banging and switching and dabbling away, burying notions of
beauty, discipline, labor, talent, and courage beneath mounds
of lacquered tinker-toys, amplified eggbeaters, interview
magazines, action-painted Danskis, atom bomb montages,
and flaming diaries. Still, the point is not so much that drawing
stick figures, jerking off into one’s hat, singing unkind songs
about the president, or ring-modulating the Dave Clark Five
with an Australian didgeridoo is not, or is, bad art, but that it is
all we have left after the smoke clears.

And it is particularly ironic
that this final, overwhelming victory of art produces its
destruction, and indeed so irrevocably that even essays
such as this are helpless to retard its collapse. Fifty or even
ten years ago this essay might have aroused a grunt of
controversy, perhaps even mild resistance; certainly it would
have been quite justifiably considered by some artists to be
reactory and philistine, and they would have passionately
opposed it on precisely those grounds. (Occasionally in
reading about past art I come across this word “furor”: can
anyone define this for me, this “furor”?) Today, however,
artists know they have nothing to fear from a mere article,
or even several articles: as such they would be among a
multitude of articles, appearing in myriad art magazines
and vanishing without a trace, while the birthrate of works
and genres asymptotically approaches infinity.

This is the crux: obviously, everyone has
a certain medium of creative potential; the mere acts of
thinking, speaking, fighting, earning a living, and making
love are creative ones; the very word procreative captures
the heart of all life. This latter is no coincidence; no coincidence
and even genres asymptotically approaches infinity.

If we create art, not out of vanity, boredom,
competitiveness, convenience, or even choice, but out of
necessity; only then perhaps will we have earned the right
for which we have begged all these millennia: to stand our work
next to the stems of grass and hope that it will go unnoticed.

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who lives in San Francisco. The complete “long version” of this essay can be

Nowadays art is awful. When was
the last time you experienced a recent work of art, in any
idiom, that was as interesting as walking through a forest,
or a crowd, or traffic? Or even simply thinking?

The mere word “art” (say it) has a
somewhat narcotic effect: one thinks of dust, paper, a
kind of insincere solemnity, a deliberate retarding of the
mind, a certain scarcity of event and idea, and, above all, an
endless waiting. More than anything, this is what we do
when we experience contemporary art: we wait. Wait for a
concept, an image, a sound that can even begin to compare,
for more interestingness, with nature, with industry, with
sex, with conversation, with television, with riding in an
automobile, with sleep.

Take improvisation. Although in ancient
times it was probably virtually equivalent to performance,
our inability to revert to the kind of utterly unconditional faith
in intuition necessary for its truly inspired use has shrunk its
domain to that of the nonverbal arts, where without the most
rigorous of structures it becomes tedious almost immediately.

Unable to accept
the irretrievable loss of
primordial, unmeditated creativity, artists improvising today
do so usually to escape what they apparently feel are the
corruptions of adult art-making: rationality, technique, self-
criticism. Improvisation has become little more than the
strutting of a puffy-chested hamster on the treadmill of the
infinitely prolific human imagination. What could possibly be
cheaper and easier for the mind than words, ideas, and
images? Far from being difficult for us to produce, we are in
our dullest moments unable to cease doing so. To make an
unabashed physical boost of the Brownian Motion in the
laundry-list of one’s consciousness is to express a supreme
contempt for both one’s own time and that of one’s audience.

What is truly new about contemporary art
is neither the work nor even the void of beauty therein, which
has in some degree yawned in every age, but the sheer size
and duration of that yawning. We find ourselves giving in to it
with increasing frequency nowadays, despite art forms sprout-
ning and blooming mad as dandelions, and “advancing” at such
a rate as to virtually consist of newness. To our horror, what
would appear newest of all, should it miraculously appear in
our art, is something as old as neurons and photons: beauty.

