

Leah Modigliani

Presented in a public lecture at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design on May 9, 2008.

Presented in June, 2007 at the International Association of Philosophy and Literature's Annual Conference in Nicosia, Cyprus, in a panel discussion titled *New Constructions of Disintegration: Art in the New Globalism*, Chair Carla Macchiavello, Stony Brook University.

Published in *Art Criticism* 22, No. 1(2007): 91-104.

Louis Vuitton and the Luxury Market After the End of Art

In December, 2006 on 5th Avenue near 57th Street, surrounded by the world-famous Christmas decorations of New York City, one finds a new kind of holiday advertising: the high art installation.¹ Louis Vuitton (known to consumers as a producer of expensive leather goods and as one of many luxury brands owned by LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) is displaying original art commissioned by contemporary artist Olafur Eliasson. The side and back walls of the box-shaped windows have been paneled in flat black fabric to maximize the effect of the art, which is titled *Eye See You*. The work consists of sun-cookers (portable devices that use solar energy to cook food) that have been modified into lamps shaped like satellite dishes mounted on tripods. One fiery glowing orange lamp is centered in each of the windows at street level. The project was designed by Olafur Eliasson and built by contractors to his specifications, and copies of the same work have been installed in 380 other stores across the globe.

The partnership between Louis Vuitton and Olafur Eliasson is an example of the extent to which all cultural products have been subsumed into a hegemonic "culture industry." In this expansive field, boundaries between art, commercial commodities and entertainment have become non-existent or blurry. The growing inability to distinguish art from non-art except through context, and/or the inability of viewers to respond

differently to the experience of either, has led to a growing body of research on what scholars have called the end or liquidation of art.

This paper begins by accepting the argument that art, as we have known it is over. However, theorizing "The End of Art" does not mean that art is not being made; simply that art is not what it once was. In fact, record numbers of artists are graduating from art schools and sales of art at an all-time high. So art exists all around us and its very desirability must mean something significant. The question now becomes how to address or evaluate this art that proliferates in a time after the end of art. This paper seeks to address the historical antecedents of these problems and their ramifications in contemporary life by examining both Olafur Eliasson's *Eye See You* project and Louis Vuitton's reasons for commissioning it. Furthermore, in theory and by example the paper suggests that art criticism exists as an integral tool in the evaluation of art in visual culture.

The placing of high art in the windows of a luxury goods retailer is not particularly unexpected because art has long been supported and commissioned by the wealthier classes of society. However, in these windows none of Louis Vuitton's products are displayed along with Eliasson's sculptures, and so the art assumes the role of primary advertisement. This strategy is part of the company's marketing plan to bond their product image to that of high art, and through this association to elevate the status of their luggage to that of art in the popular imagination. To achieve this goal both art and luggage must be seen to share the same basic attributes. The question at hand is how art is affected when it performs a role expected of ordinary objects like wallets and suitcases. What does art lose when it becomes advertising?

On the official LVMH website a page titled "LVMH, Patron of the Arts and Social Solidarity" describes the reasoning behind their cultural contributions:

...the Group consolidates its development, year after year, as a unique body of values related to heritage, know-how, creativity, innovation, art of living. These values, shared and claimed by people worldwide, constitute the leading elements of its houses success, and of that of their products. Through patronage, LVMH intends to defend, and thereby redefine luxury as generous, affective, authentic, a definition to which the Group's chairman and his associates are truly committed. . . . LVMH's institutional action intends to mark, through a civic act in favor of the greater good, its commitment to solidarity with culture, youth, and the great humanitarian causes of public health issues. LVMH's patronage is inscribed under the sign of creative passion, and a profound love of human values.²

Although the text is fairly vague, LVMH's primary motivation seems to be the defense of luxury. The "art-of-living" as a value "claimed by people worldwide" suggests that all of the objects and/or art commissions proffered by LVMH are connected as representations of lifestyle. But what is it exactly about luxury that needs to be defended? If art is being used as luxury's defense then the implicit ulterior motive of that use is not particularly generous after all.

