ART AND FEAR

Paul Virilio
Translated by Julie Rose
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Immediately after September 11 – an event that did not take him by
surprise – people who had always dismissed Virilio as a pessimist started
plaguing him for interviews. When I spoke to him at the time in Paris,
where a plan to blow up the American Embassy had just been dismantled,
he said: ‘There are no pessimists; there are only realists and liars.’
A realist to the core, Virilio will always be the first to make certain
connections. For example, others before this have attacked modern art’s
dance of the seven veils, the stripping of art’s subjects and materials down
to the bare bones of an insubstantial representation. But it is Virilio who
names the process violence, pinpoints the fear that subtends it and makes
the connection between this violence and the violence of the battlefields of
the Great War, for example, when the first abstract canvases appeared and
the human figure was literally and figuratively blasted to bits; or the
horrific return to a literal figurative, with Dr von Hagens’ real human
corpses – of unknown origin – filled with plastic preservative and exposed
as anatomical art, at the very moment the scientific community is baying
for human embryos to ‘engineer’. No one else has traced this twin
genealogy of art and science that has had so much to do with the ‘routine
horrors’ of the last hundred years.
Some people react badly not only to Virilio’s home truths, but to the
gusto with which they are uttered. When La Procédure silence came out in
France at the end of 2000, Virilio received threats of violence against his
person. He fielded questions on talk-back radio from ‘art lovers’ who
showered him with righteous spite. That flak alone constitutes proof if
proof were needed of the pertinence of what he has to say here about
contemporary art and terrorism, silencing and noise. Virilio does not
mince words, whether in conversation or essay and these papers are both.
So it is impossible not to take a stand, whatever that might be.
TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

One pivotal dichotomy in what follows needs explaining here. You will see I use ‘pitiful’ and ‘pitiless’ throughout, as Virilio does, and have kept those terms even where a more sympathetic English word might seem called for – because it is not. The opposition between being full of pity – pitiful – and being absolutely without it is crucial to the argument. And being full of pity can also have the pejorative sense of being pathetic, somewhat contemptible, as opposed to its positive sense of compassionate. So, apologies to Bob Dylan fans when he pops up as ‘a pitiful musician par excellence’. By the time you come to that phrase, you know that ‘pitiful’ means ‘human’ in our fond expression, as well as, yes, ‘pathetic’. The shorthand is true to form and hopefully works in the English, as in the French, to cover a lot of territory in just a few strokes.

Julie Rose
2002
Paul Virilio is now recognized for his theorizing of aesthetics and politics throughout the English-speaking world. The translation and publication of *Art and Fear* adds considerably to his discussions of contemporary art and the politics of human silence. These are both subjects that Virilio is increasingly anxious about. In diverse respects Virilio feels alienated from the ‘pitiless’ way in which twenty-first-century artists, unlike twentieth-century modern artists, seem incapable either of understanding the full horror of human violence or remaining silent. Greatly interested in every kind of creative departure, in these two essays on ‘A Pitiless Art’ and ‘Silence on Trial’ Virilio broadens his earlier deliberations on the ‘aesthetics of disappearance’. In particular, he is interested in re-evaluating twentieth-century theories of modern art and duration, the spoken word and the right to stay silent in an era that is increasingly shaped by the shrill sonority of contemporary art.

Even so, Virilio’s questioning of twentieth-century theories of modern art, the removal of silence and the contemporary art that has issued from such premises and practices cannot be understood as a post-structuralist rejection of humanism or the real human body. Rather, it must be interpreted as the search for a humanism that can face up to the contempt shown towards the body in the time of what Virilio labels the ‘sonorization’ (the artistic production of resonant and noisy sound-scapes) of all visual and virtual representations. Virilio elucidated this recently concerning Orlan and Stelarc, both world-renowned multimedia body artists. Speaking in an interview entitled ‘Hyper-violence and Hypersexuality’, Virilio
castigates these leading members of the contemporary ‘multimedia academy’ while discussing his increasing consternation before their pitiless academic art that also involves the condemnation of a silence that has become a kind of ‘mutism’. As he put it, anti-human body art ‘contributes to the way in which the real body, and its real presence, are menaced by various kinds of virtual presence’.

As an elder French theorist born in Paris in 1932, Virilio is indebted to his experience of the Second World War. Resembling the Viennese Actionists of the 1960s he cannot detach his thought from the event of Auschwitz. Virilio is then continually responsive to the most frightening and extremely horrific features of our epoch. It was, though, the Second World War and, in particular, the tragedy of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps that educated Virilio about the depths of human violence. Or, more precisely, the catastrophe of the Nazi death camps encouraged him to respect the human body and its capacity for silence. In different ways, then, Virilio is forging and transforming our understanding of the ethical dilemmas associated with silence and the subsequent aesthetic conflicts linked to the sonorization of the audio-visual within the sphere of contemporary art.

Through offering his Christian assistance to the homeless of post-Second World War Paris, while simultaneously producing theoretical critiques of the dehumanizing characteristics of total war, Virilio gradually discovered his humanism. Crucial to this discovery is an assessment of the aesthetics and ethics of human perception, an assessment that Virilio began to piece together. Yet no simple appeasement with the nineteenth-century situation of industrialized modernization was possible. This is because, for Virilio, it was through the carnage of the First and Second World Wars that modern art, from German Expressionism and Dada to Italian Futurism, French Surrealism and American Abstract Expressionism, had developed first a reaction to alienation and second a taste for anti-human cruelty.

‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’, wrote Theodor Adorno, a statement that Virilio believes even Adorno would now have to acknowledge as an underestimation, given the increasing pace of artistic desperation, the catastrophes of modernity and the crisis in modern art. Spellbound by human violence, Virilio considers that contemporary artists have abandoned their function of continually reassessing the creative practices and sensibilities, imagination and cultural meaning of the
advanced societies. In contrast to Nietzsche, Sartre or Camus, Virilio claims that he is anxious to study the varieties of life and the contemporary art of the crisis of meaning that nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists have shaped and the genocide that homicidal rulers have in reality committed. Connecting a multiplicity of artistic, philosophical and political resources, Virilio is crucially engrossed in examining the revolution that contemporary art is presently undertaking through its espousal of terroristic aesthetic procedures and the premeditated termination of the enunciation of silence.

The assaults on signs and silence that Virilio observes in contemporary art were already deadly in intent by the 1950s. For him it is not a matter of witnessing a real murder but more exactly the murder of signs of artistic pity in the name of freedom of artistic representation. Contemplating the unwritten and nightmarish hallucinations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and terror, Virilio is apprehensive not to overlook that this was a historical epoch that simultaneously administered the implosion of the avant-garde and the monochromatic and the explosion of nuclear weapons in glorious Technicolor.

Virilio thinks, for example, that the nihilistic sensibilities of nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals cannot be divorced from the grave disarray to be found today in the advanced democracies. Furthermore, twentieth-century art, through its expectation of the contemporary politics of hate, has added to the downfall of pitiful art and to the rise of a pitiless art that privileges hot colours over cold and the sonorization of all earlier silent imagery. Virilio is also critical of the contemporary world of revulsion represented in New German Painting and managed by an art market captivated by annihilation. Determining the sensitivities of today’s artists in the manner of German Expressionism, contemporary art disdains the silent pity of nineteenth- and twentieth-century images of the bloodshed of battle. In its place, according to Virilio, as we shall see in the next section, pitiless art embraces seductive TV images of carnage.

