

ON ARTISTIC CAPITALISM

by gilles lipovetsky



GILLES LIPOVETSKY © SYLVAIN GRENOBLE

STATEMENT CONDUCTED
BY STÉPHANIE BUI

GILLES LIPOVETSKY
“L’Esthétisation du monde, vivre à
l’âge du capitalisme artiste”,
Gallimard, 2013

FRANK PERRIN
“Paparazzi! Photographes, Stars,
Artistes”, Centre Pompidou-Metz,
from February 22nd to June 9th, 2014

FOLLOWING THE RELEASE OF HIS NEW BOOK, “L’ESTHÉTISATION DU MONDE, VIVRE À L’ÂGE DU CAPITALISME ARTISTE”, WE MET WITH FRENCH PHILOSOPHER GILLES LIPOVETSKY AND FRANK PERRIN, FOUNDER OF CRASH MAGAZINE AND AUTHOR OF THE ART PROJECT “POSTCAPITALISM,” TO DISCUSS THE NEW HYPERMODERN ORDER THAT HAS DEVELOPED ACROSS THE ENTIRE PLANET: A CAPITALISM BASED ON UNIVERSAL AESTHETICIZATION AND HYBRIDIZATION, MUCH LIKE THE FASHION SYSTEM. AND ALTHOUGH IT IS RIDDLED WITH TENSIONS AND PARADOXES, THIS ARTISTIC CAPITALISM IS NOT THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL, AND IT MAY NOW BE READY TO IMPLEMENT AN AESTHETIC POLICY DESIGNED TO USHER IN A NEW ERA OF QUALITY. NO LONGER CONTENT TO MERELY CONSUME, TRANSAESTHETIC CONSUMERS ARE NOW DEMANDING THEIR RIGHT TO CREATE. SO LET’S LIBERATE OUR CREATIVE ENERGY AND FINALLY SET FOOT INTO OUR OWN ERA!

The first phase of productivist capitalism has given way to new means of production that you term artistic capitalism in your book. "The aesthetic has become an item of mass consumption as well as a democratic way of life," meaning that we consume styles rather than goods. We are constantly consuming fashion. How did we get here?

We often portray capitalism as a system that ignores the aesthetic dimension, saying that it has only one end: generating profit. When we look only at the details, this holds true; however, since the middle of the 19th century certain segments of capitalism have indeed integrated this aesthetic dimension. Artistic capitalism, at least in its nascent form, begins in the 19th century with unprecedented forms like the Bon Marché department store. Aristide Boucicault inspired Emile Zola to write "The Ladies' Paradise" for a reason: he had the genius to totally transform retail commerce. In place of the traditional depot where merchandise was stored away until purchased, Boucicault decided to showcase this merchandise. He made a conscious decision to actively stimulate desire. He brought in Gustave Eiffel to design storefront windows, glass canopies and lighting. He produced an extraordinary emotional sensation that would be imitated all over the world with the rise of department stores.

There are fragments in Walter Benjamin where he talks about storefront windows in Paris, notably in relation to a point that Marx had already made: the diabolic aspect that merchandise takes on as soon as it is placed under a spotlight. There's something incomprehensible about it: merchandise is packaged in its presentation and then becomes diabolical!

Marx uses an especially interesting expression here: he talks about the phantasmagoria of merchandise in his famous text on commodity fetishism. Merchandise produces dreams.

“IT WAS WARHOL WHO SENT OUT THE RALLYING CRY BY SAYING, ‘I AM A BUSINESS ARTIST’, IMPLYING THAT ART IS BUSINESS AND BUSINESS IS ART.”

When merchandise is exhibited, spotlighted and showcased: it changes everything.