Perhaps defending luxury has to do with the fact that until recently Louis Vuitton's handbags were made the old fashioned way, but now they are mass-produced and sold for the same high prices. On Oct 9th, 2006, just one month before Eliasson's installation was unveiled on 5th Avenue, the Wall Street Journal ran a front-page article titled "Louis Vuitton Tries Modern Methods On Factory Lines."³ Apparently as recently as a year ago, "it took 20 to 30 craftsmen to put together each . . . bag, over the course of about eight days."⁴ In this artisan context the high prices of the bags seem almost justified. However to become more competitive and increase profits Louis Vuitton recently adopted a Japanese-modeled assembly-line process in order to keep more products on the shelves. According to the Wall Street Journal this is a risky departure for

the brand because, "Customers . . . have bought into the notion that skilled craftsmen make them the old-fashioned way."⁵ The article goes on to explain that Louis Vuitton along with other luxury brands have traditionally accepted the idea that keeping up demand is good for business - empty shelves may increase consumer desire which ensures a long waiting list of affluent customers. The very authenticity that LVMH refers to in the previous quote is thus called into question, and knowing this, they are working hard to create new justifications for mass-produced luxury.

Louis Vuitton's situation ironically echoes the condition of the contemporary artist. Olafur Eliasson is just one of many highly successful artists that cannot on their own keep up with the demand for their work. Matthew Barney, Jeff Koons and Mike Kelley are also well known in the art world for employing whole teams of full paid staff in the construction of their work. The *Eye See You* project is enormous in scope—380 stores received at least one sun-cooker sculpture at a probable cost of at least over a hundred thousand dollars in material and labor costs alone. Eliasson, like Matthew Barney, acts as the director of a project that he could not complete by the efforts of his own labor. From a Berlin studio that he calls Werkstatt & Büro (Workshop and Office) he employs approximately thirty assistants that include two art historians, eight architects and a number of artists.⁶ According to Eliasson's own website in 2006 he had twelve solo exhibitions and participated in thirty-six group shows.⁷ Given the size and scope of the massive installations he is known for creating all over the world, this level of productivity could not be possible without a full-time paid staff. Therefore it is not surprising to learn that although they are likely made to his specifications, many of these artworks are not actually made by him, and in this regard Eliasson functions as the director of his own brand-name of contemporary art.

Perhaps it is for this reason that, like Louis Vuitton, he feels compelled to defend or justify the high art (or luxury objects) that he is creating; in fact, press releases and labels next to the *Eye See You* project announce that the proceeds from the work will go to an Ethiopian orphanage.⁸ By associating Eliasson's work with charity, and specifically with underprivileged children, both the artist and LVMH discourage serious criticism of the formal, social and conceptual meanings of the artwork and its commercial context. Most likely because of the money involved in this project, the art by itself is no longer recognized as having humanitarian value and so must be associated with a more obvious social cause.

The example of luggage and art as tandem products of a luxury goods company, which both need to appeal to humanitarian causes for validity, signifies a radical shift in the traditional understanding of art's place and role in society. From the flickering hunters pictured on the interior cave walls of Lascaux, to the transcendent Christian narrative of Giotto's Arena Chapel, art has traditionally been called into the service of human social interaction with the divine or incomprehensible. The artist's development and eventual perfection of his craft through the making of discreet art objects has been an attempt to solicit divine intervention into the humble lives of man, as the popular myth of Pygmalion illustrates so clearly. Even outside of explicitly religious subjects, artistic representation sought to imbue the everyday with mysticism, the sacred, or some other quality that would enrich the prosaic recognition of one's own mortality in daily interactions with people and things.

The disinterested and distracted shoppers passing by the Louis Vuitton windows show how far from mysticism or faith art in relation to its audience has come. The formal qualities of the *Eye See You* project support this idea. The spectacle of the lamps

at night command visual attention but do not receive any from the busy public walking by. During day or night, the highly reflective plate glass windows reflect the street back to the viewer, which is compounded by sunlight, car lights, and the interior lighting of the store. From across the street the lamps are easier to see but this viewpoint is obscured by the stream of trucks and buses that pass through the intersection of 5th Avenue and 57th Street at all times. Furthermore, the lamps are so bright that they are physically uncomfortable to look into so viewers might glance at them as they walk by, but will not stop and linger. Essentially the environment is not conducive to careful contemplation, and the conditions of the street prevent people from really looking at the objects, or wanting to.