A pitiless art

In explaining the aesthetics of disappearance in modern representative art, Virilio characterized its theories as abstract, being concerned to acknowledge that it is vanishing. Today, describing ‘a pitiless art’, he illustrates its premises as ‘presentative’, a recognition that representative art is finished. But where do Virilio’s rather extraordinary accounts develop? What do
such assertions denote? In effect, he is voicing a doubt previously felt by him in *The Art of the Motor* and *The Information Bomb*: that, under the influence of new information and communications technologies, democratic institutions are disappearing as the key locations where political representation operates. Virilio writes of the emergence of public opinion and the appearance of a 'virtual' or 'multimedia democracy' that is not just obliterating democracy but also the senses of the human body, with the growth of hyperviolence and an excessively and peculiarly sexless pornography. He argues that instead of producing a merciless art of presentation, with its live TV images of genuine torment and aggression, its wretchedness, self-destruction, disfigurement, extinction and abhorrence, contemporary artists should reclaim the evacuated space of the art of representation, the space of symbolic yet crucially sympathetic images of violence.

In considering the art of representation, Virilio is seeking a debate over the status of negationism in art. The associations between contemporary aesthetics and modern ethics also permit him to introduce the problem of compassion. For Virilio, this entrusts the aesthetics of fear with the task of detecting a type of immediacy and a system of representation totally dissimilar to presentational art. This indicates that contemporary artists ought not to maintain their concentration on a chaotic and heartless form of perception. The artistic suppression of sympathy, prejudiced by the attack of medical science on the body and its subsequent presentation, presupposes that the dead are of concern only when either violating some existing prohibition or offering themselves up as images of torture. Indifferent to the sensitive attitude to the body, presentational art opens up aesthetic forms that for Virilio are dissimilar to those of the Viennese Actionists, even if something of the Actionists' self-sacrificial and violent artistic practices endures. Taking the poetic truth of brutal reality out of the loop, today's lethal presentational art of scientific voyeurism is powerless to express the actual extent of human cruelty.

Yet, as Virilio proposes, the aesthetics of disappearance also offers a mask to those artists who refuse to recognize its transgressions. He justifies this vital conception by way of his contention that the depravity of contemporary art commenced in advertising before transferring to the everyday craving for murder that also brings into being the totalitarianism of unquestioning belief. As a result, contemporary art does not check mass mediated nihilism but rather assumes that the representational techniques
of the aesthetics of disappearance will persist in further debasing our entire ‘hyper-modern’ or ‘excessive’ idea of humanity.\(^7\) For his part, Virilio refuses to tolerate an aesthetics that implies the disappearance of every type of art except presentational art. In insisting on its deceptive closeness, Virilio is objecting to a presentational art that seeks out the total destruction of careful viewer contemplation. Challenging the theories of the Canadian media mystic Marshall McLuhan, and particularly McLuhan’s concept of an ‘absolute present’, Virilio advances the idea that it is impossible to eradicate the comparative and the momentary in questions concerning the analogical experience of events. In other words, Virilio has no plans to become a theorist who surrenders to the lure of a life lived in the immediacy of mass mediated despair.

Hence, when Virilio considers the aesthetics of disappearance, he assumes that the responsibility of artists is to recover rather than discard the material that is absent and to bring to light those secret codes that hide from view inside the silent circuits of digital and genetic technologies. It is through the idea of the demise of a kind of transitory imaginary that Virilio expounds his perception of the nihilism of current technology. He judges, for example, that since genetics has now become culture, artists also have started to converse in the idiom of ‘counter nature’, but for the benefit of the performative goals of eugenics. In so doing, Virilio argues that artists critically fail to appreciate what ethical concerns are at risk in the genetic factories of fear. Virilio meets such ethical dilemmas head-on when he describes his aesthetics of disappearance as a conception that can be characterized as ‘pure nature’. This is owing to the fact that, in his view, and especially following the transformations literally taking shape in genetics, culture and science are now free of almost all human scruples. Given that aesthetics and ethics are ailing, Virilio advises that artists show mercy on both, while combating the globalization of the techno-scientific propaganda of cloning, the new science of human disappearance.

For him, no ethical forces or even the aesthetics of disappearance can rationalize a technoscience that has become theatre after the time of total war or in the present period where the will to exterminate reigns supreme. Such occurrences, contends Virilio, necessitate the denunciation of the pitilessness of a contemporary art that combines with eugenics and cloning while inconsiderately and self-consciously connecting to the repulsion of the Nazis’ experimentation first on animals and then on humans. The significance of these episodes is established through the fact that they
serve to corroborate that Nazi criteria are at the present time the foundation on which scientists and artists seek to establish a new humanity. As Virilio maintains, the scientific formation of humans is today a certainty whose meanings are technologically determined, calling to mind not the natural labour of procreation but the artificial work of scientific creation in which the development of eugenics without frontiers is well under way. Intensely attentive to post-human developments, Virilio has nonetheless realized that any cultural politics that seeks out restrictions to a freedom of aesthetic representation devoid of frontiers confronts a difficult task. As he explains it in ‘A Pitiless Art’, after violating the ‘taboos of suffocating bourgeois culture, we are now supposed to break the being, the unicity of humankind’. In Virilio’s terms, then, and owing to the ‘impending explosion of a genetic bomb’ of scientific excess, the ‘counter culture’ of nature ‘will be to biology what the atomic bomb was to physics’.

Virilio is also anxious to determine how extreme artists and scientists are willing to think and act before making an objection, for example, to ‘snuff’ literature. This is because for him the impulse to torture imagines a readiness to ruin the evaluation of the art lover, to ‘derealize’ contemporary art, theatre and dance. Virilio thinks that today’s artists are no longer able to ascertain the genuine character of flawed and shattered bodies or the degree of self-hatred at work in their creations. In his view, snuff literature is the gateway to snuff videos and snuff dance, given that pity is excluded from the outset. Virilio is, however, unconcerned with instituting an alternative declaration to that of Adorno’s concerning the writing of poetry that will stand up to the barbarism moving within the advanced societies after Auschwitz. To be more precise, he is apprehensive to say the least about a freedom of expression that features a call to murder. Consequently, Virilio questions a political correctness that presupposes a terroristic, suicidal and self-mutilating theory of art. Making links between contemporary art and genetically modified seeds bearing the label ‘terminator’, he is trying to find an image of pitiful art that exists outside of the conditions of bio- or ‘necro-technology’. Refusing technoscientific ‘success’ at any price, Virilio insists on a cultural critique of scientific experiment, technological inhumanity and deformity.

Such moral and artistic refusals Virilio understands as a thought-provoking enquiry into a freedom of scientific expression that is at present
as limitless as freedom of artistic expression. He declares his unqualified opposition to the appearance of a ‘transgenic art’ that is tolerable neither within its own self-designation nor as the starting point for a contemplative relationship between the species. Exploring the hypermodern ‘cult of performance’ in a genuine human race directed by the global magnates of sport, finance and the media, Virilio is adamant on the subject of his questioning of a biologically contrived ‘super-humanity’ lacking adequate ethical procedures or limitations. To be sure, he wants to turn his back on the fashionable scientific and artistic idea of the human body as a technologically assisted survival unit that has outlasted its usefulness. Rejecting what Arendt identified as the ‘banality of evil’ at work in Nazism and more lately in Pol Pot’s Cambodia and elsewhere, Virilio concludes ‘A Pitiless Art’ with a plea to condemn the transgressions of contemporary art. In ‘Silence on Trial’, though, he challenges whether all that stays silent is judged to consent, to allow without a murmur of complaint the contemporary conditions of audio-visual overload.

