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Three Tendencies of Future Art



Via hologram, the art critic Ben Davis reminisces about contemporary art. Video still from the exhibition "William Powhida: After the Contemporary" at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Image courtesy: William Powhida.

The following predictions were from a 2027 report of the Future Arts Alliance, entitled "3 Mind-Melting Facts About the Future of Art." They have proved a classic of art futurology in the intervening decades, despite all the dislocations caused by years of civil conflict and ecological displacement, largely because of their accurate assumptions about these larger motivating political and economic forces.

The document is reproduced here unaltered, its scattered inaccuracies, exaggerations, and now-archaic terminology left unchanged.

By the mid-twenty-first century, we predict that it will become clear that what used to be called "visual art" has essentially split into three disparate but well-defined tendencies.

By this time, what media theorists and sociologists referred to as the “aestheticization of capitalism” is complete. Cultural life has largely migrated into various mediated and virtual platforms, all controlled by quasi-monopolistic corporations.

The market for new singular art objects craters as interior decorating trends favor the ultra-minimalism that best serves as a background for various forms of customizable augmented reality experiences.

Examples of old-fashioned 2-D and 3-D arts, created in artisanal traditions, are relegated to specialist historical research societies rather than public-facing institutions. “Art” in the Romantic sense of the expression of heroic individuality becomes anachronistic, an object of appreciation much the way ancient ruins or historical sites are appreciated today.

That is, such an artistic tradition is considered historically important, with the pathos of representing the life-form of a superseded age of culture—but without a connection to continuing vernacular forms of creative expression.

In the relentlessly presentist society, museums transform themselves. Art institutions mutate into purveyors of contemporary adult theme-park attractions (so-called “Big Fun Art”), integrated into an increasingly fluid and mobile world of “experience”-based leisure.

Practically, this means a sidelining of questions of authorship in favor of the demands of interactivity in the mid-twenty-first-century cultural sphere. It will matter little to the audience of a future *kunsthalle* *who* did something or the *personal* or *social symbolism* involved, outside of how it competes for their dollar as an attraction, and gratifies an appetite for in-person personalizable entertainment.

The latest feat of maximalist installation by an artist becomes conceptually indistinguishable, in the eyes of the future cultural consumer, from a pop-up environment wholly sponsored by a corporation as an advertisement.

Successful individual artists persist, in this period, but as the figureheads of event and experience empires, much the way individually named fashion designers persist today at the head of apparel conglomerates.

In essence, just as the nineteenth century advent of photography gradually displaced painting’s basis as a privileged mode of representing the world, the

twenty-first century gradually dissolves any connection of something distinctive called “art” to pleasurable leisure experience, in general.

This is Tendency A.



Tendency A of Future Arts Alliance’s 2027 report: “Examples of old-fashioned 2-D and 3-D arts, created in artisanal traditions, are relegated to specialist historical research societies rather than public-facing institutions”



“the fully capitalist, profit-oriented cultural mainstream of a capitalist, profit-oriented world”



"The latest feat of maximalist installation by an artist becomes conceptually indistinguishable, in the eyes of the future cultural consumer, from a pop-up environment wholly sponsored by a corporation as an advertisement"

All other tendencies in what used to be called visual or contemporary art define themselves against Tendency A, since the latter represents the fully capitalist, profit-oriented cultural mainstream of a capitalist, profit-oriented world.

We predict, however, two additional tendencies, though both are self-defined by their minority status relative to Tendency A.

As spatial segregation becomes almost complete in the twenty-first-century nation, the wealthy wall themselves off in hyper-policed gated zones. The lavish entertainment spectacles of Big Fun Art may provide more than enough on the entertainment level for both the tiny ruling class and its proximate servant class. But they do not fulfill the classical art object's other remaining purpose: symbolizing, through its uniqueness, a ruling class's unique status atop the social pyramid of society.

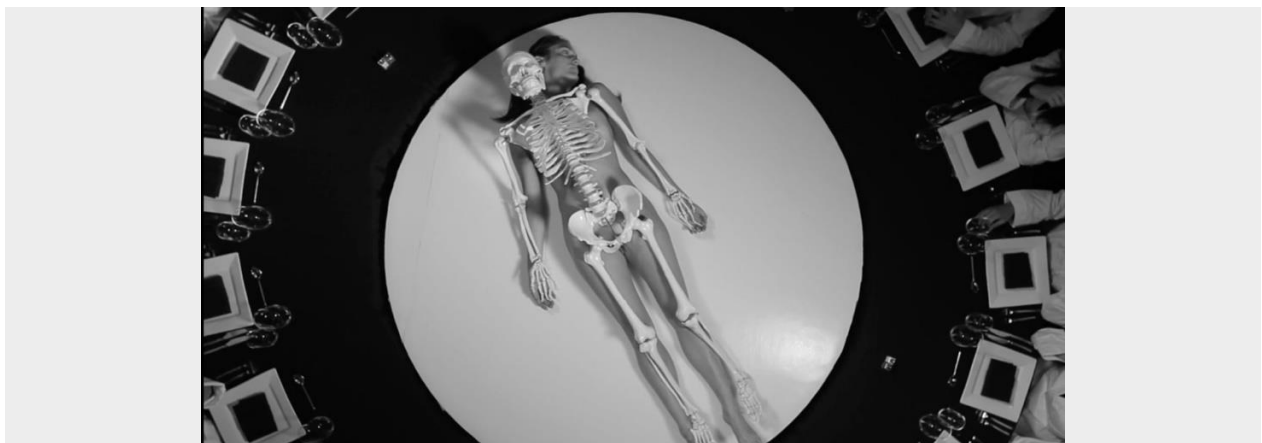
The individual contemporary artist, therefore, lives on, but more in the mode of aesthetic lifestyle coaching and bespoke mythmaking. A small number of artists—very small indeed next to the industrialized armies employed in the intricate spectacles of Tendency A—assume a new place, woven into the private life of the upper echelon of a mainly self-isolated ruling class.