Yes, it does change everything. And this phenomenon continued to develop, notably through the 1880s in the United States with the introduction of national marketing campaigns, the incredible poster designers who turned into full-fledged artists, and finally with the emergence of packaging, which created a whole mise-en-scène around products. So in today's world, we wouldn't buy a mere product. We did in the past, when we used to buy in bulk, as we said. But instead, today we purchase an entire mise-en-scène, which has become such an essential way to stimulate confidence, desire and merchandise prestige. The groundwork for all this was laid in the 19th century, but on a much smaller scale since it was only the beginning of mass consumption. The process would continue to develop with the birth of film in 1895. Film, as Malraux said, is an art form and an industry. And Hollywood was an absolutely monumental development; in fact, the people who made the film industry we know today were all corporate executives. Of course there were avant-garde filmmakers, but they were confined to a small, little known branch of film.

Film is first and foremost a mechanization of the image, set to an industrial rhythm.

That's true on a technical level; but on the global level, film is a producer of emotions. By means of the image, film manufactures emotions; therein lies the reason behind its tremendous success, which made it the top form of entertainment for the working classes up until 1950. With its highly codified genres and its other great invention, the star, film generated incredible fantasies and passions! In a way it's the only art form of the 20th century that succeeded in captivated the masses. Though there was certainly avant-garde art, it was primarily directed at an extremely exclusive group that absolutely despised the world of money, business and fashion. The historical avant-garde was diametrically opposed to these arenas, and that's where we will see what has

"THE CEO OF RYANAIR HAS DONE MORE TO CHANGE THE WORLD WE LIVE IN NOW THAN THE BAUHAUS DESIGNERS."

changed today. But these are the major developments that marked the first stage of artistic capitalism. Later, the phenomenon would continue throughout the postwar Glorious Thirty, when design annexed nearly every object on the planet.

Then there was the great Pop ecstasy: Pop Art firmly ensconced this glorification of consumerism. Precisely. And this is because the 1950s saw the birth of a mass consumerism intent on conquering every social class, not just the middle class: everyone will have a shower, a television, a car, and an annual vacation. Our conception of Andy Warhol is very close to Debord's society of the spectacle. It's the same era. But today we have arrived at the third phase of artistic capitalism. What is it? It's the gigantic expansion of a now planetary phenomenon, in which worlds that were once totally separated have now been combined. This is an extremely important point for understanding what is happening today. Modernity was disjunctive: art was separated from business, fashion was separated from art, sport was separated from art, food was separated from art, health care was separated from beauty care... Each one had its own compartmentalized, rational world, existing independently of the next. But in the hypermodern world we see a preference for conjunction over disjunction. What was once kept separate is now combined. This is what I call our contemporary hybridization. Examples of this abound: Louis Vuitton can now commission Takashi Murakami or Stephen Sprouse – an unthinkable collaboration for the traditional avant-garde! In the past, these were separate mental worlds. At best they could maybe take inspiration from each other. But today things are different. And it was Warhol who sent out the rallying cry by saying, "I am a business artist," implying that art is business and business is art. He goes one step farther than Duchamp. When Duchamp exhibits a urinal – an unheard-of act of provocation – it remains in the realm of art, even if he's making art with an object that is not art. It remains a non-mercantile work. Warhol would use images that are entirely mercantile and commercial to produce a work of art. And that changes everything, because the art world had built itself up in opposition to the market, money and the entire world of commerce. Artistic capitalism is the system that systematically integrates the aesthetic dimension into every aspect of consumerism, including products, images, services... I can't think of anything that escapes that system.

Nothing, not even coffee now that we have Nespresso...

Exactly. It's a completely mind-blowing aestheticization of coffee that even comes complete with a Hollywood star, George Clooney, and luxury boutiques...

So we can see that it's a global project that leaves no stone unturned. It seems like there's an agenda mandating that everything has to be upscale, even the most superfluous things. Coffee now has to be upscale. It has to look like gold. Everything is moving upmarket.

This is indeed the current strategy of European and American brands for conquering low-cost markets that lack prestige. In France, if you want to sell low-cost products, you're bound to fail because someone else will do it classier than you. However, if you decide to market upscale goods, then you have a chance to grab a share of the market. This is what the Germans are doing with premium cars, and it's what we do in France with the luxury sector.

