

## **The Age of Consumerism**

**By: Hassan Sharif**

In Greek and Latin the word 'Art' is used to describe all forms of human activity and is not confined to 'Fine Art' in the modern sense. It can mean any activity that depends on knowledge and is restricted by rules. It was the Greeks who conceived of rules by observing nature, and so they demanded rules for art that would ensure its clarity, simplicity, consistency and emotional restraint.

The nineteenth century was characterized by an optimistic future outlook motivated by the plethora of technological inventions aimed at improving the quality and ease of life; inventions such as the steam engine, electricity and the locomotive.

And so the artistic dialogue changed to adapt to this new social reality. The language of art became compatible with the other sciences and was thus able to penetrate into all fields, from the social and cultural arena to education, law and even politics.

The concept of 'awareness', as is well known, refers to the compromise between art and society that allows the artist's creative energy and artistic language to become known amongst the public. The artistic dialogue is forever beyond the reckless control of the commercial planner 'market control'. By the end of the nineteenth century, artists were producing visual works that stressed obstinate delusions, expressed a primitive model of humanity, and accentuated the artist's individualism. Everything produced by artists was therefore marked with an affinity to imagination.

In 1846 Charles Baudelaire called for artwork that expresses the heroism of modern life. The only artist to adhere to that maxim was Gustave Courbet who was 11 when the French Revolution took place in 1830. By 1848 the revolution has spread all over Europe. Courbet was only 30 years old when he announced that the modern artist should rely on experience and be realistic, famously saying:

Show me an angel and I will paint one.

The new aspect of modern life is the complexity of interactions between existing elements both globally and regionally. On the one side there is a continuing dominance and expansion of the international market of music, fashion, etc....Such things have become common place in society. A 20 year old from the Gulf, for instance, can listen to music from India, Iran, Europe, Spain and other places! They may also wear clothes from different parts of the world, and get their hair styled in different ways. We see this all the time in streets, beaches and shopping malls. On the other side there is extreme sensitivity from young people towards localism or regionalism. This dynamic strain creates movement and requires a huge amount of effort. It also increases the interaction between these two phenomena: Similitude and Difference.

The New World Order transmits, through satellites, radio and television stations, the internet, the fax, the telephone and other new technologies and information from different parts of the world that affect the international and regional environments and create a 'new geography' between places.

Modern human thought is migratory, existing in the nomadism of native versus foreign cultures. This means the mentality of today's human is a multiplicity of values, meanings and dimensions a thought wandering from place to place and from state to state, from reality to fiction and vice versa at a very rapid rate. Such is the nature of this struggle for survival and self-substantiation, a state mired by dangers and tragedies, some reaching calamitous levels.

Today we hover in a state of instability, shifting between the remnants of an identity, modernism, postmodernism, new technology and newer technology, always laboring to catch up.

In this world we live in various places and sites, both fictional and real. We live in spaces neither here nor there, not inside, not outside, not a dream, not quite real-a world of imagination. We spend most of our lives in cafes, supermarkets, airports, petrol stations, malls and streets, observing other people and other things through tiny car windows as we speak to people far away through our mobile phones. We move from place to place and think we are happy. In our houses, amongst our parents and children, we have fallen prey to television, the internet and other gadgets. They say that in the future education will take place via computers. There will be no more schools and lecture halls. In the future people will wage wars for information.

Reality is a state of escalation, a sort of restoration we use for annihilation. At the same time it is bustling with movement and emphasizes demolition and draining energy. A work of Art, although based on reality, is merely an imitation. Today's reality, however, is not something that deserves to be celebrated or honored. It is tarnished by excessive consumerism, gorged by denial, and revels in its rites of extermination.

We all have a computer virus- this magical box that replaces the human experience by the tap of a key a peak at the screen. It is almost hypnotic. This device provides the new human with a wealth of information in all shapes and forms and with cutting-edge technology.

How can today's human verify his existence without at least sending one SMS a day? One is always asked: Where are you on the net? What is your address? The human, information and image are now in a constant journey. We live in the era of 'new migration and consumerism'. Whether we like it or not, this is our reality and we must deal with it.

We receive this new technological web of messages and information with affection despite the fact that most of it is truly contemptible and aims at enslaving the human. These messages come quickly from far away in a grand original manner and transform the consumer's life into a 'slaughterhouse ritual'.