Having a unique personal artist becomes a service similar to having a personal trainer or chef.

Their meaning-making services function as a balm for lingering self-doubt about the fragmented form society has taken. The old-fashioned artisanal status-object even lives on, alongside various forms of meditation and mindfulness practice, as a curious hobby. In its secret preservation among the wealthy, art reminds the ultrarich of their unique centeredness and humanity in the decentered and inhumane world that they have secured for themselves, and, through its shared codes provides the basis for status networks to cement a common ruling-class identity.

Exclusivity itself becomes the medium. Occasionally, images of this clandestine cultural network leak out, either unintentionally in an exposé of its excesses or intentionally as PR, flickering across the greater public consciousness. But it remains principally the symbolic property of an impenetrable leisure class. Secret rituals and private emblems, inaccessible to a broad public so as to reanimate the sense of personal destiny for the privileged—artists live on in this way.

This is Tendency B.



Tendency B of Future Arts Alliance's 2027 report: A film still from MOCA Gala 2011's promotional video which featured Marina Abramović as the guest artist. "Secret rituals and private emblems, inaccessible to a broad public so as to reanimate the sense of personal destiny for the privileged"



“A small number of artists—very small indeed next to the industrialized armies employed in the intricate spectacles of Tendency A—assume a new place, woven into the private life of the upper echelon of a mainly self-isolated ruling class.”



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“Having a unique personal artist becomes a service similar to having a personal trainer or chef.”

There remains, finally, the role of the artist beyond the walls of this new world's gilded citadels, in the blasted and blighted suburbs of the divided world, beset by civil war, social dysfunction, and environmental breakdown. The same cadre of artists who break one way, becoming jesters and color-for-hire to the private clubs and pop-up speakeasies of Tendency B, may also reject that world, and find their destiny in the restive outlands of the empire.

Early twenty-first-century cultural discourse had already prepared the way for this, with a vogue for various forms of "Politically Engaged Art" (PEA). However, with the wealthy in uncontested command of the levers of state power, the social basis of socially engaged art erodes. The titans of the future simply do not need to patronize, through direct or indirect funding, art that pretends to heal the divides of society—at least not outside of their heavily policed enclaves.

Thus, the last frontier for artists is what becomes ironically called "Politically Disengaged Art" (PDA)—"disengaged," that is, from the pretense of healing society's divides. Instead, art frankly acknowledges those divides. The professional artist has a role here, as the Cultural Officer of the various revolutionary organizations, organizing in the invisible underground of the forgotten hinterlands.

For those large portions of the population written off as disposable in this period, various forms of subculture surge up, as do various forms of messianic belief. Propaganda from the cities projects the power of the elite as fearsome and unassailable, while the glittering spectacles of cosmopolitan leisure entertainment linger as an ideal, albeit one inaccessible to masses reduced to subsistence, with no real disposable income.

Artists focus on the task of building the totems of oppositional culture that can draw people closer to their respective political factions, to provide the dissident cultural foci that symbolize actual social dissidence.

It is a culture of closely guarded passwords and underground concerts. A ghostly mirror of the private spectacles of privilege within Tendency B, the culture engineered by this cadre of artists defines a practice by nature militantly opposed to visibility, indivisible from the guerilla world that gave birth to it.

For a “mainstream” public, the signs of this art surge to the surface only at moments of insurgency, when the entire subterranean world of pageantry that has fused together blocs of would-be revolutionaries into a like-minded movement shoots to the surface, like lava.

Once the uprising is defeated, the heretofore secret art forms of PDA become available for co-option by the respective art worlds of middlebrow spectacle and private luxury art. These attempt to co-opt the trappings of scrappy underground art practices, mainly to give some semblance of integral meaning to the arid order of a segregated milieu, incorporating the neutralized cultural forms of the exotically oppressed Outside.

Individual dissident art-makers, seen as more pliable than actual dissident political leaders, may become hot commodities in this period, targeted with lavish promises of amnesty and personal gain if they abandon their comrades. Some go down with their movements, brutally executed for sticking to the foundational principles of oppositional art; some cash in.

Culture can only reform once again in secret, in coalition with a fresh cadre of the oppressed, keeping the memory of the broken struggles for justice alive. Artists begin to invent anew, despite the unsparing spectacle of repression.

This is Tendency C.



Tendency C of Future Arts Alliance's 2027 report: stands by the Gramsci Monument "Early twenty-first-century cultural discourse had already prepared the way for this, with a vogue for various forms of "Politically Engaged Art"



“Palante,” the paper of the Young Lords, the cultural officer of revolutionary organizations. “The professional artist has a role here, as the Cultural Officer of the various revolutionary organizations, organizing in the invisible underground of the forgotten hinterlands.”



An example of subvertising, or, subverting advertisement. “the glittering spectacles of cosmopolitan leisure entertainment linger as an ideal, albeit one inaccessible to masses reduced to subsistence, with no real disposable income”



A situationist reference in an institutional context. "Individual dissident art-makers, seen as more pliable than actual dissident political leaders, may become hot commodities in this period."

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