

The Postmodern Trajectory

In 1981, Jean Baudrillard started a conversation that we continue in this issue in dialogical fashion. While so many postmodern theorists pointed to nuclear plumes as the beginning and end of postmodern humanity, Baudrillard conversely saw the apocalypse beginning and ending as humanity imploding into simulacra. Even before the World Wide Web, before social media, before *The Matrix*, Baudrillard saw it clearly: the replacement of all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, maps and models, where human experience degrades into mere simulation of reality.

Precisely on point, Marni Kotak brings urgency to the “real” by giving birth in a gallery in 2011. In E.L. Putnam’s interview, Kotak says, “We are living in a contemporary time that is dominated by an anti-life equation, which ties directly into the fetishization of the simulacra. The public’s reaction to *The Birth of Baby X* for me highlighted how taboos against birth are essentially driven by a fear of reality, the body, what we can touch and feel—actual human experience. This is built into contemporary medicalized birthing practices, where women are ultimately alienated from their own embodied experience, hooked up to machines and numbed with epidurals.”

Dennis Redmond’s essay ironically places the video game, a Baudrillardian bane, in a positive light. Redmond argues that the digital commons has leveled the playing field for artistic production, fostering fan labor in production of video games. To create is real, to be seen is real, and the 21st-century digital constellation engenders promise for everyone connected.

If we are speeding off on a Baudrillardian path, it prompts the question, “What exactly does the future consist of?” This question is explored in Rosa Barba’s film installations. Scott Budzynski interviews Barba and Michele Robecchi contributes an essay about her work. Barba’s *Subconscious Society* shows us indeterminate figures in cavernous abandoned halls with languid cutaways to boarded-up theme parks and post-industrial detritus. In a manner unintelligible to us, projects are being planned. Relics and human traces also extend into the gallery space as old speakers, and vinegary 35-millimeter projectors perform in an orbit around the screen. Is this simulacra’s last breath before the electricity goes out? Kristina Olson’s interview of Lily Cox-Richard unpacks *The Stand (Possessing Powers)*. These carved plaster sculptures re-create the bases/props but exclude the nude figures in the works of Neoclassical sculptor Hiram Powers to reveal 19th-century assumptions on gender, race and class. Here Cox-Richard makes postmodern mischief out of Baudrillardian “first order” pre-modern simulacra.

On the topic of “second order” simulacra, Liz Deschenes shows us work that is safe from the “second order” breakdown of the original that mass reproduction brings. Her photographs are not fixed. The works change over time, making still-reproduction of their primary essence impossible. Michael R. Smith, Jr., evaluates this work in his essay “Between Representation and Abstraction.”

Then Michele Robecchi reports on recent deliberations on simulacra in a Belgian court, where Luc Tuymans lost a case in which his appropriation of a photograph was judged to be plagiarism.

In the Baudrillardian “third order” simulacra, that associated with postmodernity, there is no longer any difference between reality and its representation; there is only the full-blown simulacrum, the hyper real. In Paco Barragán’s essay “A Voyeur’s Tale,” we encounter Yan Duyvendak’s performance *My Name is Neo (for fifteen minutes)*. The artist is dressed as the protagonist, Neo, from *The Matrix*. Duyvendak mimics Neo’s moves as part of the film is played on a television monitor. This performance takes us into a Baudrillardian wormhole: a Hollywood tale of “third order” simulacra is an object of indulgent reproduction.

To veer away from Baudrillard, perhaps humanities’ machine-driven rush toward the inhuman will be put in check by our own good conscious and growth aided by our technological prowess. Consider, for example, advances in Post-feminism (see my interview with painter Julie Heffernan) and in the Post-black movement (see Oliver Kiehmayer’s interview with Rashid Johnson). Also contributing to the sociopolitical discussion, Paco Barragán interviews department head curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Franklin Sirmans.

One can also wish for the real and hyperreal to commingle to good ends. Taylor Davis flirts with such sentiments in forests of real wood veneer tubes covered in text. Grain and text exist in “shared status as living history,” as Vanessa Platadis says in an interview with Davis.

But then if Baudrillard is right, the hyperreal swallows all. So even if our evolving collective conscience is not enough to save us, then we may have to look to Lyotard’s silver lining in his text *The Inhuman*. Perhaps it is a good thing to give our thoughts over to our machines. What else is going to make sure that human thought is carried to gentler cosmic climes when the sun burns up our solar system in another five billion years?

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