

**BLUFF IN THE NAME OF CULTURE**  
Jean Clair ("Culture Bars" No. 7-8)  
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**When I found this text among my old files, I decided to give it to you without hesitation.**

**read: it is important. It is very relevant. When spiritual culture is overshadowed by material, visual culture, the spirit is no longer needed. There is so much visuality that the eyes are dazzled, and the soul remains empty, exhausted. When civilization betrays spirituality, it begins to disappear. Which is what we see in this period of life.**

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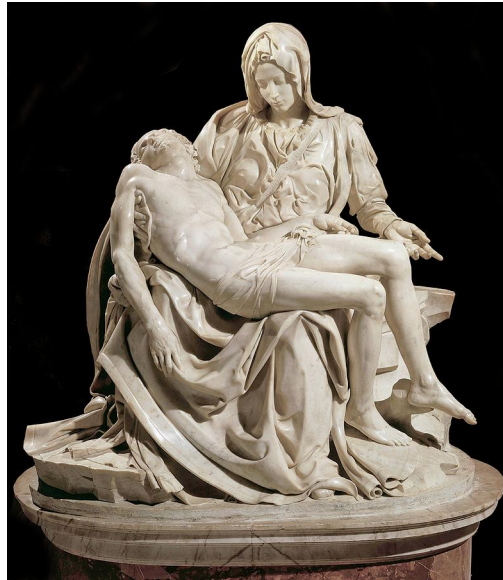
**To speak of great art is to propose a certain hierarchy, to compare. The opposition high-low art comes to mind, which has long been established in the terminology of criticism. It was prompted by the debates that flared up in the 19th century between ethnologists and sociologists. It was then that the civilized culture of whites and the primitive culture of colonized peoples were opposed.**

**This dichotomy took on a new, universally accepted meaning a couple of decades ago, when the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) organized the exhibition "High and Low" (1990): alongside classical, elite culture (painting, sculpture, and other works belonging to high culture), popular, "low" culture (comics, graffiti, caricatures, advertising, second-rate films, pop music) was exhibited - perhaps this was an attempt to bring the two opposites closer together?**

**Latin *verb* *anger* had two primary meanings: to (work) and to inhabit. Culture - as the ability to inhabit the world, to make it habitable. Culture - as the being (Dasein) that is here. But nevertheless, it was not it, but the cult that gave people the opportunity to inhabit the world.**

Culture is only a deviation from cult, its weakening expression. The gods, who inhabited (colere) a certain area, became its guardians, the "spirits of that place". And people, in turn, professed the cult of the deity who settled in their land. On the land, which they first cultivated and possessed, and then began to "sow" and nurture themselves. This primordial cult, closely related to the sacred, was called by Cicero *cultura animi* - "culturation of the spirit". This beautiful term, unfortunately, atrophied and remained only "culture". However, in the works of St. Ambrose we still find *cultura animi*...

The original sacred meaning of "culture" has gradually faded. With it, the meanings of inhabiting and cultivating have also faded - we have long since ceased to inhabit the world, and there are no longer any true farmers. We have ceased to cultivate the spirit. In Thomas Mann's novel "Doctor Faust," Mephistopheles says: "Since culture separated from cult to take its place, it has become nothing." Today, we perceive culture as a human cult that we created when the gods moved away from us. This is idolatry, the worship of man.



Michelangelo. La Pietà

In Mann's novel, the devil, with an ironic smile, states: the culture that people exalt is waste, not even remnants, but simply garbage. Thomas Mann was a Protestant, but Thomas Stearns Eliot, a Catholic, expressed a similar thought in the same 1945: "No culture has begun or developed without connections with religion." Secular culture and its works - literature, art, music - exalting only man, have found themselves at a dead end.

What is the meaning of a museum, a historical heritage, a collection of works of art, and everything that glorifies itself in one way or another today – that constant, increasingly exhausting effort to attract attention? The more I think about it, the older I get, having served in museums for four decades, the more I am inclined to answer – none.

Walter Benjamin has spoken of the aura of a work of art and its loss in the age of technical reproduction: only a work that is here and now, *hic et nunc*, - one that can neither be moved from place to place nor reproduced - retains an aura of sacredness. This philosopher's thought brings him closer to the late 19th century anthropologists, such as Rudolf Otto, who studied numinous experiences, that is, manifestations of deities (*numen* and *numina*) in various places. Today, such places no longer exist - the aura has disappeared, and in our profane museums there is neither *numen* nor *numina*. Only a pile of ruins after the division of the earth.