It's a new mythology that's being sold to us, a grand narrative.

Yes, but this mythology corresponds to a real transformation taking place in consumerism. Up until now, the taste for luxury was reserved for the rich. Class-based cultures stigmatized those who wanted to buy items belonging to another class or background.

Even in some of Sartre's writings, we sense a certain hatred for the proletarian who plays at being bourgeois and the bourgeois who plays at being proletarian. This wasn't a joke; this kind of identity

was extremely important. For those with little means, it was anathema to have any taste for luxury...

It was anathema because it was seen as an immoral act of wasting resources for anyone who was struggling to meet their basic needs. That was the thinking. It's like the gambler who loses everything and then can't pay for the kids to go to school. Human vanity leads to peril. There was this idea that people had to know their place and stay there. Our world is no longer like that by any means. Today, the working classes know all about brand names, fashion and luxury thanks to advertising and magazines.

Which explains the boom in fashion accessories and the general accessorization of fashion... Whether or not they can afford it, young girls now buy four pairs of shoes and three handbags a year; whereas in the past women would only buy one or two handbags in their whole lives. A new worldview has emerged: a need for fashion that has fueled the market for accessories, which in turn have become accessible to every consumer.

This accessorization of fashion started off slowly in the 1960s with the decline of haute couture in favor of ready-to-wear. Brands were clever enough to use their aura of creativity to sell other products like perfumes and, since the 90s, leather goods. Clothing became secondary. This reflects what I call in the book the rise of the "transaesthetic consumer," which we find in every class. Today, every social class knows brand names, they all travel and they are all in the market

for aesthetic experiences. In the book I also argue against pessimistic accounts that see the development of modern society as a transition from the proletarianization of labor to the proletarianization of consumers. I think this analysis is wrong, even though parts of it may be true. Observation shows us that a taste for aesthetic experience has spread everywhere because people are traveling, listening to music nonstop, going to movies, watching TV, etc. We're actually living in an overaestheticized society, based on an overaestheticized form of consumption, because aesthetic experience produces emotions: it's an endless source of renewal and new feelings. In this respect, I don't see where it could ever end. What end could there possibly be to the renewal of forms and narratives? I don't see any.

In your opinion, our need for aesthetic experience increases as capitalism becomes more financial. We are living in hypermodern times and so, by definition, things develop at an exponential rate... How far can this development possibly go, especially if we consider ecological constraints?

I don't know. I understand the argument, but to me these questions just seem like big ideological debates. For now, I'm still seeing the expansion of artistic capitalism.

Degrowth is an interesting idea. But I've never seen humanity pursue progress by moving backward. Partisans of degrowth think we have arrived at a point of no return. I am all for thinking about a limit, but when and where?

What may happen ? Marx talked about ideologies, but the grand narratives may shift, move, split off... We may develop new mythologies.

We already know all about mythologies. What is happening here is obviously another form of hybridization: not a prohibitive antagonism between aesthetic and ecological concerns, but a combination. We're just going to make recycled or recyclable jeans.

You've talked about a form of "sustainable hyperconsumption" in relation to the unending quest for pleasure on the part of consumers. Are we required to seek pleasure today?

At most, I can become a radical ecologist and only buy certain products, but I'll still want to listen to 3,000 songs on my iPod, travel, watch TV shows... This is what we call aesthetic dissonance.

Ecology almost looks just like any other marketing tool.

The "anti-" refrain is a sophisticated strategy in an aestheticized world. We say we're against marketing ploys, but even this becomes another marketing ploy.

Producing organic clothing is commendable, but it's also a marketing tool like any other, maybe just a little less amoral. If the day comes when everyone wants organic products, then big companies will use this marketing tool as well. For now, it's not yet a general, global demand, otherwise every company would be doing it.