Silence on trial

In this essay Virilio is for the most part involved with exposing a silence that has lost its ability to ‘speak’, with a mutism that takes the form of a censorship of silence in an age awash with the obscenity of noise. Unrestricted ‘Son et Lumière’ events and ‘live’ art exhibitions, for instance, currently flood many social and cultural spaces. Virilio recognizes such occasions as illustrations of the disappearance of representation and the motorized regime of speed in contemporary art that confirms the substitution of the aesthetics of appearance by the aesthetics of disappearance. Assuming a historical perspective, he points to the previously neglected significance of the appearance and imposition of talking pictures or ‘talkies’ in the 1920s. In fact, in Virilio’s opinion, it was in this period that citizens who indicated silence as a mode of articulation were first judged to assent to the diminishing power of silent observation and the increasing supremacy of the audio-visual. In our day, however, the question according to Virilio is whether the work of art is to be considered an object that must be looked at or listened to. Or, alternatively, given the reduction of the position of the art lover to that of a component in the multimedia academy’s cybernetic machine, whether the aesthetic and ethical silence of art can continue to be upheld.

Video and conceptual art have been increasingly important concepts of
Virilio’s work on the audio-visual torrent of the mass media and the digital contamination of the image ever since The Art of the Motor (1995). Nevertheless, it appears in ‘Silence on Trial’ that Virilio’s interpretation of the new information and communications technologies of ‘hyper-abstraction’, such as the Internet, is shaping new forms of theoretical exploration that are necessitating an alternative approach to his previous writings on the speed of light. For in this essay Virilio also contemplates the speed of sound. As he describes it, the contemporary technique of painting with sound, lacking figures or images, first emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the works of Wagner and Kandinsky, Schwitters, Mondrian and Moholy-Nagy. But, for Virilio, present-day sound art obliterates the character of visual art while concurrently advancing the communication practices of the global advertising industry, which have assaulted the art world to such a degree that it is at present the central dogma of the multimedia academy. People today, for example, have to endure the pressure of the ‘ambient murmuring’ of incessant muzak at the art gallery, at work or at the shopping centre. Furthermore, their silence on such matters is, in Virilio’s terms, connected with the closing phase of the aesthetics of disappearance that is also the gateway to a new ‘aesthetics of absence’, an absence where the silence of the visible is abolished by the sound of audio-visual multimedia. However, as Virilio makes clear, in struggling against the aesthetics of absence in the name of the silence of the visible, it is important not to overemphasize the significance of the visual cinematic image in particular as a method of examining the power of sound. From his perspective, this is due to the fact that cinematic images saturate human consciousness and are more damaging than often recognized. Virilio places his hopes in the ‘accident of the visible’ and the annihilation of the audio-visual by a politics of silence. Dating the contemporary crisis in the plastic arts from the invention of the talkies, he insists that this is the basis of the resulting condemnation of human deafness and the marketing of sound that has given rise to the ‘trauma of the ear’. Equally significantly, Virilio is especially sceptical of the insertion of speech into the image, owing to the fact that the art lover rapidly becomes a casualty of the speed of sound and a prisoner of the noise of the visible. It is also important to keep in mind that for him the arts are presently transfixed by a will to noise, a phenomenon whose objective is the purging of silence. For these reasons, as Virilio understands it, the turmoil in contemporary
visual art is not the consequence of the development of photography or the cinema but the outcome of the creation of the talkies. Such a declaration in addition relates to his questioning of the waning of oral traditions that unsurprisingly for Virilio entails the ever ‘telepresent’ talking image and the ever fainter presence of silent reality. To say nothing, declares Virilio, is not simply an act that leads to fear, to pitiless art and to pitiless times, but also to the domination of the immediacy of contemporary visual art by the sonority of the audio-visual.

Implicated in Virilio’s final thoughts about contemporary art’s losing ground to sonority on account of its immediacy is his on-going resistance to the end of spontaneous reactions to works of art and the continuing imposition of the conditioned reflex action. Virilio’s purpose at this juncture is to disrupt those graphic arts that unreservedly rely on the speed of sound. This strategy is typical of Virilio’s ‘pitiful’ artistic stance and of his preceding radical cultural analyses. In The Art of the Motor and in ‘Silence on Trial’, for instance, Virilio rejects the screaming and streaming multimedia performances of the body artist Stelarc. As Virilio notes, it is of fundamental importance that the hyperviolence and hypersexuality that at present rule the screens of hypermodernity are challenged given that they are the supreme instigators of social insecurity and the crisis in figurative art. He understands the art of the mass media consequently as the most perilous effort yet to manage the silent majority through a spurious voice conveyed through public opinion polls, corporate sponsorship and advertising. Virilio thus laments the eradication of the modern ‘man of art’ by hypermodern contemporary artists such as Stelarc. Such a loss to him is also an injury to all those who still yearn to speak even when they remain silent. Virilio is accordingly looking to uncover within the field of contemporary art the forces involved in the systematic termination of the silence of the visual and the gesture of the artist. By explaining in ‘Silence on Trial’ that such forces plan to extend the motorization of art while removing the sensations of the human subject, Virilio concludes that, for him at least, cybernetic art and politics have limits that do not include murder.
ART AND FEAR

The aesthetics of Auschwitz

Commentators on Virilio's *Art and Fear* might claim that his powerful speculations on contemporary media are the conjectures of a critic of the art of technology who has lost hope in the ability of modernism and hypermodernism to effectively face up to rising hyperviolence and hypersexuality. His works and interviews as a rule are, however, very much concerned with circumventing the dangers of an indiscriminate aesthetic pessimism. Yet it does appear in 'A Pitiless Art' and 'Silence on Trial' as if he is at times perhaps excessively disparaging of the trends and theories associated with contemporary art and film, politics and the acceleration of the mass media. In condemning pitiless art and the recent ordeal experienced by those seeking a right to silence without implied assent, he is possibly rather too cautious with regard to the practices of contemporary art. As in the case of the body artist Stelarc, Virilio's criticism of his work tends to overlook the remarkable and revolutionary questioning of the conventional principles of the functioning of the human body that Stelarc's medical operations and technological performances signify. For Virilio, however, the humiliation of the art lover through the imposition of pitiless images and ear-splitting sound systems in the art gallery and elsewhere is not so much the beginning of an aesthetic debate as the beginning of the end of humanity.

In the same way, the thinking behind Virilio's recent writings on the idea of a contemporary multimedia academy only adds to the feeling that he increasingly proposes a type of criticism that is antagonistic towards academia generally. One difficulty with this sort of strategy is that in order to oppose accepted theoretical dialogues on art and politics Virilio is obliged to ignore or to engage with them and in both instances thereby draw attention to the fact that his work cannot sustain itself without such discourses. Virilio's dilemma, of course, then develops into that of both being censured for his lack of familiarity with the contemporary aesthetic and political discussions that he disapproves of and for trying to place his work outside of such deliberations. In other words, Virilio is from time to time in danger of staging a debate with only himself in attendance. Forever on the look out for innovative body artists and other multimedia projects that expose the hypermodern condition, Virilio is perhaps wont to unfairly accuse them of surrendering to a style of uncritical multimedia academicism. In so doing he can occasionally be read as if he is unaware that a body artist like Stelarc also
criticizes multimedia academicism as well as traditional conceptions of identity.

