it recognized and to which it gave signification.

After the break art was to become the means for recreating the old community, the "Lost Totality." With the loss of immediate coherence, art was the mediation reestablishing communication. This search for the lost community is clear in Greek theater, opera, cinema, and the attempts to realize total art (even in happenings), even if it no longer appears in such terms to those doing them. It's not just art as the sum of the artistic actions trying to reaffirm a whole, it's each particular art that rushes into this endeavor. It's as if each wanted to reorder the whole and reform it from itself, involving a reconstitution from a certain viewpoint and understanding; for linearization began as soon as the "radiant phenomenon" was destroyed, because of the break and the autonomization of the parts constituting the original whole. Attempts at reconstitution failed to stop this, since they began from a separated part. It's impossible to catapult oneself straight into another community. But it's the only starting point for rediscovering radiant thought.

Nostalgia for lost community is most obvious at times of appearance of art derived from opposition between two moments in human history in a well-determined area. Examples are the oppositions between matriarchy and patriarchy<sup>3</sup> in Greek tragedy, and feudalism and nascent bourgeois society returning to the old models (Renaissance). A common characteristic is that it's the defeated parts

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<sup>1</sup> For example, it would clearly be necessary to study Beaubourg's importance with regard to the organization of space and urbanization (i.e., the mineralization of organic nature). Nor am I considering similar phenomena already under way in other countries, especially the U.S.A.

<sup>2</sup> See *Le Geste et La Parole* (1964). No particular passage is cited since the entire book must be not only read but studied.

<sup>3</sup> These terms are used for simplification and to avoid long theoretical digressions on the nature of the human groupings in the Greece of Aeschylus and Euripides.

that produced art (such as provincials or American southerners), as if art is all the more glorious when attached to something irredeemably lost. So for some art would be a consolation for the defeated, ignoring its affirmation not of the defeat but of creation or maintenance of a possibility, a refusal of the diktat of realism and the reality principle.

Secularization happens at the same time. Loss of the sacred leads art to take nature as its model. In reaction it is equally the place of its conservation. The heresies have survived through art.

At the time of capital's formal domination over society, art could remain outside it and accomplish its anti-bourgeois function. As it happened, it was anticapitalist, for the bourgeoisie historically needed art to impose itself on the world, as it was a class that exalted it.

This opposition continued until the attempt by the Dada movement to link up with the revolution then occurring in Germany. This simultaneously admitted that no separated activity could reorganize a totality or be a starting point for another community. Nonetheless artists at that time showed more insight than revolutionaries,<sup>4</sup> because their proclamation of the death of art was linked to their perception of the end of a world, the old bourgeois society, because of the passage from formal to real domination of capital, which occurred over several years (notably 1914–45). At the turn of the century, painters had already anticipated capital's development in breaking all reference to nature and in discovering that everything is possible.

The Futurists were the first to entirely and methodically reject the hegemony of cultural stereotypes. Once the social barriers were abolished, the masses – for whom the quantitative appeared as the new twentieth-century determinant – would have to organize the world differently. The new dynamism and its collective nature made it transgress the old social categories and imposed an active transformative logic already foreseen by Marx. So the world no longer appears as inevitability but as a collection of possibilities. In the euphoria of this new freedom, experienced in several areas of contemporary intellectual life, classes and noble subjects vanished from the collection of social relations. (One of the things passing through this breach was totalitarian practice.)

Now, *“Everything is possible” is capital's fundamental characteristic*. It's essentially revolutionary because it destroys obstacles impeding development and eliminates taboos and congealed mimesis: all are put back into question and into movement. (Taboos that cannot be lifted are exteriorized and consumed

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<sup>4</sup> This statement should be tempered by consideration of the Anarchist movement at the turn of the century, which, in its terrorist and negationist tendencies, declared the wish to speed up this end, avoid decomposition, drag the masses from the listlessness induced by democracy, and build afresh.

in representation, for example, the incest taboo and psychoanalysis.) If capital (under its modern as well as antiquated forms) thus became definite by taking over the immediate production process, this was due to the confluence between the movements of exchange value's autonomization and peoples' expropriation. It could successfully pass to its real domination over society only at another moment, because of confluence between its nature and the deep desires of people separated from their community and stripped of divine and natural referents. In accomplishing this even the implied consequences could be forgotten: desire becoming all the grander and imperious the more people are desubstantialized and alienated.