And museums, what do they look like? The future Museum of Contemporary Art in Metz resembles the Buffalo Grill restaurants scattered along the highways. Today, the construction of museums is a real headache for architects. What are they for? Everyone knows why temples are needed. Schools or stations are the same. But what is the point of a collection of objects torn from their original space and arranged in any way, without thinking too much about their meaning? The subtle, wise Paul Valéry described museums as follows: "Hard work... barbarism... inhumanity... disorderliness..." We know what a cathedral is - its purpose determined the shape of the building down to the smallest detail.



Picasso. Man

First, the orientation of the building in relation to the cardinal points was chosen – not by chance, but with the help of geomancy, as old as humanity itself. Then everything else appeared: the cloister, as if closing the building in itself and separating it from everything worldly, the ambulatory, the transept, the portico welcoming the catechumens, and under the altar – the crypt, the martyrium, in the center of which the remains of the saint rest. Later, believing that the rays of Enlightenment would dispel superstition and overcome social inequality, people turned to ancient buildings again. They were transformed into art galleries, reminiscent of the salons of Dutch art dealers – the paintings were hung in random order, in three or four rows overlapping each other.

In America, the thirst for knowledge became the impetus for building replicas of Greek temples dedicated to classical culture, the new god of the young democracy. And what should a museum of low art look like today?

As a railway station, a boarding hall, an engine room, an ambulatory, a waiting room, a gigantic shopping mall, a refectory? Or perhaps as a concrete bunker accumulating works like a Basel Schaulager? In order to find the right form, one should first understand the meaning of a collection of objects that have lost their originality and, in fact, no longer have any power.

From cult to culture, from culture to culturalness, from images of deities to art simulacra, from works of art to waste... This is how we gradually, over the course of about forty years, descended to the level of culturalness: cultural business, cultural goods, cultural holidays. And yet we were quite high up – maybe not in high culture, and we were still looking for God or his transcendent substitute, meaning, maybe even salvation. In any case, we believed in survival. Having lost ties with religion and freed from the duty to provide meaning, culture was to become the highest entertainment for people.

Alas!

We have been thrown down to earth, where we are free-spirited but still crawling, enslaved by the tyranny of technology and fed by promises of ever longer old age, even though we cringe from the first

The flu virus that has occurred. The stage of culture is also coming to an end - we will soon reach the level of outcasts or, in Thomas Mann's words, "waste". Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Jan Fabre, Serrano with his "Christ of the Dung" convince us of this, and with them the usual companion of excrement, its odorless counterpart - gold, that is, speculation, art fairs, auctions full of scandals, excesses and obscenities. As if we hear a daily litany - "corporate culture", "culture of conflict", "culture of social relations", even "culture of the football field", as if in this way we could hide the meaningless emptiness that has opened up. The word culture, repeated hundreds of times a day - is just a habit, an expression of community, group or gang, a passive reaction, a last flicker of sympathies or antipathies, an involuntary muscle twitch. In the past, culture meant the pursuit of universality; today, all that remains of it is an involuntary gesture or word, salivation or satisfaction caused by a conditioned reflex.

For an oral society, culture helped to seek knowledge and even to understand what is unknown, what lies beyond words and actions. And the breakthrough of our "culture" testifies that true culture is ending up withering, evaporating, and devaluing. Low culture has long since swallowed the remnants of high culture. A great example of this is the television channel "Arte", which on Easter Monday offered its viewers a modern production (desecration) of Handel's "Messiah", a wonderful work of sacred music: Christ, who has become a financier, is judged by the praetor, who in turn embodies the company's administrative board. Later, left alone in a hotel room, Christ commits suicide - this scene is "framed" by two foot-washing rituals.



Vanga's "spells" are ingrained

The false religion of culture and the poor substitute for a sanctuary dedicated to the cult of man, the museum of modern art, were predicted by Malraux, who, in his works on the philosophy of art published in the first years after the war, developed the concept of the imaginary museum. What was demanded of culture was what only a cult could give. According to Malraux's philosophy of art, art is the worship of the dead - the black-clad women of Teruel mourning the murdered Republicans, or the women of the Auvergne mountains weeping for the fallen partisans. Lazarus is his best book. This great

The writer's cultural policy led to France's spiritual catastrophe, which occurred in the previously mentioned stages: from cult to culture, from culture to "culturedness."

