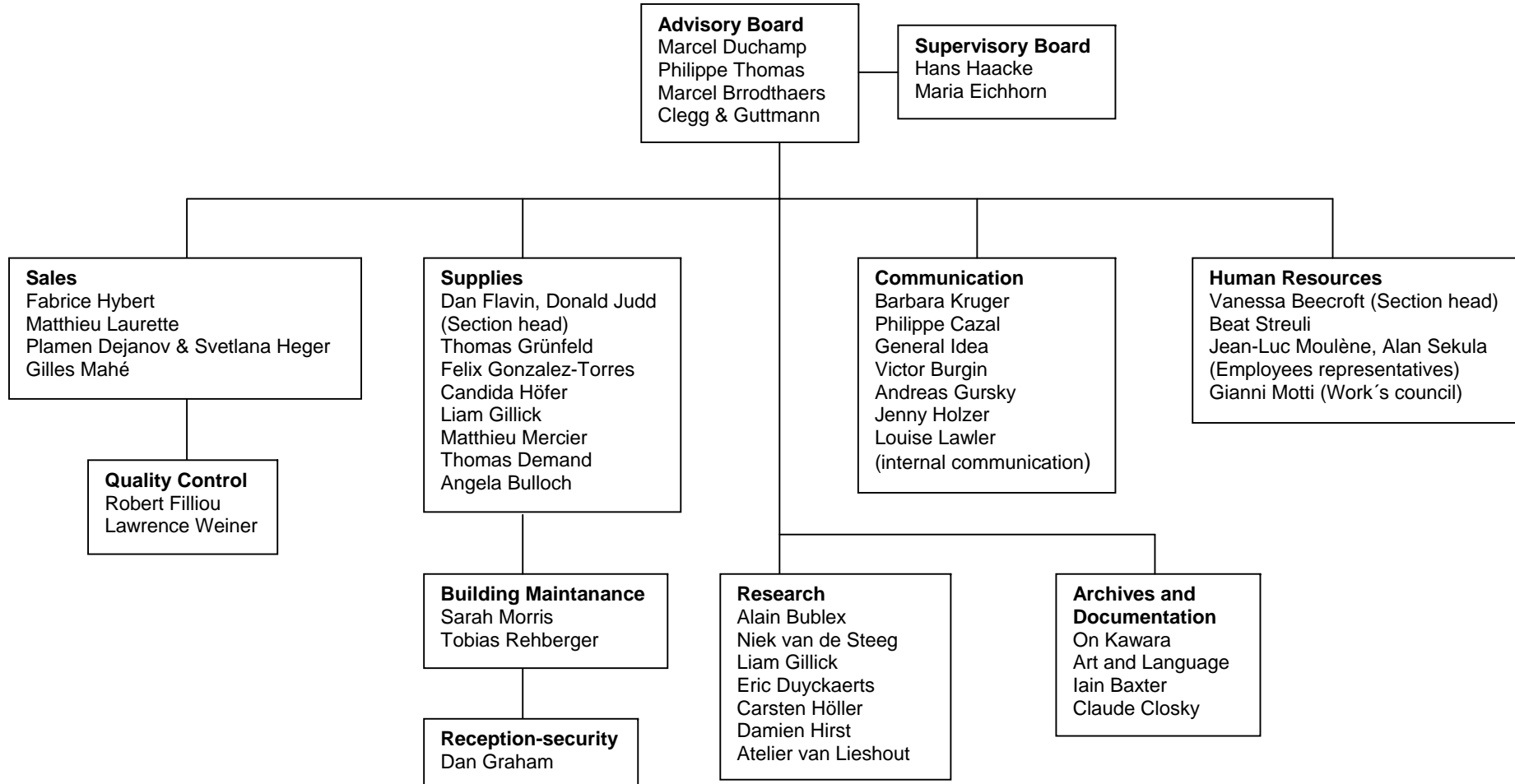


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Soft Office (Fetishism-Capitalism-Art)

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Fig. 1: Flow chart



1 The office museum

summary: log of a crossed dematerialization (art/economics)