The restricted man or woman, separated from everything, wishes to reconstitute everything from potentialities, beginning the opening of the field of applied science. For a time, the referent could still be the individual human being, until capital's anthropomorphosis, when it realized its real domination over society and established itself as representation (and therefore as referent). This reconstitutes the splintered person, who is ever more enslaved. So what Eliade said relates only to the initial moment:

"The nihilism of the early revolutionaries and nihilists represent attitudes already surpassed in modern Art. No great artist of our times believes in the degeneracy and imminent disappearance of his/her art. From this point of view, their attitude resembles that of the "primitives": they have contributed to the destruction of their world and their artistic universe – in order to create another one."<sup>5</sup>

Not only has the natural referent been destroyed and another world created, but the very forms coming from the previous great destructive movement have themselves been destroyed (especially in Picasso).<sup>6</sup> This again resembles capital's movement, which is impeded by substantialization and must avoid becoming fixed. Eliade continues in an equally illuminating way:

"It's significant that the destruction of artistic language coincided with the development of psychoanalysis. Depth Psychology brought renewal of interest in origins, an interest characteristic of people in archaic society. A close study of the process of re-evaluation of the myth of the end of the world in modern Art would be interesting. It would be found that artists, far from being the neurotics they are often called, are, on the contrary, psychologically more sane than many modern people.<sup>7</sup> They've understood that a true beginning can come only after a

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<sup>5</sup> See *Aspects du Mythe* (1962, pp. 93–94).

<sup>6</sup> See Cailloix's "Picasso the Liquidator" [*Le Monde*, 28/11/75] and the ensuing polemics.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, can't they be said to be more sensitive to human pathology, in the sense that they've had a more shocking glimpse of the result of the wandering?

true end. And artists were the first moderns to apply themselves to destroying their world,<sup>8</sup> to recreate an artistic universe in which people could simultaneously live, observe and dream.”<sup>9</sup>

The world created since the 1920s is actually one in which people have decreasing importance and significance, because psychoanalysis has deprived them of these qualities: the various qualities of the psyche have been exteriorized and transformed into representations.<sup>10</sup> The artistic universe created is metaphorically that of capital. Such is Beaubourg: the idealized and ideal factory, industrial revelation and capital, presenting itself as art. The subject becomes art itself, completely realizing it, going beyond its reconciliation with life.

Beaubourg reabsorbs the dimension of art as nostalgia for the past, since it is a museum, a place for hoarding (the old form of behavior of exchange value become capital). Since exhibitions of contemporary painting are held in it,<sup>11</sup> it’s also the place where credit is obtained. As Cailloix<sup>12</sup> justly remarked, *credit* invades art:

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<sup>8</sup> Eliade was far ahead in reporting a discovery announced by Attali in “Noise”: that music anticipates social development. And what goes for music goes for all the arts. That’s a commonplace. Its interest is that Attali makes himself the recuperator of its “noise” and poses as mediator of capital. What’s he actually telling us?

“A new theory of power and a new politics are needed. Both require the elaboration of a politics of noise and, more subtly, an explosion in the capacity to create order starting from each individual’s noise, beyond the channeling of pleasure into the norm.”

For him, it’s a matter of listening – as is the case for the current ecological demands – in order to recuperate the various “noises” to ensure the survival of theory, power, and politics. It’s worrying that, to allow scientific comparison, he still wants to reduce us . . . to noises!

<sup>9</sup> It shouldn’t be forgotten that Western art accomplished this destruction-creation by plundering so-called “primitive” peoples: American Indians and Africans. This is another aspect of capital’s “rejuvenation” which I described in *Invariance* Vol. 2 No. 6 in “Working Theses on Communist Revolution.”

<sup>10</sup> Let us add that the mediation of pedagogy and ethology means that the world of childhood and early moments in the life of our species are also affected. In particular, with regard to childhood, it has allowed the creation of an industry of playthings and products “specific” to children, who were excluded from their life and creation. The moment when “Homo Ludens” (Huizinga) is discovered is that when humans are increasingly robbed of play.

<sup>11</sup> By simultaneously incorporating museum and experimental center, Beaubourg realizes one of Toffler’s projects: the establishment of past communities to allow those unable to follow power’s rhythm to get their bearings, and future communities for those living only through anticipation (see *Future Shock*).

The incorporation of a *Center of Contemporary Architecture* plagiarizes Voyer’s “Institute of Contemporary Prehistory.” Briefly, the presence of experimental centers indicates a wish to fuse science and art. More precisely, what is seen here reinforces an already distinct philosophical tendency: the loss of autonomy. Art and philosophy follow in science’s wake in order to produce something. They become commentaries on science, hermeneutics.

<sup>12</sup> See “Picasso the Liquidator,” an article to which I will return later.

“When execution is replaced by credit, by a blank check, Art finds itself reduced to derisory size and, at the extreme, disappears. It disappears by becoming almost the opposite idea.”