Malraux saw in art the last opportunity to approach the sacredness lost with the death of the gods, and argued that only after the death of the gods can art fully reveal itself (see the second volume of the trilogy "Metamorphosis of the Gods", "The Unreal"). Such Hegelianism applied to the world of forms allows us to interpret human history in a teleological aspect – art becomes, if not the Second Coming, then at least a profane substitute for the Last Judgment, based on creation.

What is the absolute work of art in Malraux's chain of metamorphoses, in which ancient sculptures of gods are transformed into pure forms of modern art? Certainly not some unknown masterpiece by Balzac or a metaphysical drama. These are the simple mockeries that abound today: Picasso's signature becomes a trademark, a flawed reflection of modern genius, which helps to sell Citroën cars; the Louvre Museum gives up its name and rents its collections to a state in which slavery triumphs. Malraux's imaginary museum, which brings together works of all times and all religions, freed from the obligation to illustrate faith, does not glorify human genius - rather, it mocks it, creating the conditions for the transformation of works of art into mere commodities. Malraux's chain of metamorphoses ends not with the glory of human creation, but with filthy waste.

Subprime lending, securitization of credit, "Ponzi scheme"<sup>1</sup> – these terms, unknown only yesterday, flash in the press like signs testifying to the catastrophic times we live in. The mystical inscription "Numbered, weighed, divided" (Mane, thecel, phares)<sup>2</sup> that appeared on the wall of the Babylonian palace during a feast was interpreted by the prophet Daniel as words announcing the collapse of the empire.

Its unexpected collapse was caused by endless feasts and excessive waste of wealth. The current crisis also arose from unrestrained financial greed. Another important similarity is the desecration of sacred things: it is very obvious in the biblical episode (the profanation of the holy chalices), but, upon closer inspection, it is also visible in today's context, because objects previously used for cult purposes have become cultural property, they can be exhibited not only as aesthetic objects, but also put into circulation, speculated on as commercial goods.

A work of contemporary art is advertised and sold like any other object. For example, a calf – imagine its carcass, cut lengthwise into two parts and immersed in a bath of formalin. Let's say this object of interest has an author and suddenly turns into a work of art. So it needs to be "released" into the art market. How to do that? How to "create value" out of nothing and sell one copy for several million euros? And also repeat this business, if possible, with other copies. Who will give credit, who will believe in the success of the work, who will dare to invest?

Examples of how to create value from nothing, using only financial manipulation, can be found in hedge funds and credit securitization. We mix a questionable credit with a few more reliable ones. We place a Damien Hirst work (formally a "carcass") next to a Joseph Beuys piece, or,

even better, next to Robert Morris, these are already accredited authors, with AAA or BBB ratings on the stock market and less risky than high-yield bonds. We present our work to several private galleries that understand the system well and have an attractive commercial "facade" - those that would be able to share the risk associated with accepting a credit of dubious value into their "stables". This core of initiates, including shareholders who finance the project, will provide the initial capital. The next step - we promise high profitability, i.e. from 20 to 40 percent. per sale.

Unlike the traditional art market, which is based on long-termism, this investment will probably pay off in a very short time, say, in about six months. In the event that no customer appears at auction, the gallery may even undertake to repurchase the work for the purchase price, increased only by a small amount of interest. Finally, it remains to crown our work and lay the cornerstone of this pyramid: with the help of some public institution, for example, a museum (similarly, the national bank of a country ensures the issuance of money with its gold reserves), we organize an exhibition of the artist, the costs of which are covered by the gallery or group of galleries supporting the artist. The historical heritage of the museum, like the gold reserves of the national bank, ensures the value of the newcomer. For example, the value of the works of Jan Fabre exhibited in the Louvre is guaranteed by their similarity to primitive altars, and the painting of the mysterious cinema3 becomes especially valuable due to its proximity to the Mona Lisa.

Of course, in this process, the concept of "value" does not mean aesthetic value, which takes time to unfold, so the work should be evaluated as a "financial performance" based on the principles of ephemerality, not aesthetic criticism. As in the Ponzi scheme, the one who fails to get rid of the work in time, i.e. resell it, loses. The last one loses everything.