Stelarc's theoretical and applied technological revolutions in the field of contemporary art also function to transform questions concerning art's power of effect and inadvertently assist Virilio in conceiving of pitiless art and its deafening manifestation as crucial characteristics of the present hypermodern order. He is, in short, developing a stimulating mode of theorizing in these essays, which moves away from that typically found in contemporary art. What is absolutely vital for Virilio is the technological means by which contemporary art has abandoned its passion and sexual force. Conversely, it is important to stress that he is undoubtedly concerned not to characterize contemporary art in opposition to theory or aesthetic fervour, but to distinguish it as a pitiless and emotionless reaction to the disastrous circumstances of hypermodernity. As a result of such heartfelt aesthetic declarations, Virilio is quick to single out the hypersexuality of contemporary pornography as the most recent source of pitiless representations and sadistic ideas.

Given that contemporary artists and specialists in pornography have twisted pitilessness and noise into the rallying call of a totally destructive and increasingly non-representational regime, it is hardly surprising that Virilio senses that he must dissociate his work from what might be called the 'aesthetics of Auschwitz'. Here, Virilio is in fact paying attention to the reproduction and globalization of the aesthetics of Auschwitz in the present day. He thus not only refuses the collective delusion that Auschwitz was a singular historical event but also Adorno's assertion that to write poetry after it is barbaric. Virilio wants to recognize that in video and film, TV and on the Internet, Auschwitz inhabits us all as a fundamental if often repressed component of contemporary processes of cultural globalization. Today, as a result, art, according to Virilio, confronts the predicament first identified by Walter Benjamin, that is, of imagining that barbarism and warfare will 'supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology'. In jeopardy of preoccupying itself with virtualized self-absorption, contemporary art, Virilio argues, as well as humanity, has attained such a level of 'self-alienation' that it can now 'experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order'.

As Virilio interprets it in *Art and Fear*, the outcome of contemporary aesthetic and political theories and practices is that the viewer of art has
been converted into a casualty of a pitiless aesthetics bent on the sonorization of everything. In ‘A Pitiless Art’ and ‘Silence on Trial’, however, it is not so much Virilio’s aesthetics of disappearance that takes centre stage but rather his reconsideration of twentieth-century art and especially its associations with the ruling audio-visual regime of contemporary art. Rejection of the human body or its virtualization, declares Virilio, are the only alternatives presented to the art lover by the multimedia academy led by body artists such as Orlan and Stelarc. For him, these and other artists and the multimedia events they perform disclose their anti-humanism and lack of respect for the body. Virilio condemns pitiless art and the destruction of silence as a consequence of his belief that the mutism intrinsic to contemporary body art shows the way to the terrorization of the real body by the virtual body. Virilio’s words of warning to contemporary artists are that to stop thinking about the Second World War and Auschwitz is to forget the reality of the horror of war and the violence of extermination. It is to ignore the responsibility to value the body and its alternating attachments to silence and noise.

In evoking this responsibility, Virilio explains that he employs his Christian humanist critique of war, alienation and cruelty in an artistic and political sense, perhaps as an aide-mémoire of a further precise obligation to poetry or as an awareness of the aesthetics of Auschwitz. Hypermodern art is for Virilio a manifestation of a contemporary aesthetics that aspires to celebrate Nietzschean violence while discounting a crisis of meaning that is so profound that it is fast becoming indistinguishable from what he describes in ‘A Pitiless Art’ as ‘the call to murder and torture’. Remember, asks Virilio, the ‘media of hate in the ex-Yugoslavia of Slobodan Milosovic’ or the ‘Thousand Hills Radio’ of the Great Lakes region of Africa calling Rwandans to inter-ethnic genocide? Faced with such ‘expressionist events’, he answers, ‘surely we can see what comes next, looming over us as it is: an officially terrorist art preaching suicide and self-mutilation – thereby extending the current infatuation with scarring and piercing’. Contemporary art is then the expression of all those artists who take for granted that today’s transformation of the field of aesthetics into a kind of terroristic performance also implies the elimination of silence. As a constant critic of the art of technology and the current attack on representation, Virilio is intensely uneasy about the development of pitiless art. He challenges its claim to a freedom of expression that demands the implosion of aesthetics, the explosion of dread and the
unleashing of a worldwide art of nihilism and a politics of hate. Virilio thus
looks to reclaim a poignant or pitiful art and the politics of silence from an
art world enchanted by its own extinction because to refuse pity is to
accept the continuation of war. But, more than this, in the pages that
follow, he seeks to go beyond the gates of pitiless art and the prosecution
of silence in order to explore the aesthetics of Auschwitz, the source of all
our contemporary art and fears.

John Armitage
2002
‘Remaining silent, now there’s a lesson for you! What more immediate notion of duration?’, Paul Valéry noted in 1938, shortly before the tragedy of the camps, the silence of the lambs . . .

To speak or to remain silent: are they to sonority what to show or to hide are to visibility? What prosecution of meaning is thus hidden behind the prosecution of sound? Has remaining silent now become a discreet form of assent, of connivance, in the age of the sonorization of images and all audio-visual icons? Have vocal machines’ powers of enunciation gone as far as the denunciation of silence, of a silence that has turned into MUTISM?

It might be appropriate at this juncture to remember Joseph Beuys whose work Silence parallels, not to say echoes, Edvard Munch’s 1883 painting The Scream. Think of the systematic use of felt in Beuys’ London installations of 1985 with the gallery spaces wadded like so many SOUNDPROOF ROOMS, precisely at a time when the deafening explosion of the AUDIO-VISUAL was to occur – along with what is now conveniently labelled the crisis in modern art or, more exactly, the contemporary art of the crisis of meaning, that NONSENSE Sartre and Camus were on about.

To better understand such a heretical point of view about the programmed demise of the VOICES OF SILENCE, think of the perverse implications of the colouration of films originally shot in BLACK AND WHITE, to cite one example, or the use of monochromatic film in photographing accidents, oil spills. The lack of colour in a film segment or
snapshot is seen as the tell-tale sign of a DEFECT, a handicap, the loss of colour of the rising tide under the effects of maritime pollution . . .

Whereas in the past, engraving enriched a painting’s hues with its velvety blacks and the rainbow array of its greys, BLACK – and WHITE – are now no more than traces of a degradation, some premature ruin.

Just like a yellowed photograph of the deceased mounted on their tomb, the MONOCHROMATIC segment merely signals the obscurantism of a bygone era, the dwindling of a heroic age in which the VISION MACHINE had yet to reveal the PANCHROMATIC riches of Technicolor … gaudy, brash AGFACOLOR1 over-privileging hot colours to the detriment of cold. But surely we can say the same thing about the sonorization of what were once silent films.

Nowadays everything that remains silent is deemed to consent, to accept without a word of protest the background noise of audio-visual immoderation – that is, of the ‘optically correct’. But what happens as a result to the SILENCE OF THE VISIBLE under the reign of the AUDIO-VISIBLE epitomized by television, wildly overrated as television is? How can we apply the lesson of Paul Valéry’s aphorism in considering the question, not of the silence of art so dear to André Malraux, but of the DEAFNESS of the contemporary arts in the age of the multimedia?