The fact that the art actually repels the viewer physiologically gives the title *Eye See You* a troubling connotation. It sees us but we do not see it. This is a one-way communication in which no collaboration of meaning exists. Interestingly, there is a single sculpture by Eliasson titled *You See Me*, commissioned by LVMH at the same time as the *Eye See You* series, hanging permanently inside the store out of sight from the street. This sculpture consists of four sun-cooker discs connected in the center to form a kind of sphere from which four "eyes" look out in different directions. Despite the title's solicitation for us to see it, the sculpture is mounted so high in the store that it is unlikely that Louis Vuitton shoppers will notice it unless they walk up the stairs to the fourth floor and happen to look in the right direction from that level.

Whether or not intentional, these two works, as metaphorical sets of eyes with indifferent and/or aggressive relationships to moving viewers, effectively illustrate post-modern theory about surveillance and social control. In fact, when Michel Foucault analyzed the discourse of power through the example of modern prisons and models of

discipline, he specifically pointed to the connections between the development of the new technologies of the "telescope, the lens and the light beam," and the development of new ways of imagining the observation of men.⁹ In Foucault's now famous example of the panopticon, he showed how human subjects can become self-controlling, or disciplined, in their social behavior by their consciousness of always being watched. However unlike the early Bentham prison that Foucault referred to, contemporary public surveillance is not restricted to a particular spatial structure or to one set of eyes - in fact in a post 9-11 world Americans have become accustomed to watching each other. Participation in contemporary life also means accepting the fact that advertising through information technologies can and does reach all space both public and private. When we walk out on Fifth Avenue we are so deftly attuned to these many daily impositions that Eliasson's brightly lit examples of the all-seeing-eye are not likely to stand out.

Besides the sheer number of *Eye See You* sculptures found simultaneously world wide, each one's material construction of mirror-like glass and polished aluminum adds to their spectacular potential even if ultimately unsuccessful. Mirrors reflect the self back to the self, but as Narcissus' fate showed us, such images are not in the end sustentative or redemptive because the one-sided communication is empty of new and enriching content. It seems clear that *Eye See You* is an example and product of a culture in which multi-reflective surveillances modify behavior away from critical consciousness by exposing people to an overload of unsubstantial visual stimuli. This is a far cry from seeking and recognizing truly redemptive works of art that reinforce the beauty and wholeness of the world through their inspired forms.

The gradual dissolution of art's purpose as a link to the divine corresponds to the historical birth of avant-garde art. Although having antecedents in David, Delacroix and

other eighteenth century artists, the avant-garde's inward turn towards a secular subjectivity became accepted as a basis for creation in the nineteenth century: particularly in the work of Manet and his contemporaries. This is not to say that these artists were universally liked or accepted by the public, simply that contemporary connoisseurs of art took them seriously and debated their efforts in the public forum of newspapers and journals. The poet Émile Zola, in his public support of Manet, exemplified this with a plea to his readers to wipe clear their whole understanding of art history and tradition in order to see Manet's art with fresh eyes. Zola also rejected the long-standing idea that "there is an absolute beauty located outside the artist, or better, an ideal perfection toward each artist strives."¹⁰

As D.D. Egbert described so succinctly in his essay "The Idea of the Avant-Garde," the rejection of tradition was for intellectuals wed to the belief that this rejection would prepare them for a better new socialist future.¹¹ This is confirmed by Renato Poggioli's classic text on the avant-garde that asserts that a belief in a new radical future is one of the fundamental tenets of the avant-garde.¹² Egbert locates the origins of the avant-garde in the teaching and philosophy of Henri Saint-Simon, a successful military strategist and founder of the still operating École Polytechnique in Paris. Simon envisioned society as "a kind of great machine operating under natural laws like those of the Newtonian universe"¹³ which he combined with the desire to create a kind of Christian paradise on earth. He positioned artists as the creative leaders of a trinity of social reformers that would be the guides in this process, with the other leadership positions assigned to scientists and engineers. Perhaps because of the implicitly elitist hierarchy of Simon's leader-and-followers model, his successors eventually separated

into two camps, which were distinguished by those who believed in the socio-political goals of his artist-as-leader, and those who did not.