My new book tries to show some of the unexpected consequences of this situation: despite everything, the most mercantile and commercial system imaginable is still capable of producing multiple and varied forms of pleasure based on emotion and feeling. Capitalism has done a lot more than any of the major reformers in this respect! It's capitalism that makes it possible to change the way we live! The avant-gardes didn't change anything. They just changed our forms and the way things looked. When we look at the ideals of the avant-gardes and the Bauhaus, when we consider the fact that they planned to change the world, we realize that they didn't change anything at all. They left blueprints for change on a purely formal level... Only a dozen or so of their prototypes were ever produced on an industrial scale.

The CEO of Ryanair has done more to change the world we live in now than Bauhaus designers. It's paradoxical.

It's a huge paradox. It's the most commercial aspects of society that contribute to the aestheticization of the world. It's the market that fuels the expansion of this aestheticization. While aesthetics and aesthetic tastes have been around since Antiquity, they were always restricted to a very small fraction of the world. Today, aesthetic experience is open to absolutely everyone!

The thing I find interesting in your book is how you conceptualize what's happening in the world today and how you find a way to move beyond Warhol and Debord when thinking about capitalist production: Marx talks about the product, Warhol and Debord talk about the image of the product, but today we have outgrown all of these concepts. We're seeing a total "cosmeticization"...

It's more than that. "Cosmeticization" still sounds like Debord. I don't see any use in talking about manipulation. It's a word that carries a strong moral connotation. But what is really happening? Are moviegoers or music fans really being manipulated? What does it mean to manipulate people? The real innovation is capitalism's ability to incorporate the aesthetic dimension, to provide an emotional experience, like Apple. I agree with most of what you said: we have outgrown both products and images. Today it's emotion and feeling. It's something different...

"PEOPLE WANT TO DO THINGS, AND NOT JUST CONSUME."

Debord's thinking came out of a time when there was only one TV channel. Everything was controlled. With Warhol, the idea was for a nobody to go on TV and become a star. It's an outdated model.
Yes, it was a hierarchical model.

Now the system is multipolar: boutiques are everywhere, there are hundreds of TV channels, thousands of songs, new museums popping up all over the place, lines to get into every cultural institution...
We're living in a new kind of mental magma where beauty has covered nearly everything. Before Armelle Leturcq and I founded Crash, we were working in contemporary art with Blocnotes, an underground art review. We were mixing with people from all different backgrounds: fashion, music, etc. And that's how we got the idea to start a magazine. When we started thinking about a name – I had already read J. G. Ballard's novel, "Crash", which was later turned into a movie by David Cronenberg in 1996 – and I had this idea that Crash was a word that everyone would understand. And, in fact, a crash is two things colliding and blending together. And what did we want to talk about in Crash? Everything: fashion, ideas, design, architecture. Because the same people were buying both fashion and music.

The same people who came from this new social fabric and contemporary magma.
The word "magma" can cause confusion, since there is a logic behind hybridization: the logic of fashion. In actuality, everything produced today now obeys the logic of fashion and seduction. The word "magma" loses this sense of there being a logic and a system, so I prefer your other word: "crash"!

You stress the fact that the logic of this system is based on tensions and paradoxes...
With this system, we produce both great things and trash. Capital is capable of producing quality. The big problems are the contradictions between the creative and financial departments within companies. Financial departments are risk averse. But history shows us that there's an extra return on innovation and creativity, on beauty and everything that reaches people on an emotional level. No need to invent a countersystem. There isn't one. Tensions exist within the system and so what we need to do is promote the industries that produce quality. This is especially true in urban planning, where there is a lot of room to talk about the limits of artistic capitalism.

It's like what Mike Davis said about Dubai in "the Dubai stage of capitalism": everything, even an escalator, has to be "number one."
Yes, Mike Davis. His book on Dubai is very good... and in place of "number one," I gave him a concept: the hyperspectacle, because we haven't invalidated what Debord said, but instead we have moved on to another level. Take cruise ships, for example. It's incredible: every year a new cruise liner becomes the biggest in the world! The most recent one is 300 meters tall and carries 6,000 people!