The sudden and severe crisis forces us to wonder, whether we like it or not, about the meaning of the countless products of our economy, from toothpaste to SUVs, which are being produced at a frantic pace. While asking ourselves what the nature, function and meaning of these objects are, we cannot help but think about works of art - what is the meaning of a work of art in a mercantile society that expects innovation from art, or, as they used to call it, the "avant-garde", similar to the automotive sector or the ice cream industry?

The vocabulary used by the intangible economy ("intangible assets without physical weight," management of "intellectual property" or "cognitive capital," etc.) conveys a certain Platonic nostalgia: above the real bodies of the real economy hovers a disembodied image of virtual exchange, a stray from the world of Ideas.

It is here that art, great Art, which emerged from high culture, can testify to the meaningfulness of the crisis. Because it does not produce ideas, does not generate electronic transactions, does not create virtual values - art creates material, tangible, substantial objects. And these objects do not belong to intellectual property or cognitive capital, but to spiritual capital. This term does not exist in the terminology of the intangible economy.

And it is precisely this that makes the difference. What will remain of a contemporary work of art if we discard the accreditation procedures, the transactions, the creation of added value – all that makes it a contemporary work of art?

Babylon fell not only because of its wealth, but also because objects intended for religious purposes lost their original purpose and became a source of profit. The empire's downfall was caused by the greed and sacrilege of the feasters, who poured wine into cups stolen from the temple in Jerusalem.

You will ask me mockingly – “You are probably suggesting a return to the cult?” Yes, but in a clearly defined sense. Baudelaire said that the cult of images was his “great, sole, primitive passion.” He was not talking about visual culture, but about cult.

The cult he attributed to Rubens, Delacroix and others is not the worship of man, but an attempt, through a work of human hands, to touch the infinite, which, according to the poet, approaches the edge of divine eternity, writhes and dies. Such a cult is as demanding as the commandments for believers - it is not tempted by the entertainments provided by culture and the vain culture.

I will repeat my question: why do we need our museums? What is their meaning? Will we be more intelligent than those Iroquois who, a few years ago, managed to get a museum to return their masks to them instead of displaying them because they are not intended for the eyes of ordinary laypeople? Will we feel further advanced than primitive peoples?

For example, the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, which strives for "cultural dialogue" often to the detriment of culture, opposes the desire of the people of Vanuatu and the Aboriginal people of Australia not to exhibit objects that these people do not consider to be "works of art" and want to reclaim them.

Will we appear less subtle than the Israelis who opened a prayer room next to the exhibition hall at the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem? Less humane than the visitors to the Ethnology Museum in Mexico City who asked permission to pray near some exhibits? Or will we, calling ourselves “educated,” “enlightened,” continue to auction off objects that have been considered religious for centuries so that we can later exhibit them in future museums?

The descent from high culture to low culture in the Western world has another counterpart - it is the story of the descent into hell.

**Translated by Jurgita POČIŪTĖ.**

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**About the author: Jean Clair (b. 1940) is a French art historian and critic, former long-time director of the Picasso Museum in Paris, and since 2008 a member of the Académie française. Among his most famous works are texts on Balthus, Cartier-Bresson, Duchamp, and Giacometti. In his book “The Crisis of Museums” (Malaise dans les musées), published in France in 2008, Clair, who does not shy away from polemics and sharp words and is often called one of the most prominent European intellectuals, compellingly describes the “sick” contemporary culture that has turned museums into “amusement parks” and demands the greatest possible**

**profit and as soon as possible. In this article, the art critic once again returns to a topic that is important to him - he examines the void of meaning that has opened up in contemporary culture.**

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1 A "Ponzi scheme," named after the fraudster Charles Ponzi, is a fraudulent investment system in which investors are offered abnormally high returns, which are paid out of the money of subsequent investors rather than from actual stock trading profits. This is what is known as a pyramid scheme.

2 "Numbered, weighed, divided"—mystical words that appeared on the wall of the Babylonian palace during a feast. Their meaning was explained to King Belshazzar by the prophet Daniel. The book of Daniel records that on that very night, Babylon was captured by the Medes and Persians.

3 Yan Pei Ming is a Chinese artist whose painting "The Funeral of Mona Lisa" was exhibited at the Louvre from February 12 to May 18, 2009 (author's note).

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