The point of this digression into the origin of the avant-garde is that even in the early stages of the avant-garde, art was conceived as having a socio-political purpose. When artists imagined themselves as leaders but separated this from the socio-political goals that the Simonians had insisted on, art became art for arts sake, and artists began to imagine themselves as outside of society. Without the idea that art might serve some common purpose by appealing to a complicit public, the seeds were sown for two centuries of experimentation in which the art object became more and more about revealing the artist's subjectivity through his/her free expression in contrast to the dominant culture.

Eliasson's artwork demonstrates an even further development of this trajectory. The construction of reproducible and spectacular artworks that are not made by the artists hand, but built according to plan by others, actually strips the artwork of any sense of the artist's own subjectivity. Because of the formal reasons already outlined, it is impossible to get any sense of Olafur Eliasson's subjectivity through looking at the *Eye See You* project. The sun-cookers can and are able to be assembled by anyone. Subjectivity is linked to authorship, and when authorship becomes a brand name with little to no emotional resonance, as it does here, the work feels empty no matter how spectacular its form. In this case, we are left with an artwork that does not reveal the artist's or viewer's subjectivity, that has no apparent socio-political purpose except as a fundraiser for charity (but selling the handbags and giving the profits to the orphanage would achieve the same result), and that has limited aesthetic appeal because the work is visually confrontational. If this artwork has a purpose or meaning and it cannot be located in the object itself, then

it must be located somewhere else. This suggests that the art object is a sign or placeholder of meaning that is external to it.

The desire for an artwork's meaning to be located in its objecthood is a desire so strong it cannot be easily broken. To accept that meaning lies elsewhere is to accept the possibility that art will be used as propaganda. The relationship between an artwork's meaning, its location and its partisan use is perhaps best reflected in the 1930's dialogue between Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. In a series of letters both men try to find the source of art's significance in relation to the socio-political concerns of their time. Their dialogue brackets the core issue which was, and still is, the encroachment of mass culture on older forms of high art. Benjamin, continuing in the tradition of the Saint Simonians, argued for the revolutionary social potential of new forms of mechanical reproduction and their ability to reach mass audiences, especially film. Adorno counter-argued that art's importance lay in its inherent autonomy and distinct status outside of mass culture, and that film like other new technologies, was just another tool to be used by the culture industry to reach mass audiences and further indoctrinate them into capitalism's reified program. The popular film and the high art object are, to echo one of Adorno's frequently used metaphors, "two halves that do not add up." The utopian whole that is not fulfilled by these two halves is that of socio-economic liberation and freedom.

Today, the distinctions between high and low culture that Adorno, and later Clement Greenberg (in his famous essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"), desperately sought to protect have been obliterated. Nowhere is this more evident in the marketing of fashion and high art that is certainly not the exclusive domain of Louis Vuitton. In 2001 a Prada boutique literally occupied the old sight of the Guggenheim' Museum's New York SoHo branch, where shoes and clothes are displayed in vitrines and pedestals in a

building designed by famous architect Rem Koolhaas. In Chelsea, fashion boutiques sell high priced clothes next door to blue chip galleries. Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, perhaps the best example of the fusion of art and fashion (and tellingly known as the Japanese Andy Warhol) literally runs a marketing empire out of Tokyo, from which he sells the Murakami brand (paintings, dolls, sculptures, keepsakes, prints, etc.) to an international consumer base. The phenomenon of artists branding themselves (or being branded) as creative identities is perhaps the most significant aspect of the inward turn to a secular subjectivity divorced from faith. In many cases the art-objects produced by brand-name artists such as Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, and Takashi Murakami are valued prior to existence. This is verified by the fact that collectors will put their names on waiting lists to purchase these artist's works before they are even made. Given that a communicative exchange between viewer and object can only take place after the work exists, it is clear that emotional, cultural or social value is not as important as market value when buying these artists works. An artist I know often complains that the art he sees exhibited in contemporary galleries "looks like props from the movie of someone's fabulous art life." The significance of this rather witty assessment cannot be understated: much art feels like it is disingenuous and/or empty. It signifies meaning, but does not deliver it.