I think this is where we see the limit of this grand project. And we're starting to feel it today in places like Hong Kong, São Paulo and elsewhere: hotels and stores and everything are all standardized... It's what Henry Miller called the "air-conditioned nightmare"...
It's true, because, in general, that's how our new urban spaces are organized. It's not ugly, but everything looks the same. It's one of the limits of artistic capitalism. With the same capital, I think we can do different things. This is where we have a role to play. It's not just about money. We're making things with absolutely no taste. Today, the challenge is no longer ugliness, but a form of neo-standardization, something totally insipid. We need to rehabilitate a sense of charm, a kind of magic emanating from places, something other than the gated communities in the United States – something that could be of particular interest to you as a photographer... This standardization is the failure of artistic capitalism.

But you also talk about the positive aspects of artistic capitalism.
Most notably the democratization of the desire to create. Everyone wants to travel, take pictures, shoot videos, etc. Everyone is The Artist! It's the other end of Debord's analysis of the society of the spectacle as a society built on alienation or, in other words, passivity. Now it's the exact opposite. People want to do things, not just consume. We're much more lenient in our quality standards for creativity. For example, publishing houses are always drowning in new manuscripts!

While writing is supposed to be difficult! So the desire to do something is definitely there. Artistic capitalism is not just about consuming aesthetic and emotional products; it also generates a desire to do things. On the one hand, this logic serves to fuel competition; on the other hand, it fuels creativity, enjoyment and pleasure. There are contradictions everywhere... margins to play with.

In your opinion, the biggest challenge of artistic capitalism is to improve both quality of life and quality in general, since the challenge of quantity is already behind us.
Yes, because the meaning of consumerism is not the meaning of life. Life is not about consuming. That's why my new book refuses to demonize: the paradoxes never end. We have this system that's dead set on selling and commercializing everything; at the same time, more people than ever before now want to create things on their own. There's an irony here. In pre-mercantile

"AESTHETIC TASTES ARE NOT NATURAL. WE HAVE TO TAKE A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE HERE: IT'S THE SUPPLY OF BEAUTY THAT CREATES THE DEMAND FOR BEAUTY AND AESTHETIC TASTES."

"WHETHER WE'RE TALKING ABOUT MOVIES OR ADS, WE HAVE A HYBRID ART THAT IS BOTH PRODUCT AND ART-WORK; IT'S A COMMERCIAL ART, BUT AN ART ADDRESSED TO THE ENTIRE WORLD."

times when capitalism was still very small, when it didn't have an impact on people's lives, no one was creative, no one wanted to be an artist in the fields or country! Today, when we're all trained to be obsessive consumers, people are now starting to demand even more! People still want to consume, but they also want to do more than that.

It's interesting because we could think like Malthus: as capitalism develops, the world gets poorer.

Paradoxically, as capitalism grows and expands, creativity and expression also increase.

Exactly. It's true that there are more and more commercial strategies and competition, but at the same time we're seeing the development of aesthetic consumers who want to make something beautiful out of their lives. These consumers make art and they also do volunteer work... It's not everyone, but it's a lot of people. There are thirteen million volunteers in France. And yet, we're living in an artistic capitalism whose only goal is supposed to be private satisfaction! As society becomes more individualistic, people have a stronger desire to get involved in things that offer no return, or a kind of return that the market can't provide: the pleasure of helping others, of doing something meaningful, of being useful. That's a pleasure the market can't give them. It hasn't managed to deracinate this desire from the human heart. And that's good news. Capitalism does generate horrors; but, at the same time, it is capable of offering everyone an incalculable number of aesthetic and emotional experiences that were once the sole privilege of princes. Who had the right to enjoy music in the past? Today there are twenty million songs on YouTube and Deezer! We are oversaturated with things of beauty! And that's what creates this aesthetic desire. Aesthetic tastes are not natural. We have to take a Marxist perspective here: it's the supply of beauty that creates the demand for beauty and aesthetic tastes. Marx understood this perfectly.