These ideas, views and images we consume on a daily basis affect our memory in a sickening way. We accept them as facts when in reality they are enticements seeping their way through to our understanding, rendering all different opinions malleable and neutral. It changes us into

machines the capitalistic system can shape and mold as it pleases under its slogan “Adapt your aspirations to our ends-or else”. And so the individual is stripped of his freedom and desire to be truly creative. His ideas, fantasies and actions become artificial, hypocritical and fake. Artwork has become, under this pressure, a useless and pale imitation that betrays misery and that is produced for merely commercial purposes. The once profound and deep meanings became superficial veneers.

The social lives of individuals became routine consumerism a sterile state of disillusionment. One no longer has the time to reflect on his current state, for even free and rest time is bound by the commercial routine.

The human in modern society is lacking in true creative thought. Individualism has lost sight of its aesthetic dialogue, and art has become a cheap imitation of a ghastly reality produced simply to adorn walls and desktops.

In the era of lost creativity and true essential standards, the individual is transformed into a consumer who expresses feelings and humanity through products bought and owned, not through taking an interest in artistic, intellectual or cultural creativity and innovation, because in this era that aesthetic dialogue is transformed into a commercial one: How much will you pay?

This exhausting pursuit of different temptations has led to an explosion of psychological disorders that accompany over-consumption like self-degradation, self-depreciation and intemperance. More and more people are filling the waiting lounges of psychiatric clinics. The human is becoming sick, melancholic and hysterical. We hear spasms of laughter from people standing alone, on their mobile phones.....A superiority complex....They feel obliged to play all these different roles they think are important when they are in reality trivial. This modern international consumerism has turned us all into jesters that play their tragic roles with great pleasure and joy. This state is a result of the imbalance between bodily functions and brain cells.

Plastic Art was able, since the 1980s, to expand its creative sphere, blurring the boundaries with other art forms. It was present in all walks of life: the intellectual , the scientific, the political, the economic, the cultural and etc...Thus the social function of art was restored from the days of Gustave Courbet’s realism to a new realism.

In April of 1960 Pierre Restany wrote the manifesto of ‘New Realism’ that was published in Milan, Italy. In it he said: “Wise academicians and brave individuals may be alarmed at the rate at which the history of art is progressing and at the extraordinary power of the modern world to wear away at things... We are witnessing the draining and ossifications of all established vocabularies, languages and styles. (Many) have responded to this exhaustion of traditional means... We find ourselves immersed up to our necks in direct expressivity at forty degrees below Dadaist zero, without any aggressivity complex, without any particular controversial desire, looking to nothing but to our realism for justification. And that produces positive results. People, if they succeed in reintegrating themselves with what is real, will identify it with their own transcendence, which is emotion, feeling, and, ultimately, poetry”.

In this age of consumerism many things have changed including the painting. If we look at Gustave Courbet's 1848 'stone Breakers' we can clearly tell the subject of the painting: two workers breaking stones. Courbet wanted to depict people in their daily work environments; that is his realism. Rene Magritte's 'This is not a pipe' with that phrase written beneath it; that is the realism of Rene Magritte-a surrealist realism. Andy Warhol, a Pop Art's legend, produced 'Marilyn Monroe' in 1962. It contained 25 Marilyn prints, about which Warhol said: "Twenty five Marylins are better than one!" This is Warhol's realism because he lived in an era when realism was popular. He used mass production using a silkscreen, the goal being to flood the market with prints that everyone would buy. Not only did he print Marilyn Monroe's picture, he also printed Jacqueline Kennedy, the Mona Lisa, and several other prominent characters in the sixties. In the twenty-first century, however, consumerism has changed the function of the painting. The subject became the painting itself; a process called 'recoding'. The old concept was replaced by a new one that said: "the thing you are confronted with is just a painting in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century plastic arts".

On this grounds it became inconsequential to say that you are looking at stone breakers or a tree or still life or a pipe or Marilyn or abstract lines, colors or shapes; you are simply dealing with the language of consumption.

Andy Warhol says: "A Coca-Cola is a Coca-Cola and no amount of money can get you better Coco-Cola than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Coco-Colas are the same and all the Coco-Colas are good".

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### References:

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