Why does so much art feel so uninspiring? Either the art is uninspired or it is falsely representing itself. When walking through Chelsea we don't feel disappointed when we encounter an ugly or uncomfortable pair of shoes, we just move on until we find a pair that suits us. We don't *expect* inspiration from shoes, although we may occasionally be inspired by aesthetically pleasing or comfortable design. But with art, we are expecting something more; we are expecting (or at least hoping for) some kind of

beyond-the-usual aesthetic experience. I would argue that within advanced capitalism, when it comes to art, viewers prefer evidence of the hand-made. The alienation one feels from the production of their labor and that of others, can be compensated somewhat in the recognition of original artworks made by artists. When the experience of viewing something we know to be art (after all sometimes art is not even recognizable) is just the same as looking at all of the other consumer goods out there, we feel disappointed. Different viewers will have different responses to this expectation, which will vary based on their personal history, education and understanding of art. These complicated expectations are a result of the long history art has with faith, a history that hangs on despite all attempts to liquidate it.

Walter Benjamin called this history the aura of the art object, only he was advocating for its eventual demise through the object's technical replication. He thought that the aura controls our experience of art and he was right. However, he did not anticipate the fact that even when an art object has no aura, our tenacious desire for it to exist fulfills the same controlling function. Adorno expressed this well when he said:

Aura is not only—as Benjamin claimed—the here and now of the artwork, it is whatever goes beyond its factual givenness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art.¹⁴

Adorno was advocating in favor of modernist artworks, which he saw as dialectical combinations of form and content. To get rid of either one is to be left with non-art. The advances of capitalism have thrown an unforeseen wrench into this dynamic because today the content of the artwork is so often determined by the artwork's context. As we have seen in our own day with artists like Eliasson, who mass-produce their work, the work's meaning is often determined by the spatial, social or political context the art is found in: galleries, catalogues, signage, websites, etc. If aura is not necessarily bound to

the objecthood of the art, and is further deflected to the artwork's context, the ground for evaluation of artworks becomes murky indeed.

In 1980 Douglas Crimp published a small but important essay on this subject in the journal *October*.¹⁵ He theorized the aura as a ghost; a presence of absence:

The withering away of the aura, the dissociation of the work from the fabric of tradition, is an *inevitable* outcome of mechanical reproduction. This is something we all have experienced. We know, for example, the impossibility of experiencing the aura of such a picture as the Mona Lisa as we stand before it at the Louvre. Its aura has been utterly depleted by the thousands of times we've seen its reproduction, and no degree of concentration will restore its uniqueness for us.¹⁶ (original emphasis)

Crimp's essay reveals an important critical observation about the aura and the autonomy of art. The widespread reproduction and dissemination of all kinds of images in the information age effectively obliterates the aura. The ubiquity of visual imagery in today's world ensures that even "original" images will feel as though they have been seen somewhere before. But, as Crimp goes on to explain, the absence of aura creates a desire for it that is disproportionate to the original need, resulting in an obsessive attempt to restore it in all imagery:

The restoration of the aura, the consequent collecting and exhibiting, does not stop there. It is extended to the carte-de-visite, the fashion plate, the advertising shot, the anonymous snap or polaroid. At the origin of every one there is an Artist and therefore each can find its place on the spectrum of subjectivity.¹⁷

Although Crimp focuses on photography, the central idea, which is the fetishization of the aura in order to validate a subjective experience, can be extended to any and all contemporary imagery. The *idea* of an authentic art trumps the details of whatever thing we are looking at. This is the psychological component of art's purpose that may grow disproportionately important as other opportunities for faith and inspiration dwindle or are also co-opted by capitalism. The aura exists and doesn't exist at the same time; it is a

phantom limb attached to most artwork, but only felt by the viewer. This phantom limb is a very real response to an ongoing trauma, western capitalist culture's separation with tradition and faith. This metaphor also complements the military history of the avant-garde and the failure of its utopian campaign.