Silence no longer has a voice. It LOST ITS VOICE half a century ago. But this mutism has now come to a head . . . The voices of silence have been silenced; what is now regarded as obscene is not so much the image as the sound – or, rather, the lack of sound.

What happens to the WORLD OF SILENCE once the first SON ET LUMIÈRE productions are staged, again under the aegis of Malraux, invading as they do the monumental spaces of the Mediterranean? The ‘son et lumière’ phenomenon has been followed most recently by the craze in museums as venues for live shows, though you would be hard-pressed to beat the calamitous NIGHT OF THE MILLENNIUM, when the mists of the Nile Valley suddenly broke up a Jean-Michel Jarre concert. After the deafening felt of Beuy’s London installation, PLIGHT, they managed to bring SMOG to the foot of the pyramids.

‘I don’t want to avoid telling a story, but I want very, very much to do the thing Valéry said – to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance.’ These words of Francis Bacon’s, taken from David Sylvester’s interviews with the artist and quoted as a lead-in for the ‘Modern Starts’
exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1999, beautifully sum up the current dilemma: the less you represent, the more you push the simulacrum of REPRESENTATION!

But what is this ‘situation’ concealing if not the contraction of time? Of this real time that effaces all duration, exclusively promoting instead the present, the directness of the immediacy of ZERO TIME ... a contraction of the LIVE and of LIFE, which we see once more at work in the recent appeal of live shows, which are to dance and choreography what the video installation already was to Fernand Léger’s Mechanical Ballet.

All in all, the invention of the CINEMATOGRAPH has radically altered the experience of exposure time, the whole regime of temporality of the visual arts. In the nineteenth century, the aesthetics of CINEMATIC disappearance promptly supplanted the multimillennial aesthetics of the appearance of the STATIC.

Once the photogram hit the scene, it was solely a matter of mechanically or electrically producing some kind of reality effect to get people to forget the lack of any subject as the film rolled past.

Yet one crucial aspect of this mutation of the seventh art has been too long ignored and that is the arrival of the TALKIES. From the end of the 1920s onwards, the idea of accepting the absence of words or phrases, of some kind of dialogue, became unthinkable. The so-called listening comfort of darkened cinema halls required that HEARING and VISION be synchronized. Much later, at the end of the century, ACTION and REACTION similarly would be put into instant interaction thanks to the feats of ‘tele-action’, this time, and not just radiophonic ‘tele-listening’ or ‘tele-vision’.

Curiously, it is in the era of the Great Depression that followed the Wall Street Crash of 1929 that SILENCE WAS PUT ON TRIAL - in Europe as in the United States. From that moment, WHOEVER SAYS NOTHING IS DEEMED TO CONSENT. No silence can express disapproval or resistance but only consent. The silence of the image is not only ANIMATED by the motorization of film segments; it is also ENLISTED in the general acquiescence in a TOTAL ART – the seventh art which, they would then claim, contained all the rest.

During the great economic crisis which, in Europe, would end in Nazi TOTALITARIANISM, silence was already no more than a form of abstention. The trend everywhere was towards the simultaneous synchronization of image and sound. Whence the major political role played at the
time by cinematic NEWSREELS, notably those produced by Fox-Movietone in the United States and by UFA in Germany, which perfectly prefigured televisual prime time.

Alongside booming radiophony and the live rallies of Nuremburg and elsewhere, the talkies would become one of the instruments of choice of the fledgling totalitarianisms. For Mussolini, the camera was the most powerful weapon there was; for Stalin, at the same moment in time, the cinema was the most effective of tools for stirring up the masses.

No AGITPROP or PROPAGANDA STAEFFEL without the consensual power of the talkies. Once you have the talkies up and running, you can get walls, any old animated image whatever to talk. The dead too, though, and all who remain silent. And not just people or beings, either, but things to boot!

'The screen answers your every whim, in advance', as Orwell put it. Yet though the walls may well talk, frescos no longer can. The seventh art thus becomes a VENTRiloQUIST ART delivering its own oracles. Like the Pythian prophetess, the image speaks; but, more specifically, it answers the silence of the anguished masses who have lost their tongues. As a certain poet put it, 'Cinema never has been SILENT, only DEAF'.

Those days are long gone. No one is waiting any more for the REVOLUTION, only for the ACCIDENT, the breakdown, that will reduce this unbearable chatter to silence.

In olden days a pianist used to punctuate segments of old burlesque movies; now the reality of scenes of everyday life needs to be subtitled in similar vein, the AUDIO-VISUAL aiming to put paid to the silence of vision in its entirety.

All you have to do is dump your mobile phone and grab your infra-red helmet. Then you are ready to go wandering around those museums where the sound-track amply makes up for the image track of the picture-rail.

Does art mean listening or looking, for the art lover? Has contemplation of painting become a reflex action and possibly a CYBERNETIC one at that?

Victim of the prosecution of silence, contemporary art long ago made a bid for divergence – in other words, to practise a CONCEPTUAL DIVERSION – before opting for convergence.

Surely that is the only way we can interpret the Cubists' newspaper collages or the later, post-1918, collages and photomontages of Raoul
Hausmann, say, or his Berlin Dadaist confrère, John Heartfield, not to mention the French Dadaists and Surrealists, among others.

In a decidedly fin de siècle world, where the automobile questions its driver about the functioning of the handbrake or whether the seatbelt is buckled, where the refrigerator is gearing itself up to place the order at the supermarket, where your computer greets you of a morning with a hearty ‘hello’, surely we have to ask ourselves whether the silence of art can be sustained for much longer.

This goes even for the mobile phone craze that is part and parcel of the same thing, since it is now necessary to impose silence – in restaurants and places of worship or concert halls. One day, following the example of the campaign to combat nicotine addiction, it may well be necessary to put up signs of the ‘Silence – Hospital’ variety at the entrance to museums and exhibition halls to get all those ‘communication machines’ to shut up and put an end to the all too numerous cultural exercises in SOUND and LIGHT.

Machine for seeing, machine for hearing, once upon a time; machine for thinking very shortly with the boom in all things digital and the programmed abandonment of the analogue. How will the silence of the infinite spaces of art subsist, this silence that seems to terrify the makers of motors of any kind, from the logical inference motor of the computer to the research engine of the network of networks? All these questions that today remain unanswered make ENIGMAS of contemporary ethics and aesthetics.

With architecture, alas, the jig is already up. Architectonics has become an audio-visual art, the only question now being whether it will shortly go on to become a VIRTUAL ART. For sculpture, ever since Jean Tinguely and his ‘Bachelor Machines’, this has been merely a risk to be run. As for painting and the graphic arts, from the moment VIDEO ART hit the scene with the notion of the installation, it has been impossible to mention CONCEPTUAL ART without picking up the background noise of the mass media behind the words and objects of the art market.

Like TINNITUS, where a ringing in the ears perceived in the absence of external noise soon becomes unbearable, contemporary art’s prosecution of silence is in the process of lastingly polluting our representations.