One of the elder slugs in this idiom
larvae-boom is the idiot bastard Performance Art. The best
artists of this ilk, generally of less interest than those consid-
ered mediocre in the others, tend to be individuals with an
alphabet Cup-A-Soup of economically worthless skills (usually
tap-dancing, origami, yodeling, and underwater hand-
shadows), with a desperate need (for obvious reasons) for an
idiosyncratic values in both training and critical standards. Somehow they can survive for years on the social Twinkle of art stardom, whining all the while about the lack of state funding, without once asking themselves if they accomplish anything more laudable than the squandering of time and attention.

**Performance art** is far from exceptional.

Mail art, audio art, ceramic art, conceptual art, Xerox art, book art, etc.: all are forms that arose not so much out of any pressing urge to communicate ideas, emotions, or images (known pejoratively in the trade as “content”) but, as most of the artists themselves would boast, because they were there. In our more nostalgic moments we would like to think of these experiments as artistic crimes committed against a vilanous and imperialist Establishment, and of the artist as a Dada Robin Hood, heroically letting fly at the raptoms of bourgeois value.

No, the new idioms appeared mainly because they were easy: inexpensive, simple to work in, quick to become finished product, and best of all easy to reproduce and disseminate to the by then vast baby-boom art audiences cheering open-beaked to the horizon. Even more happily for the artists, none of these forms possessed critical yardsticks against which a work’s relative success might be measured. Thus the art patron, already somewhat portly with education, had to be told that what he beheld was good art at the same time that he was told it was art.

As fast food and condominiums replaced home cooking and homes, so are we increasingly buried in Fast Art: performances prepared in three weeks, bands gigging after a month’s rehearsal, composers who stretch a measure’s worth of material into a full-length work, sculptors who mass-produce figurines under the guise of Embracing Capitalism. Fast Art is almost always breathtakingly bright, smooth as Frottage, easy or unnecessary to be understood, flattering to its audience (at least for their taste, and their membership in the artist’s personality cult, which may number anywhere from in the dozens to in the millions), and, most importantly, stylistically indistinguishable from the rest of the artist’s work: it is an advertisement for his other advertisements for himself. And, as with his ideological cousin in the culinary arts, McDonald’s, his ideological cousin in the culinary arts, McDonald’s, his success depends largely on the comfort we take from knowing that no matter what artwork or franchise we go to, we know what we’re getting.

In a society in which few dare venture even the slenderest notion of what, in their terribly humble opinion, art is, it is not surprising it has become signature. Obviously if it is anything in particular, someone else’s work is going to be left out in the woods overnight, leaving the critic or beholder who exiled it there open to the charge of "elitist" a disparagement about half a rung above “Nazist” on the descending ladder to hell. And if artists have no aesthetic nucleus to orbit, each is left to shoot his own name in a deafening crowd scene: hoarse, unheard, and unlistening. If there is no concept of what constitutes an artist, it is surely inevitable that ever greater multitudes will turn out to qualify.

**So ends the Age of Art.** The ability to apprehend and analyze the structure of works, minds, and even the creative process itself stands at its height; indeed, ever greater phases of this process are now surrended to what had once been mere tools and instruments: the recording studio, the sound stage, the editing room, the music synthesizer, the image-processor and, of course, the artist of the future, the computer. The point is not that artists are somehow “losing” creative prerogative to their technoloy, but that if they are wise they surrender it voluntarily, because the will-to-beauty in their own hearts is by now insufficient to create it alone. We have reduced art to the education and training necessary for its execution. Thanks at least in part to exponential growth in our ability to record, preserve, research, and reproduce art, every scrap of technical and psychological evidence as to how great art is made is now at our disposal. The knowledge has in fact the kind of comprehensiveness that can only result from one kind of operation: the autopsy.

**But what was most fatal to art was its sudden availability, because of the epidemic spread of education and mass communication, to all people.** Automation and other technologies have freed us of vast featureless deserts of time for tens of millions of people, more of whom are high school- and college- and television-educated than ever before in history. Confronted by the yawning emptiness of automated culture’s bored mouth, they respond by making art. Hence the recent booms in poetry readings, book bands, novelists, street performers, video artists, photo galleries, mime companies, etc., and of course a correspondingly massive increase in the ratio of bad to good in those fields.