This is evident since, to the extent that there remain no concrete representations and referents through which people could come together again, it's clear that the important thing will be the individual's credit, whether accorded spontaneously or through the influence of advertising (something becoming important in art).<sup>13</sup> Now, credit is the means of appraisal and behavior in the material community of capital, which is partly instituted through generalization of credit. With inflation this becomes capital's confidence in itself. The same process rules over the whole human environment. People disconnected from their old relationships, referents, and sentiments can only reconstruct their “unity” and social relationships through external mechanisms such as advertising, criticism, etc. (It's no longer possible to speak of community, since it's that of capital in every case).

Progressive abstraction is bound to the loss of the general referent (general equivalent). This implies that there's not just abstraction but also its autonomization. So it becomes practically synonymous with the arbitrary: “The arbitrary here is basically the absence of all justification” (Cailloix), a kind of gratuitous act (so Gide's theory isn't without historical significance). Paradoxically, the gratuitous is real for others only through appearance of the credit bestowed by justified significance or significant justification. Obviously this has a clear relationship to the saturation of the art market at the end of the last century, which meant that new openings had to be found. The picture could be decomposed even to the extent that unprepared canvas would be put forward as the artwork, a work with multiple possibilities. But that is but an effect of the phenomenon, since it too would have to lead to the demand for the end of art.

That death arrived. Nevertheless, art still exists. It no longer has anything to do with what was previously understood by the term. And those wanting to revive Dada's project can only carry out a “murder of the dead.”<sup>14</sup> Capital's art is knowledge of capital. It's a way to achieve knowledge of the new world it has created, in which the sacred, nature, men and women exist only behind death masks.

As Cailloix emphasized, the ridiculous often accompanies the arbitrary. It cannot fully realize itself or else the capitalization of the pictures produced would cease, putting an end to hoarding and ruining many people, and also breaking

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<sup>13</sup> Later it will be necessary to investigate fashion and advertising, considering them as forms for creating and representing the world of capital.

<sup>14</sup> The title of an article by Bordiga, in which he showed that capital can only regenerate itself by destroying all dead, accumulated labor which impedes its process of valorization- capitalization.

down many museographical institutions. The ridiculous corresponds to the disappeared and ephemeral, things affected by present-day capitalism. Here the same forms are again found: capital too cannot really eliminate hoarding, gold, and the past and create itself, so to speak, *ex nihilo*. Basically it can only escape the past by running away from it: inflation.

Here we encounter capital's essential "project": it must dominate the future or else its power would be put back into question and its domination wouldn't be real. This is already present in the concept of capital, but can only be achieved at a given moment in its "life."<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, there can no longer be a specific anticipation and abstraction of the heart of a totality (a perceived abstraction) by which to perceive the distinctive and significant parts. Initially the future is produced; there is as much imagination as possible; reality and image are fused.<sup>16</sup> The imposed image invades everything, to the extent that it isn't yet produced with its reality. In effect, capital needed its own image to be able to implant itself within the socioeconomic whole and to dominate it. It then had to annex all images and, to confirm its domination, eradicate their presuppositions and replace them with its own.

So the factory becomes indispensable – art has to be produced from art and artists in a manner amenable to capital. For what matters is to touch the mass of human beings (otherwise there would be no realization of art)<sup>17</sup> who still haven't

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<sup>15</sup> See *Invariance*. Vol. 2 No. 6: "Here is the fear, jump here."

<sup>16</sup> One thus goes beyond abstract art, the moment of intuition of the basic elements of the community of capital, which had hardly yet appeared. This can now be represented in its totality, so realism is possible. This shows the extent to which Socialist Realism is bound to an ideological perspective and not to a social movement. The Soviet leaders don't realize to what extent abstract art (as well as other recent Western art) represents a reality. Their fear of this kind of art is actually a fear of the subversive in capital, that "Everything is possible," which could be easily diverted in a society in which the capitalist mode of production has great difficulty implanting itself. So the Soviets are condemned to understand only the despotism of capital, without ever "enjoying" its revolutionary liberating aspect. This explains the pro-Western views of elements in the present-day USSR "intelligentsia."

Leroi-Gourhan's statement concerning figuration, very clear in the USSR, is also vital. I'm drawing attention to it, and will eventually return to it, since it concerns the specificity of the whole human phenomenon, and the biological madness afflicting humanity in particular:

"The crisis of Figuration is the corollary of the mastery of machinism . . . It's particularly striking to observe that, in societies excluding Science and Work from the metaphysical plane, the greatest efforts are made to save figuralism . . . In fact it seems that an equilibrium as constant as that co-coordinating the roles of figuration and technique cannot be destroyed without putting the very sense of the human adventure into question."