Having digested the critical impact of Marcel Duchamp’s retinal art, let’s hear what French critic Patrick Vauday had to say a little more recently:
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The passage from image to photography and then to cinema and, more recently still, to video and digital computer graphics, has surely had the effect of rendering painting magnificently célibataire. Painting has finally been released from the image-making function that till then more or less concealed its true essence. Notwithstanding the ‘new’ figurative art, it is not too far-fetched to see in the modern avatar of painting a mise à nu of its essence that is resolutely ICONOCLASTIC.³

At those words, you could be forgiven for fearing that the waxing twenty-first century were about to reproduce the first years of the twentieth, albeit unwittingly!

Under the guise of ‘new technologies’, surely what is really at work here is the actual CLONING, over and over, of some SUPER-, no, HYPER-ABSTRACTION that will be to virtual reality what HYPER-REALISM was to the photographic shot. This is happening at a time when someone like Kouichirou Eto, for instance, is gearing up to launch SOUND CREATURES on the Internet along with his own meta-musical ambient music!

What this means is a style of painting not only without figures but also without images, a music of the spheres without sound, presenting the symptoms of a blinding that would be the exact counterpart to the silence of the lambs. Speaking of the painter Turner, certain nineteenth-century aesthetes such as Hazlitt denounced the advent of ‘pictures of nothing, and very like’.⁴ You can bet that soon, thanks to digital technology, electro-acoustic music will generate new forms of visual art. Electro-optic computer graphics will similarly erase the demarcation lines between the different art forms.

Once again, we will speak of a TOTAL ART – one no longer indebted to the cinematograph, that art which supposedly contained all the rest. Thanks to electronics, we will invent a GLOBAL ART, a ‘single art’, like the thinking that subtends the new information and communications technologies.

To take an example, think of the influence of Wagner on Kandinsky in 1910, when the very first ABSTRACT canvases emerged; or think of the influence of Kurt Schwitters whose Ursonate was composed of oral sounds ... Then, of course, there is the influence of JAZZ on works like the ‘Broadway Boogie Woogie’ of New York based Mondrian, an artist who would not have a telephone in the house during the years 1940 to 1942. Unlike Moholy-Nagy, who was already making TELE-PAINTINGS twenty
years earlier using the crank phone to issue instructions at a distance to a sign painter ... and inventing pictorial INTERACTIVITY in the process.

All this interaction between SOUND, LIGHT and IMAGE, far from creating a 'new art' or a new reality – to borrow the name of the 1950 Paris salon dedicated to French painter Herbin’s geometric abstraction – only destroys the nature of art, promoting instead its communication.

Moreover, someone like Andy Warhol makes no sense as an artist in the Duchamp mould unless we understand the dynamic role played not only by sign painting, but more especially by advertising, that last ACADEMICISM that has gradually invaded the temples of official art without anyone’s batting an eyelid. So little offence has it given, in fact, that where ‘Campbell’s Soup’ not so long ago turned into a painting, today Picasso has become a car.

Last autumn, the BBC began broadcasting recordings of murmurs and conversation noises destined for the offices at the big end of town where employees complain about the reigning deathly silence.

‘We’re trying to get a background of ambient sound’, explains a spokesman for the British station. ‘These offices are so quiet that the slightest noise, such as the phone ringing, disturbs people’s concentration which, of course, can lead to stuff-ups.’

Following the muzak that is piped through shops and supermarkets, let’s hear it for AMBIENT MURMURING, the voice of the voiceless! After the promotion of domestic consumerism via the euphoria of radiophony, it is now production that finds itself beefed up with a sound backdrop designed to improve office life ...

Similarly, over at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the post-renovation reopening exhibition, which was called ‘Le Temps vite’ – or ‘Time, Fast’ – was underscored by a sound piece composed by Heiner Goebbels.

Heralding the coming proliferation of live shows in museums, silence has become identified with death ... Though it is true enough that the dead today dance and sing thanks to the recording process: ‘Death represents a lot of money, it can even make you a star’, as Andy Warhol famously quipped. Don’t they also say that, on the night of New Year’s Eve 2000, the ‘POST-MORTEM’ duo of Bob Marley and his daughter-in-law, Lauren Hill, could be heard all over New York?

On the eve of the new millennium, the aesthetics of disappearance was completed by the aesthetics of absence. From that moment, whoever says nothing consents to cede their ‘right to remain silent’, their freedom to
listen, to a noise-making process that simulates oral expression or conversation.

But did anyone in the past ever fret about the very particular silence of the VISIBLE, best exemplified by the pictorial or sculptural image? Think of what August Wilhelm Schlegel once wrote about Raphael's Dresden Madonna. 'The effect is so immediate that no words spring to mind. Besides, what use are words in the face of what offers itself with such luminous obviousness?'

Today, when the AUDIO-VISIBLE of the mass media reigns, beamed out twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, what remains of that effect of immediacy of visual representation? Media presentation dominates everywhere you turn.

Struck 'deaf' and 'dumb' over the course of the waning century, the visual arts have taken a battering, not only from the animated image, but especially from the TALKIES.

Remember, too, what the poet said when he insisted on the fact that so-called SILENT cinema was only ever DEAF, the first cinema-goers of the darkened movie halls being less aware of the actors' lack of words than of their own deafness. The early devotee of the seventh art of cinematography translated the silence of the movies into their own imaginary handicap, their personal limitation in seeing without hearing what the characters up on the screen were saying to each other.

Yet has anyone ever experienced this feeling of infirmity looking at a painting representing singers or angelic musicians? Hardly! So why did the aesthetics of the animated image suddenly disable the viewer of silent films, rendering strangely deaf a person hitherto not deaf in the slightest?

'Looking is not the same as experiencing', Isabelle Adjani reckons and she would know when it comes to looks. Adjani here goes one further than Kafka, who expressed his specific anxiety to his friend Gustav Janouch, some time in the years between 1910 and 1912:

'Cinema disturbs one's vision. The speed of the movements and the rapid change of images force you to look continuously from one to the next. Your sight does not master the pictures, it is the pictures that master your sight. They flood your consciousness. The cinema involves putting your eyes into uniform, when before they were naked.'

'That is a terrible thing to say', Janouch said. 'The eye is the window of the soul, a Czech proverb says.'
Kafka nodded. 'Films are iron shutters.'

What can you say about the 'talkies' and about the sound-track that puts the finishing touches on the effect of mastery of the image track, except that they are a lot more harmful than people realize? Must we wheel in radiophony and telephony yet again to explain 'the accident of the visible' that goes by the name of the audio-visual?

Bear in mind Démény's bit of chronophotography in which a man mouths 'je t'aime' to a camera that only records the movement of his lips. We've all seen the smile of the Mona Lisa; here you can see the smile of Etienne-Jules Marey's pretty niece as a prelude to hearing speech enunciated in front of a microphone.

The contemporary crisis in the plastic arts actually started here, with the enunciation of the image of the talkies and the concomitant denunciation of our deafness. You do not lend speech to walls or screens with impunity -- not without also attacking the fresco and mural art and, ultimately, the whole panoply of the parietal aesthetics of architecture every bit as much as painting.

After the eye, mobilized by the whipping past of film sequences denounced by Kafka, it is the turn of the ear, traumatized suddenly by imaginary deafness. Victim of the war in which the unfolding of time is speeded-up, the field of perception suddenly becomes a real battlefield, with its barked commands and its shrieks of terror; whence the quest for the scream as for fear conducted by the German Expressionists throughout the traumatic years of the 1920s and 1930s when the disqualification of the silence of paintings would usher in the impending tyranny of mass communications tools.