Louis Vuitton is banking their business on the notion that the semblance of art is a luxury worth purchasing. The phantom limb of the aura is the corrupt magic dust that sprinkles all objects with authenticity. This is why the company is "redefin[ing] luxury as generous, affective, authentic" in place of an older model that links luxury to the objecthood of hand-made goods. The real aesthetic experience that occasionally results from important works of art might well also be described as generous, affective and authentic. The artist gives you a piece of their self in the work (their time, their thought, their vision), it affects you somehow, and it is this interaction that resonates as authentic experience. This is tradition—social communication engendered through expressive action. Both the artist and the viewer's subjectivity is activated and validated. Without one or the other the artwork is empty. What Louis Vuitton gives us in their new product lines, which include commissioned artworks, are objects that promise the aura of art but because of their mass production cannot provide the traditional experience. They are the status symbols of a new age; signs of important traditional values that no longer exist in a world that continues to forfeit them in the pursuit of material wealth.

What is at stake in critiques of the conflation of mass culture and high art is what Suzi Gablik has referred to as the "Reenchantment of Art" in her book of the same title.¹⁸ Although I disagree with her limited characterization of modern art as purely centered on individualism, freedom and self expression, which seems to ignore the socio-political project of the original avant-garde artists, she is right in her overall call for the support of

artworks more social in nature. However, to turn away from autonomous art objects in favor of social networks and collaborative works (as exemplified in the art-world popularity of "relational aesthetics"), is too limited. Because art's redemptive significance is its ability to foster critical consciousness, any work that succeeds in doing so must be singled out from the plethora of works that do not. For critics, it is no easy task to make these qualitative judgments publicly, because it means dismissing much art and artists popular in the powerful contemporary art market. This is why this kind of criticism is rarely found in magazines, newspapers and journals today.

The continued existence of true artworks and the critical assessment of them are vitally important in the current context of an advanced capitalism whose bottom line is profit. Art does and always has revealed the human dimension of living in one's time. Beauty, self-criticism, careful looking, contemplation, inspiration in oneself and others, and a feeling of social connection are all human qualities fostered by art but threatened by the marketplace. To accept art as advertising and vice versa is to renounce these traditional aspects of humanity in favor of work, profit and a materially centered lifestyle. The *Eye See You* project shows that in an end-of-art-world the social and communicative qualities of art can no longer be assumed to exist in the art object. Louis Vuitton's example is decadent at best and dangerous at worst. We know we can live without luxury, after all most of the world does, but can we afford to live without art?

¹ This essay was first written in December, 2006.

² The quoted text is exactly as was found on the official LVMH website in December, 2006. Readers should know that LVMH mission statements may vary as their website continues to be updated over time. See: http://www.lvmh.com/mecenat/pg_mecenat_home.asp?rub=23&srub=0

³ Christina Passariello, "Louis Vuitton Tries Modern Methods On Factory Lines," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 Oct. 2006, front page.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., A15

⁶ This information was provided by Prof. Philip Ursprung of the University of Zurich in a paper titled "Machines in the Studio: Olafur Eliasson and the Globalized Art World" at the 2007 College Art in New York City on Wednesday Feb. 14th, 2007.

⁷ www.olafureliasson.net

⁸ It is not within the scope of this paper to fully investigate the subtext of defensiveness that underscores the partnership between Louis Vuitton and Eliasson, although it seems important to note.

⁹ Foucault describes the development of new forms of observing subjects in order to correctly 'train' them for military or other service, under the heading of Hierarchal observation. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 170-171.

¹⁰ Charles Joshua Taylor, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Theories of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 421.

¹¹ Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-garde' in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (1967): 339-366.

¹² Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1968)

¹³ Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-garde' in Art and Politics," 340.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45.

¹⁵ Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91-101.

¹⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸ Suzy Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991)