Capital is the fuel that makes it possible to do new things, just like advertising makes it possible to sell something aesthetic like a magazine at an affordable price. Without advertising, there would be no magazine. So is advertising evil? No.

We shouldn't demonize advertising. Without it, not only would your nice magazine disappear, but so would all the press along with it! We can criticize advertising as much as anything else, but we shouldn't demonize it. It's an instrument of democracy. There is no democracy without the press, and there is no press without advertising. There may be a very small, activist press, but no mass press.

We have to believe what people say. They are not alienated by this aestheticization of the world.

Yes, I agree. And that's why Debord's idea of a society of the spectacle based on the concept of alienation is so unsatisfying. His analysis states that society produces the spectacle, meaning a set of images that people consume though they don't produce them. For Debord, people live something other than their own lives. However, things aren't so simple, and the problem lies in the fact that the commercial offer of artistic capitalism is so dispersed: there are no longer any absolute criteria for saying what is beautiful and what isn't. We have regained a kind of freedom. In the past fashion was authoritative because everything was dictated by haute couture; it was a hierarchical system. Just a dozen or so fashion houses set the fashion for each season across the entire planet. Today, there are innumerable aesthetic houses and brands that all do entirely different things... Maison Margiela is a wholly different aesthetic world than Chanel! What should we choose? That's where Debord's spectator regains a share of independence, because there are no longer any imposed criteria, no more norms...

And nobody is no longer wearing the same brand head to toe. We all mix our clothing, even if there is still a certain code.

There are so many different influences and styles that it's hard to see how we're being manipulated! Women have been buying whatever they want, wearing whatever they want and presenting themselves however they want for some time now, so it's hard to say that there is any manipulation going on here! I'm not convinced by the concept of alienation. We need to continue to think critically – because there are many points in need of criticism – but not in terms of alienation or manipulation. I think the paradox comes from the fact that people have gained an enormous freedom and an immense amount of personal choices to make in everyday life. People are free to mix up codes and genres. In the era of the bourgeoisie, people had to dress in a specific way and go to the opera, etc. But, today, we have this new freedom that's rooted in the mechanization of the world: the fewer strict, regulated codes there are for individual behavior, the more life on the global level looks like a system. We are forced to buy things. You can buy whatever you want, but it's difficult to cut out buying altogether. There is an increasingly powerful mercantile system, because there are more and more things and needs that simply didn't exist before. There is a lot of pressure to buy more and more.

Do you think this tendency will continue?

These two logics will continue to go hand in hand: we'll continue to gain more independence in one sense, while we have less in another sense. And it's plain to see: the poor are also consumers. They suffer because they simply can't keep up, even if it just means buying a coffee or going to the movies...

And so they feel this global pressure even more intensely.

The problem is that we can't really do anything anymore today without paying for it... With every step you take, you have to buy something. So what can we do? It's clear that this merchandization has spread its tentacles everywhere. We no longer live in the same world as Rousseau, when people spent their days dreaming away by the lake...

You've said that we now fight against downtime...

Because consumerism's success lies in the fact that it completely fills our downtime. There can be no downtime under consumerism. It proves Pascal right: consuming is a lifetime occupation. Today, we're racing to achieve eternal youth on the aesthetic level, but on an even more profound level, we no longer want any downtime. A day without pleasure is a wasted day! Pleasure has now become a universal right. Consumerism provides small pleasures that makes us feel like we're fighting against habits and routine. Studies have shown that shopping is when women give themselves pleasure. It's a time of relaxation rather than alienation. At the same time, the two moments mix and coincide, though it's not as clear-cut and mechanical as it may seem.

It's a new era. We can no longer think about our world in the same regressive critical terms. There is a dual reality. You provide the kind of analysis we've needed for a long time. Previous readings of this phenomenon, like the Situationist analysis, remained stuck on questions of image, on things that were permanently opposed, on the irreducible question of alienation...

The new book avoids demonizing anything. If we had decided to focus on financial criteria, we may have ended up with this kind of reading. Our goal is not to say that this is the absolute truth of the world, etc. We simply presented one aspect of capitalism, and it's mostly positive. The major failure of artistic capitalism is visible in urban planning.