This bestowing of speech upon images, upon the whirling rush of film, meant unwittingly triggering a phenomenon of panic in which the audiovisual would gradually lead to this silence of the lambs whereby the art lover becomes the victim of sound, a hostage of the sonorization of the visible. In his 1910 tract Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto, Marinetti, after all, declared, 'Our sensations must not be whispered; we will make them sing and shout upon our canvases in deafening and triumphant fanfares.'

The key term here is this we will, expressing the triumph of the will to wipe out the voices of silence through the din of those famous 'noise-making machines' that heralded the ravages caused by the artillery of the Great War.
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And so the upheaval in the graphic arts is not to be chalked up to photography or even to cinematography so much as to the TALKIES. As a contrast, both sculpture and architecture were able to dream up and elaborate the myriad metamorphoses of their representations – and this, from the beginning in fact, thanks to a certain cinematic aesthetic.

‘To command, you must first of all speak to the eyes’, Napoléon Bonaparte decreed. ‘The cinema means putting your eyes into uniform’, Kafka confirmed. Between these two complementary assertions, oral culture has slowly evaporated. The art of speaking has bowed out before the ‘talking’ cinema and the oratorical power of the political tribune has been defeated by media culture. From now on, what speaks is the image – any image, from billboard images to images at home on the box.

Wherever TELEPRESENCE has taken over from PRESENCE, whether physical or graphic, silence spreads, endlessly deepening.

Having been wired for sound at the end of the 1920s – in 1927, to be precise, with the film *The Jazz Singer* – the cinematograph has not only pulled blinkers over viewers’ eyes – or iron shutters, as Kafka would say. It has also, according to Abel Gance, stymied looking – before going on to render the visual arts hoarse and then swiftly dumb.

By indirectly promoting the rise of TOTALITARIANISM, Democratic Germany’s ‘silent prose-cution’ promptly authorized every kind of negationism. Bear in mind the confession of the German priest Father Niemoller: ‘When they arrested the gypsies, I said nothing. When they arrested the homosexuals, I said nothing. When they deported the Jews, I said nothing. But when they arrested me, the others said nothing.’

Early warning signs of the pitiless nature of MODERN TIMES as portrayed by Charlie Chaplin, the visual arts of that historical period never ceased TORTURING FORMS before making them disappear in abstraction. Similarly others would not cease TORTURING BODIES afterwards to the tune of the screams of the tortured prior to their asphyxiation inside the gas chambers.

On that note, let’s hear the testimony of Valeska Gert, the actress who starred in German filmmaker G. W. Pabst’s 1925 ‘street’ film *Joyless Street*:

*I looked like a poster – that was novel. I would screw my face up into a grimace of indignation one minute, then quietly dance the next. By juxtaposing insolence and sweetness, hardness and charm, without*
any transition, I represented for the first time something characteristic of our times: instability. This was in 1917, towards the end of the war. The Dadaists did the show as a matinee in Berlin and the high point of the programme was a race between a typewriter and a sewing machine. George Grosz was the sewing machine. *I danced to the sound of the two machines.*

A still figure coming to life, silhouettes, shadows flapping about: the camera obscura had already been there, done that with the invention of visual perspective. But an animated image, one that talks, calls out to you ... This was the birth of a sonorous audio-visual perspective that far outdid what instrumental music had already done for the history of oral culture. Suddenly Plato’s cave became the Sybil’s lair and there was not a thing the visual arts could do about this sudden irruption of the AUDIO-VISIBLE.

When Al Jolson, the white singer who mimicked the movements of a black singer, launched his celebrated ‘Hello Mammy’ in the first talking film, in 1927, he was answering the unarticulated scream of Edvard Munch. In 1883, two years before the Lumière brothers invented cinema, Munch had tried to puff up the painted image with a sort of SOUND RELIEF, which was until that moment the sole province of music and its attendant notations.

Similarly, around 1910, newly hatched abstraction would typify the bid for mental sonorization in the pictorial realm. Here’s the way Kandinsky put it: ‘The clearer the abstract element of form, the purer, the more elementary, the sound.’

An adept of the then very recent discoveries in the psychology of perception, this pioneer of abstraction would seek to clear the field of all the formal references of figurative art. In the peculiar manner of the Berlin School’s GESTALTHEORIE, Kandinsky would tirelessly pursue ‘the right form’: a pictorial language ‘that everyone can understand’.

It is worth noting in this regard that, contrary to the romantic notion previously expressed by Schlegel, art’s most serious drawback is its immediacy, its ability to be perceived at a glance.

While theatre and dance – those arts involving immediate presence – still demand prolonged attention, we sum up the visual arts immediately, or as good as. The very recent development of REAL-TIME computer imagery only ever accentuates this effect of iconic stupefaction.

Whence contemporary art’s shrillness in its bid to be heard without delay
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— that is, *without necessitating attention*, without requiring the onlooker’s prolonged reflection and instead going for the conditioned reflex, for a reactionary and simultaneous activity.

And strangely, as British art historian Norbert Lynton notes:

Since the thirties, we have spoken more and more often also of another sort of commitment. We want the artist not only to give himself wholly in his art and to his art; we also want him to dedicate his resources to political progress. For too long, the argument goes, has art been an ornament and a diversion; the time has come for the artist to accept adult responsibilities and to make art a weapon. *Art that does not help in the fight diverts attention from it.*¹⁰

This declaration of hostility towards the prolonged attention of an ONLOOKER, who then finds him-or herself defined as MILITANT, if not MILITARY — in any case, as *militating against the law of the silence of art* — is typical of a ‘futurism’ for which war was the world’s only hygiene. It could only end up disempowering the graphic arts due to their lack of sound.

For if certain works SPEAK, those that SHOUT and SCREAM — their pain or hate — would soon abolish all dialogue and rule out any form of questioning.

The way that pressure from the media audience ensures that crime and pornography never cease dominating AUDIO-VISUAL programmes — so much so that our screens have reached saturation point these days, as we all know — the bleak dawn of the twentieth century was not only to inaugurate the crisis in figurative representation, but along with it, the crisis in social stability without which representative democracy in turn disappears.

To thus vociferously denounce OMERTA, *this law of the silence of art*, and promote instead some so-called ‘freeing up of speech’, was to trigger a system of informing that George Orwell would later portray to perfection. NEWSPEAK, the language Orwell invented in his novel *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, beautifully exemplifies not only the *linguistic clichés* of the emergent totalitarianisms, but also the crimes and misdemeanours of the audio-visual *language* of the MASS MEDIA and, in particular, those of this *denunciatory telesurveillance* we see being installed all over the world.

While psychoanalytical culture managed to bring artists up to speed
with tales from the FREUDIAN DIVAN, twentieth-century political culture would embark on the rocky road of trying to control the silent majorities. TO MAKE SOMEONE TALK would suddenly become a major requirement with the advent of the poll and television ratings systems.

The imperatives of state security and those of advertising become indistinguishable in identifying trends in public opinion. And so contemporary art finds itself dragged kicking and screaming into this escalation in the use of investigative and promotional campaigns, especially in the United States, where sponsorship turns into manipulation, pure and simple. That is, until the Saatchi affair of autumn 1999, when the exhibition 'Sensation' at the Brooklyn Museum, financed by Christie's International, had the unavowed aim of speculating on the value of the works on show.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite Magritte and a handful of others, commercial imagery – verbal art, visual art – would wreak the havoc we are all too familiar with yet which has for some reason provoked less of an outcry than that wreaked by 'Socialist Realism', the official art of the defunct Soviet Union ... The comic strip iconography of the likes of Roy Lichtenstein taking on the noisy sound effects of the Futurist machines, Mimmo Rotella apeing systematic billposting, etc. Why go on?