- 1.1 proliferating dematerialization.** Let's consider that art in the twentieth century underwent a transformation paralleling economics; in other words, an increase in the weight of administrative activity within production itself and an explosion of service activities (cf. C.01.). A general phenomenon of *tertiarization*, presented as an irreversible tendency towards the *dematerialization of activity*. This tendency was first formulated by the economist, long after Adam Smith, who, in the 18th century, had already spoken of the service as "that which perishes at the very moment it is rendered"¹. Then followed the art critic (Lucy Lippard) who, at the close of the 1960's, proclaimed the dematerialization of the art object as a new horizon of creation. In both cases, it is a matter of virtuality, precariousness, the end of the object (and the work it implied). A heavy trend towards immateriality.
- Now the paradox: the material inventory of these two purportedly exterminating movements reveals that objects have tended to increase rather than diminish. More than ever, the merchandise evacuated (not from the economic reality but solely from the visual field -a point we'll come back to) serves as the decor for activity, which becomes the business firm's object (tertiary and artistic) and spreads materially. Forms, colors, and messages, act as new vectors of identity that define a tertiary style that ranges from architecture to communication to design. It doesn't mean fewer objects, but less raw material and more finished objects. Dematerialization? One would swear that the case is the very opposite: the reification of activity.
- 1.2 zero productivity:** the dawn of the tertiary poses new problems for management. By definition, the intangibility of services implies stalled productivity, quality that is hard to evaluate and feeble technical progress. The capital of time-object is no longer relevant. How to better the output of a product whose life span is equal to the time of its fabrication and for whom the work furnished is in itself the final output? How to arrive at an overall evaluation of a service that depends directly on the individualization of a direct producer/consumer relation? Finally, the investment in capital goods is no longer the motor of profitability. Tough luck. In order not to stall the elementary mechanism of growth, a transfer will take place: the decor will reap the benefits of innovation. In the mid-twentieth century, the service boom is presented as a potential surpassing of the notions of productivity, quality, and technique. The same discourse holds true for art.
- 1.3 data base:** the tertiary model will rapidly center itself around procedures for handling information as tools to help in decision making. Whence the proliferation of documents, studies, diagrams, statistics, and the rise of functions such as technological or economic forecasting, documentation and archiving. At the same time, the artist also becomes a forecaster, compiling information on art and the world, to nourish his/her work. Between 1913 and 1915, Marcel Duchamp puts his painting career on hold to study literature, science and philosophy as an employee in the Saint-Genevieve Library. His decision already pertains to the service approach of the engineering or consulting type: gather knowledge, then handle it. In other words, "an intellectual stance taken against the manual servitude of the artist."² (MD)

2 Dramatically equivalent

summary: the to-and-fro between the office esthetic and art, and vice-versa

- 2.1 synchrony:** in the modern age, functionalist design simultaneously invades the headquarters of business firms, public spaces, and the home. From then on, tertiary forms of art could be the result of this esthetic invasion that is not the privilege of services alone.
- 2.2 anticipation.** Another (opposite) trend full of ambiguity: the business firm's borrowing of artworks that it recycles as decorations or emblems. Kinetic art, minimal art, the monochrome, and contemporary photography are perfectly assimilated by the context of big business. Is it pure chance, an esthetic choice, or rather because a part of creation precociously develops a formal coherence with tertiary activity? It is as if contemporary art, through visionary and/or subconscious mimeticism, had anticipated itself as the *ad hoc* decor of tertiary firms. It is a case of formal paronymy, as if the headquarters of the business firm had succeeded in rendering minimal sculpture inhabitable.
- 2.3 integration:** art (along with philosophy) lies within the definition of service activities from the very start³. It is even the artistic field, considered as the service activity *par excellence*, which serves as the model to envision the sector's specificity. The economist William Baumol goes so far as to adopt art as the paradigm of the absence of productivity in services. Tertiariation thus perhaps signals that economics becomes artistic in its entirety. The Society of the spectacle (Ltd.). What's more, capitalist (market) economy reproduces the methods

¹ Adam Smith, "Travail Productif et non productif", in *Recherches sur la nature et les causes de la richesse des nations*, Gallimard coll. Folio essais, Paris, 1990.

² cited in *Marcel Duchamp*, Hatje-Cantz editions, 2002

³ The economist A.G. Filscher writes, "For greater convenience, we will divide economic activity into three groups (...). The third is a vast ensemble of activities dedicated to providing "services", ranging from transportation to commerce, not to mention leisure, training, and the highest forms of artistic and philosophical creation". In *Economic Progress and Security*, 1945.

for valorizing art in the modern age emblematically: a powerful multiplying coefficient subject to fashion, discourse and subjective criteria of the image, identity, and confidence.

- 2.4 In the meantime, art remains a matter concerning the transformation of raw material (and thus remains linked to the secondary sector).