**Happily, at least one field has managed to benefit from the glut:** entertainment. Almost immediately after becoming neon-lit with the post-modernist logo “Anyone Can Make Art,” the playing fields of art began to team with the untrained. Not surprisingly they soon became heaped with contempt, causing a large number of those more gifted to defect to entertainment, a field that had once looked vulgar and common, but by then looked positively exclusive by comparison. Because entertainment does not stammer and vacillate about what it wants, the best, there will always be room for only a limited amount of it, and the rest can go back to art. In entertainment one either succeeds or fails; its door is not at all open to the huddled masses leeching the corpses of their helpless muses: it is in fact strictly elitist. Naturally there are a certain number of failures and fools, as there are anywhere, but these are errors quickly corrected by marketplace economics. Bad entertainers, unlike bad artists, do not have friends on grant committees.

Moreover, even as art grows commoner, easier, and sillier, the artists and audiences for entertainment become daily more educated and sophisticated. This has prompted the more naive among us to announce that the Art of the Future will be in the form of entertainment; as if somehow all the idioms of art might someday mysteriously unite with those of entertainment in some grand aesthetic Moonie Marriage. But this is truly the silliest kind of romanticism: a merely cursory examination of the marriage’s prognosis reveals that entertainment and art have not merged symbiotically at all: rather, the former has quite absorbed the latter. Our experience of this kind of event is in fact nothing like a great art experience, which can suspend one shivering with vision on a wire hung from the ineffable, but is rather a mild glow, such as one’s feet might get from a steam pipe on a winter morning.

The process is ultimately rooted in one of the most important events of the 20th century: the final and incontestable irreversible victory of 1945 in what constitutes an artist, it is surely inevitable that ever greater multitudes will turn out to qualify.

**To its credit,** Western art saw it coming, and not only predicted, but with its usual fiercely perverse sense of humor, actually precipitated its own downfall. Warhol’s famous pronouncement about everyone becoming famous for fifteen minutes deserves mention. John Cage devoted an entire career to the notion of the artist erasing rather than engraving the traces of himself in his work, and earlier still Artaud had called for “no more geniuses” in an essay entitled “No More Masterpieces.” Even earlier Italian Futurist theater with its minute-long sinter (tiny performances), and French Surrealist poetry with its automatic writing, Duchamp with his urinal and again with his early retirement, had all leveled crippling blows at the traditions of both work-as-masterpiece and artist-as-genius, little realizing that, as usual in culture, the job would be completed not by future artists and their manifestos but by economics and demographics.

The expanding Red Giant of culture reached critical mass in the 1960s 1970s and 1980s. And with the creative explosion of forms that lit those decades (performance art, mail art, sound sculpture, textile art, poster art, apartment theater, art rock, art graffiti, ceramic sculpture, environmental sculpture, sound poetry, radio art, computer music, conceptual art, laser sculpture, artists books, concrete poetry, Xerox art, art comics, video sculpture, body art, interactive video, etc.), under the influence of idiom cross-fertilizers like Robert Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik, Vito Acconci, Yoko One, Allan Kaprow, ed in fiumeum, it became increasingly obvious to artists, critics, and audiences that art was simply whatever the artist chose to call art. At the same time, the idea of performance as merely a framed swatch of ordinary time, of sculpture as an imperceptibly altered environment, of music as any ordinary sound (Cage), of dance as any natural movement (Cunningham), of literature as randomly-selected print (Burrroughs), of performer as non-artist (Robert Wilson), of film as documentation of ordinary time (Warhol), and of video and music as pure ambiance (Eno), combined in an unapologetic assault on the idea of the art work itself. Like the identifying features of value in general, those of art have, as in a supernova, expanded quickly enough to qualify as an explosion, and we are left with a vast, indistinct nebula of dust and gas.

At this crucial moment the political and socioeconomic forces described above became paramount. The mighty armies of freshly self-christened artists stretching scores abreast to the horizon, having both illuminated and generated by this cultural nova, delightfully pick up malleys and brushes, photocopy knobs and synthesizer toggles, and begin