As for Andy Warhol, listen to him: 'The reason I'm painting this way is because I want to be a machine.'\textsuperscript{12}

Like Hamlet reinterpreted by the East German defector Heine Müller, the WARHOL-MACHINE no longer has something to say about the 'worker', but only about the 'unemployed'.

Somewhere between Antonin Artaud and Stelarc, the Australian body artist, Warhol does not so much document the end of art – preceding the end of history – as the end of the man of art: he who speaks even as he remains silent.

Whether what is at issue is the manual speech of the painter or the bodily speech of the mime artist or dancer, we are now living in the age of suspicion with doubt about the creative faculties of naked man holding sway.

With the indictment of silence, contemporary art can't quite shake off the accusation of passivity, indeed, of pointlessness ... The case instituted against silence, citing the evidence of the works, then ends in out and out condemnation of that profane piety that was still an extension of the piety of bygone sacred art.
Silence suddenly stops being indulged: he who says nothing is deemed to consent in spite of himself to judgement of the artist on mere intention.

Accused of congenital weakness, the silence of forms and figures suddenly turns into MUTISM: the mutism of abstraction or that of an indeterminate figurative art whose victims were to be Giacometti, Bacon and co.

'The less you think, the more you talk', Montesquieu pointed out. Surely the same thing applies to the visual arts. *The more you talk, the less you paint!*

The first thing to go was craftsmanship, a victim of industrial manufacturing from the eighteenth century onwards. In the twentieth century, it was art's turn to feel the impact of industrial repetition – head-on.

Victims of an art that claimed it contained all the others, with television following hot on the heels of the movies, the visual arts have slowly vanished from the set of history and this despite the unprecedented proliferation of museum projects.

*The art of the motor* – cinematographic, video-computer graphic – has finally torpedoed the lack of MOTORIZATION of the 'primary arts'. And I don't just mean the oceanographic arts or those that have come to light at Thule in Greenland but also, equally, *the gesture of the artist* who, first and foremost, brought his body with him: *habeas corpus*; all those corporal arts whose vestiges remain the actor and the dancer. Such motorization thus prefigures the disastrous virtualization of choreography, the grotesque dance of clones and avatars, the incorporeal saraband of some choreographic CYBER-ABSTRACTION which will be to dance what the encoding of digital HYPER-ABSTRACTION has already been to easel painting.

The Nazi assault on *degenerate art* would thus be followed by the age of *computer-generated art*, AUTOMATIC ART, cleansed of any presence *sui generis* – an aesthetic cleansing thereby perpetuating the recent ethnic and ethic cleansing in the theatre of the Balkans.

And so, after the SACRED ART of the age of divine right monarchy and after the contemporary PROFANE ART of the age of democracy we will look on helplessly, or just about, as a PROFANED ART emerges in the image of the annihilated corpses of tyranny, anticipating the imminent cultural accident – the imposition of some multimedia 'official art'.

*Art breakdown*, contemporary with the damage done by technoscientific progress. If 'modern art' has been synonymous with the INDUSTRIAL
revolution, 'postmodern art' is in effect contemporary with the INFOR-
MATION revolution – that is, with the replacement of analogue languages
by digital: the computation of sensations, whether visual, auditory, tactile
or olfactory, by software. In other words: through a computer filter.

After the like, the ANALOGOUS, the age of the 'likely' – CLONE or
AVATAR – has arrived, the industrial standardization of products
manufactured in series combining with the standardization of sensations
and emotions as a prelude to the development of cybernetics, with its
attendant computer synchronization, the end product of which will be the
virtual CYBERWORLD.\textsuperscript{13}

It might be useful to note, by way of winding up these few words, that
the hypothesis of \textit{an accident in AESTHETIC values} – or in scientific
knowledge – in the age of the information revolution is no more far-
fetching than the hypothesis of the \textit{accident in ETHIC values} that shook
Europe in the age of the production revolution ...

What has recently taken place in Austria in the aftermath of the
tragedy that has been playing out for ten years in the Balkans proves yet
again that POLITICS, like ART, has limits, and that democratic freedom of
expression stops at the edge of an abyss, on the brink of the \textit{call to murder} –
limits blithely crossed by those already going by the name of THE MEDIA
OF HATE.
Notes

Art and Fear: an introduction

1 I would like to thank Ryan Bishop and Verena Andermatt Conley for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this Introduction. The essays published here, 'A Pitiless Art' and 'Silence on Trial', were originally given as two talks by Paul Virilio in 1999 at the Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in the South of France. On Virilio's concept of the aesthetics of disappearance see Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (New York: SemioText(e), 1991).


3 Ibid.


5 Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*.


8 The term 'banality of evil' was first coined by Hannah Arendt in Chapter 15 of her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Penguin, 1963).
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A PITILESS ART

1 Unpublished interview with Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Gérard Wajcman conducted by François Rouan, May 1997.
4 The title of the famous conference paper delivered in Vienna in 1908 by the architect Adolf Loos.
7 Ibid., p. 291.
10 Ernst Klee, La Médecine nazie et ses victimes (Arles: Solin/Actes Sud, 1999), pp. 204, 342.
11 This was among the issues discussed at ‘Image et Politique’, a conference chaired by Paul Virilio within the forum of the ‘Rencontres internationales de la photographie’, Arles, 1997 (Arles: Actes Sud/AFAA, 1998).
13 As for the curious name given to the ‘Musée des arts premiers’, quai Branly, Paris: are we talking NATIVE or NAIVE art here? About an art SAVANT or an art SAUVAGE?

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NOTES

16 'Art, où est ta nature?', a conference held at the Institut Heinrich Heine, Paris, 8 March 1999.
18 Ernst Klee, op.cit., see the chapter 'Un généticien d'Auschwitz'.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 A dubious account of Josef Mengele's career has recently been filmed in Germany.
26 Ibid.
27 Libération, 16 March 1999.
29 Libération, 28 February 1999.
32 Ibid.

Silence on Trial

1 'A subtractive colour process developed in Germany by Agfa AG for 16 mm film in 1936 and for 35 mm film in 1940. Agfacolor was a tripak colour process, in which three emulsion layers, each sensitive to one of the primary colours, were laid on a single base.' I. Konigsburg, The Complete Film Dictionary, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 8.
2 The Jazz Singer, the Hollywood film directed by Alan Crosland and starring singer Al Jolson, marks the cinematograph's entry into the age of the TALKIES, on 23 October 1927 – the date of the first public screening.
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3 Patrick Vauday, ‘Y a-t-il une peinture sans image?’, a paper given at a seminar held by the Collège International de Philosophie, Paris, during its 1999–2000 programme.


6 Le Figaro, 4 January 2000.

7 August Wilhelm Schlegel, Paintings.


10 Norbert Lynton, op.cit., p. 359, from Chapter 12, ‘The Artist in Modern Society’.


12 Andy Warhol, quoted in Norbert Lynton, op.cit., p. 294.

13 ‘Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.’ George Orwell, Nineteen-Eighty-Four (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 313 (first published 1949).
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