3 irregularities

summary: these sparkling objects of desire

- 3.1 **high-heeled standard:** it is no longer work-value that serves to measure the value of services, but "desire-value". The consumer's desire has replaced the time of production as the reference for determining prices: the supremacy of demand over offer.
But still:
- 3.1.1 the absence of a tangible object (merchandise) within the enterprise creates an erotic fascination for activity (cf. Lacan: the frustration felt towards the "lost", unattainable object, as the motor of the libido and the production of fantasy).
- 3.1.2 the manifest objects of tertiary activity -furniture, but also communication tools - then seem offered to the gaze as substitutes, signing the business firm's new identity (formally purified, professionally vague).
- 3.1.3 *Fetishes* therefore. Eroticism: one no longer possesses, one consumes. It is the fetishistic nature of the services (which intensifies and surpasses the Marxian "fetishization of merchandise") that compromised the forms of art. {*Stop. We'll look no further (neither in the etymology of servicius (the slave), nor in the homophonic association between the French language's services/sérvices (torture) or in the X-rated films that portray secretaries more often than strip-teasers.)*}
- 3.2 **bureauphilia.** Let us then consider the emblems of tertiary planning: carpeting, fluorescent tubes, the typewriter, the armchair, the desk, the potted plant, as well as the logos, signs, and sheets of paper with headings, etc., as products arising from the sublimation of industrial activity. Like *Objets d'art*. Very well: Dan Flavin's fluorescent tube sculptures, Donald Judd's plexiglass shelves. Very well: On Kawara's binders, Art & Language's storage systems, Hanne Darboven's diagrams, Victor Burgin's ads, Felix-Gonzalez Torres' stacks of paper, etc. Very well: Marcel Broodthaer's empty museum or Philip Thomas' agency, Guillaume Bijl's or Gilles Mahe's office environments... Beneath their purely functional exteriors, all these installations and sculptures possibly resound with the echo of a collective fascination for a tertiary activity with great erotic potential. More profoundly, in a movement that parallels economics, they act as substitutes for the repressed disappearance of painting and sculpture in the studio.
- 3.3 **case study:** Marcel Duchamp. A precursor, Marcel Duchamp experimented a way of working that was, from the very start, as administrative as it was productive, revealing an almost obsessive penchant for the logical structure of the tertiary. It is a positioning that is apparently more than just parodic, for within it can be discerned the ideal to be obtained: the artist as a provider of services. Few objects produced, but a proliferation of substitutes-samples managed in the most rational manner possible. Whence the stubborn attempts to have the roto-reliefs patented. Whence, the desire to edit a circumstantial report on the *Grand Verre* modeled after the "*Catalogue des Ames et Cycles de Saint-Etienne*". Whence, the *boîtes-en-valise*, genuine sales rep cases containing Duchamp's entire *œuvre* in miniature. This inspiration is not just functional, but *retinal* and plastic as well⁴. Whence the portraits of the artist as a member of the advisory board. Whence the obligation to crack the jackpot at the Monte-Carlo roulette wheel. Take the example of certain ready-mades...a urinal for group establishments, a hat rack, a dust cover for typewriters: office items.

4. Self-service

summary: non-critical, empty shell and model office

- 4.1 One can legitimately question the critical capacity of an art that formally replicates tertiary planning as was discussed in the first four sections. Easy: the denunciation of an economic situation, critical mimeticism. Distance. Structural Irony. Maybe. Besides, that's what sets capitalism apart: capitalist realism⁵ can't help but be ironic in the same way that socialist realism couldn't help but be propaganda. Too easy.
- 4.2 Contemporary art's frontal critique of capitalism polarized itself on industry, even through phenomena such as publicity, sales, and consumption. Very well: the external flows. Icons are borrowed from the internal flows of the tertiary without serious questioning:
- 4.2.1 because one can't recognize them
- 4.2.2 because one succumbs to the ambiguous seduction of decor (cf. 3.2).
- 4.2.3 one thus often faithfully represents the methods and esthetics of services in a discreetly parodic manner - neither comic, nor pornographic- as if it were not a matter of criticizing, but of paying tribute to the mechanism's efficiency and plastic beauty. Designate rather than express while maintaining a respectful distance: one doesn't really penetrate the altars of these fetishized offices. One touches with one's eyes.

⁴ sorry

⁵ Here intended not just in reference to Warhol or Richter, but to all the artists mentioned.

4.3 case study: Hans Haacke manifests this ambiguity in a certain way, in his deliberately "political" work (cf. 3.4.2.). For example, in a project for the Guggenheim Museum⁶, he commits himself to denouncing the real-estate monopoly of a New York magnate by presenting photographs of building facades accompanied by descriptive index cards and statistics tables. Visually it resembles the esthetics of a real estate agency. This critical study formally deployed within the museum (the outcome of which will be the exhibition's censoring), uses the very style of that which it denounces: rigor and the efficiency of marketing. As far as esthetics are concerned, the position is unclear: does he denounce the form he combats by pastiching it, or does he use it for its practical, demonstrative qualities, if not clearly its purely plastic seduction potential? Not simple.