A simple remark: as I suggested above, capital could very well reintroduce figuralism. But, again, it's no longer art as human referent (nor has it been so for some time) but the art of capital.

<sup>17</sup> On this subject, I can but raise a matter of great theoretical and historical breadth: that of the continual degradation, the reification-extraneization linked with the massification-democratization

internalized capital's lifestyle, who are still more or less bound to certain rhythms, practices, superstitions, etc., and who (even if they have taken up the vertigo of capital's rhythm of life) don't necessarily utilize its image, and therefore live a contradiction or jarring, and are constantly exposed to "future shock."

Everything must be understood through capital's image. Such is Beaubourg's function: a carcinoma, a neoplasm that must divert the aesthetic flux into domination of the future. It will create roles to that end. This carcinoma will overrun everything and secrete its metastases everywhere. No individual encountering Beaubourg will remain unaltered: his/her image will be reoriented, reordered, or completely transformed (all the more when taken in the totality) through exposure to living in anticipation.

Beaubourg is the future cancer. It organizes the destruction of art extolled by Dada and, to the extent that culture is presented as nature, deprives human beings of any possibility of escape. This is all the more true because of the need for nature powerfully affirmed since 1968: it has to be diverted toward a wholly formed, dominated, and programmed nature, magically capturing all revolt.<sup>18</sup>

Beaubourg's role isn't annihilation of all revolt (at least not immediately), since, as has been said, one of art's sources rises from the clash between two historical moments. The integration-realization of art by capital implies its integration of revolt. It will be absorbed. Better: revolt will be declared insignificant and a more total rebellion proposed to the individual, drowning him/her in revolutionary possibilities because there are no reference points and he/she is disowned. Revolt can no longer begin from the individual and his/her released possibilities; the being can no longer give structure to his/her revolt, for enjoyment is always the basic model: always promised but never attained, because it's always deferred. . . .

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taking place down the millennia. Progress is often justified by saying that it gave something formerly restricted to a limited circle of individuals to ever-increasing numbers of people. In saying this, what is forgotten is the complementary process of loss of the sacred, nature, and humanity (e.g., in the sense of an art of life in society such as that in the eighteenth century) leading to desubstantialization of human beings and their reduction to transient, insignificant beings. It's the undeniable existence of this process that explains the pregnancy of the aristocratic critique and a certain form of art, as well as the Nazi lucubrations.

Let us also add that the hope that "the masses would have to organize the world differently" was largely disappointed, and that this draws us to the question of the proletariat's historic mission and the illusion that this class could divert the development of productive forces in a human way. These masses haven't been able to organize: capital did it instead and organized them at the same time. So the solution no longer lies in elites or masses!

<sup>18</sup> Capital must provoke and reinvent revolt, therefore organize it, and perfectly realize the spectacle as described by the Situationist International. The separation between actors and spectators tends to disappear, because the spectacle must be worked by all human beings set in motion by some "master illusionists" (Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la Parole*), mediators of capital.



So even if painters, musicians, and poets arrived at an intuition of elements of the human community, they could do so only to the extent that they accepted work at a center like Beaubourg. It provides the possibility to reinvigorate the image of capital, which swamps everything, even if this is to pervert it, since it is the great “embezzler” (*detourneur*).

Capital’s future lies in the complete uprooting of all kinds of people, so that they’re completely liberated and can be moved in any direction whatsoever, to do whatever they’re told to do. It will amount to human life without human beings, just as cancer (the high point of alienation) is life excluding the life of the being in which it developed. But simultaneously it is the ultimate vital reaction of a body afflicted with a bizarre life, as much on the nutritional as the affective or intellectual plane, for cancer is caused by no microbe, virus, or pathogenic agent. It’s caused by the wandering of humanity and is the typical human sickness under the domination of capital, which is also a product of the great wandering. No therapeutic like reformism or revolution can cure the human species, only the abandonment of the crazy dynamic it’s been following.

I’m well aware that many people consider that I’m making capital into an entity, a mysterious being outside human beings, while I’m simply showing that it realizes a human project (domination over nature), through the process of anthropomorphosis. They also deny that my description of development is correct and recall what Eliade said concerning the creation of an artistic universe: that people could change a movement; that they could divert what is now moving toward destruction, reification, etc. . . . They don’t actually recognize that sooner or later they will be reduced to saying “I didn’t want that” like those intellectuals who initially supported fascism. It’s unfortunate that, if truth is an unveiling, for many it happens only retrospectively. Nevertheless, even this retrospect already displays many facets that all indicate a single reality. Even the blindest must recognize that it’s necessary to abandon this world which is so congenial to the future cancer, the inevitable promise of abominable events.

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