We haven't yet found the architecture or the environment for our world. A pair of architects who I think have a lot of important things to say on this question are Lacaton & Vassal. They take existing sites and simply improve them. Instead of constructing new buildings from scratch, I think we have to take what is already there and magnify it, amplify it, restore a sense of quality, and stop trying to produce new models without end, because it doesn't work.

Other areas have no problem combining extremely different things. Take advertising: there is the best and the worst. There is also a lot more creativity in TV shows today than there was in the past. Film is an interesting example, because, in general, people only know a tiny fraction of what's being made, only about ten or so blockbusters a year. France produces more than 200 movies a year, Hollywood about 800 and Bollywood makes about 1000 a year, as does the whole of Europe. But what do people actually see? A tiny minority of movies manages to capture 80% of the audience share. The problem of artistic capitalism is that it's too creative! There is an overabundant offer that fights for a level of consumption that is actually in decline. To say that film is dying, as Jean-Luc Godard did, is stupid. There has never been so much creativity in the movie business, but we just don't see it! It pops up from time to time at Cannes... In Egypt and Iran, for example, some extremely creative films are being made with very few resources, but these aren't the kinds of films that get any major success. The problem with artistic capitalism is that it produces much more than it can possibly absorb: we're stuck in a logic of best sellers and the star system. Success generates more success, and the rest gets nothing.

For a time we thought the Internet might change things. But it didn't. It's the same thing in music. There are twenty million songs on YouTube, but people only actually hear a few thousand of them. The Internet will not change anything. A few studies have already observed this gap between a massive and diverse offer and a demand that's concentrated on an extraordinarily small number of books, movies, songs and even museums... It's a universal logic that's invading every single field of culture.

In our stagnant economy, I saw that the only three sectors seeing major growth last year were luxury goods, movies and art. And the public's interest in art is generally focused on a few blockbuster exhibitions and museums, as you might say...

Luxury goods are certainly seeing a lot of growth, but it's mostly coming from emerging countries. As for big exhibitions, they've drawn in so many people they've had to extend their hours into the night, but by no means does this point to any democratization of culture. All our studies agree: museum and opera attendance rates have not changed. This doesn't alter our arguments in the book; it just means that aesthetic forms persist because we have to master the codes. So there's a real limit on our capacity for democratization: there is a democratization of aesthetic tastes, but not all tastes. People like to travel, they like nice things, nice hotels, they go to Ikea, listen to music, but these are different tastes. Our purpose is not to pass judgment on people's tastes. Art is surviving, but that doesn't mean we should go in for any naive optimism: the artworks we think of as high art are still those that have what we call cultural capital. This simply shows the aestheticization of the world is not just an immense crowd of Bach lovers or something. My goal is to combat a certain aristocratic conception of culture.

As Baudelaire said, makeup is already art. And that's the right attitude. When we talk about artistic capitalism – this integration of art into the capitalist system – it's supposed to give us a

broader perspective on what art is, because art is more than just a masterpiece. Bad paintings are also art. Thinking that art can be reduced to creating masterpieces is an anthropologically false conception of artistic activity. Art involves manipulating forms in order to elicit an emotion, or an idea if you're a Hegelian. If you think of art in this way, your definition automatically becomes much broader and more inclusive.

Artistic capitalism invented a special kind of art that came into being for the first time. We can call this art, as I have in my previous books, the art of mass consumption. Unlike the religious, popular or avant-garde arts, which we could readily define, we can't completely define the arts of mass consumption like movies and music. These arts are addressed to the entire planet and they require no specific cultural background for their appreciation. You don't need to know anything about Christianity or Christian art to understand Titanic or Dallas! In some cases you may object that artistic capitalism produces merchandise and not art; but, in fact, it produces a kind of art that didn't exist before! Whether we're talking about movies or ads, we have a hybrid art that is both product and artwork; it's a commercial art, but an art addressed to the entire world. And for that reason, it's revolutionary. Until now, artists have only succeeded in revolutionizing forms and they were always confined to a tiny, exclusive milieu. With movies, we can change the entire world with a film that has no pretension of lasting forever.

It's the final abolition of the distinction between High and Low Art. What's interesting is that Pop Art abolished this distinction, but only within the confines of the gallery. Now, it's not just in galleries where High and Low Art are combined, but on iPods and everywhere.

Capitalism doesn't care about High or Low Art, it wants to sell. It takes elements from masterpieces and throws them into the commercial melting pot. It created a unique phenomenon: an aesthetic individual who is constantly on the hunt for new sensations. This attitude was once reserved only for the rich; now it belongs to all of us. One interesting example is the tourist. We can criticize tourism for a lot of reasons, but at the same time tourism is nothing but an aesthetic way of looking at things: tourists want to see and appreciate things. We shouldn't be too condescending here. During their trips, tourists have purely aesthetic experiences! They are where they are for no reason at all; their presence has no utilitarian end! Talk about the lifestyles of the rich and idle! Every year, there are 900 million tourists traveling around the world. In twenty or thirty years, two billion more people will join the middle class. This means a potential three billion tourists. It's the biggest industry in the world.

There is this kind of dual reality, but at the same time we're not fooled by it. Personally I prefer Warhol to Rihanna; but it's great that Rihanna is there, because if there was only Warhol, things would get boring... And one doesn't preclude the other. It's a dual reality, an augmented reality where nobody confuses Warhol and Rihanna. And both coexist without any problem. In the cycle of humanity, in a kind of Hegelian way with his absolute mind, are we not arriving at the perfection of something with the progress of this artistic capitalism? Is your book not describing the foundation of an era marked by the complete victory of leisure and aesthetic experience? A victory that belongs less to an absolute mind than to an absolute aesthetics?

From a Hegelian point of view, that's exactly right. But if we were already there, then it would be over, something else would be in development. Soon there will be nine billion people, so we have some margins to work with. But what is going to happen? We're going to travel to space. We'll have to spend twenty million dollars to find our purely aesthetic experience... Hotels lost in the desert, under the sea... The quest for experiences... We can trust the market to provide us with new experiences... There is certainly a kind of vanity at play here. It's counterbalanced by the fact that a lot of people want to travel on their own terms, and not with organized tour groups. It's what we call post-tourism. And I'm not sounding any alarm bells because what I see here is an extraordinary desire to do things. Otherwise it would all be too perplexing; we'd be nothing but consumers. I try to find a lesson in it all: we need a kind of aesthetic policy that can galvanize human passions alongside our moral passions. Starting in schools, we need to promote more openness in order to promote quality. This kind of education will have a tremendous impact because consumers are the people who drive the economy. People are not just stupid consumers. We need to encourage creativity in our schools through music, dance, photography, video – there are so many possibilities. Particularly in France, we're suffering from this lack of artistic practice. We need to support and foster creativity, liberate the imagination of our teachers and professors so they can educate people to have tastes that aren't so standardized. It would be all the better for our economy. If we manage to export into foreign markets, it will be because of our creativity. But we need to give people the tools they need to succeed in this grand project of making life a work of art – to use a bit of an overblown expression. That's where we should build our "policy"; not a politician's policy, but a policy that gives meaning to our future. Our future will require more than justice – though it's true that we need to regulate capitalism – but we also have to change things in our educational system, especially because I think this is what people actually want. Artistic taste is a powerful thing: it gives pleasure. That's what we need to support. Education is the primary tool that helps shape our tastes. As a humanist culture, we are under an obligation to give people an opportunity to experience the arts. It's our collective project!

"CAPITALISM DOESN'T CARE ABOUT HIGH OR LOW ART, IT WANTS TO SELL. IT TAKES ELEMENTS FROM MASTERPIECES AND THROWS THEM INTO THE COMMERCIAL MELTING POT."