5. Vanities

summary: the representation of the void as a critical proposition (and other strategies)

5.1 being and neon: if there is, in the end, a critique, it might be that it articulates itself around a representation of tertiary activity as a production of the void. Nothingness, pseudo-offices that produce nothing which can be transferred to the economy and which work in an autonomous manner. Celibate offices. Often, the absence of human representation reinforces this derisory vision of tertiary activity. To tell the truth, neither human presence nor activities, but a fascination for the reflexive diagram which denounces nothing except for the vacuity of what it represents.

5.2 With such an ambiguous mixture of philosophy, delightfulness, wealth, the representation of passing time (clocks), technical rigor, the quality of materials, and inscriptions emblematic of those found in painting, tertiary esthetics - much like 17th century vanities - maintains, a permanent ambiguity between fascination for the represented subject and its questioning through a more or less direct allusion to the activity's vacuousness.

5.3 play-time: the business firm emptied of its activity also represents one of the last possible spaces for fiction. Philip Thomas' agency "Ready-mades belong to everyone", offered its clients a role in the art world. Formally: poster ads, a potted plant, a leather armchair, a slogan: "Don't wait for tomorrow to become a part of history". It is a story that can also be understood here as a *scenario*. With regards to the real economy, such a stance appears meta-representative: a representation of the representation of activity. Fiction's new frontier: close your eyes and imagine what takes place in this decor.

5.4 case study: Michael Asher. Another critical strategy consists in displaying the virtuality of a genuine service activity. In 1974 Michael Asher simply knocked down the wall in the Claire Copley Gallery separating the office and exhibition space, thus exposing those spaces intended for commercial activities to the public. In other words, not much to look at. A purely administrative activity whose object in this specific case is precisely to promote the work presented. The infinite regression of mirrored reflections. Feedback. *Mise en abyme*. Things start getting complicated.

5.5 case study: Iain Baxter. Iain Baxter's creation of the N.E. Thing Company is symptomatic of these works that grant a primordial role to the formal structure of the business firm based on the capitalist model. Legally registered, the company is *in principle* able to handle all types of services: from consulting (which the artist truly practiced) to catering (the restaurant *Eye Scream*). The artist deploys a plethora of bureaucracy's outer signs (calling cards, stationary with headings, ink stamps, forms, telexes, diagrams, statistics, etc.) for a seemingly derisory activity, as if the esthetics of official documents took precedence over any real activity. A work form 1968 entitled *Products*, sums up the stakes of such a proliferating project: an empty envelope stamped with the word "Products", sent as an invitation to the exhibition. Business management appears as the packaging of economic destituteness.

6 Conclusions/Recommendations

6.1 There might then indeed be a kind of discreet and ambiguous critical judgement in the material representations that denounce the objective void of contemporary economics by brandishing the shady seduction of tertiary planning.

6.2 Right.

6.3 Anything company: what's the problem then? Why look for a critical soft spot in the utilization of tertiary esthetics? Maybe because the conceptual ideal of tertiarization constitutes one of the great hypocrisies of contemporary economics. Supposing the disappearance of the working class in favor of a middle class (employees), it has become the model of all industry, developing an equivalency principle that has wiped out all industrial specificity. Who knows what lurks behind the commonplace luxurious esthetic of the tertiary (offices, carpeting, logos, cocktails, etc.)? There is but one model: management. And there is but one kind of management, for the provision of water and for the publication of dictionaries alike (*Vivendi*). The prestige of *uniformity*. By following the same movement as the economy, certain art forms have ultimately only mimicked the ways of functioning which tended to instill the belief that all activity could be reduced to the model of service providers. Fascinated by the ideal form of these transaction modes, they played on this idea of versatile

⁶ Hans Haacke, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971.*

production, transforming everything into positive values by annihilating the survival of a productive world, and all the problems it raised (namely in terms of images).

6.4 case study: Feu inextinguible by Harun Farocki⁷ provides the example of a brilliantly critical representation of tertiary esthetics' capacity to dissimulate. This true-false documentary on an "anonymous" industrial firm plays excessively on the attractive and fascinating representation of the tertiary (the secretary's spotless office, the carpeting, the potted plant, the advisory board's conference table, the logo, etc.) Chic, cleanliness and functionalism. However, the film dismantles the perverse administrative logic that conjures away the real activity taking place behind a kindly formalism. The product of activity is never mentioned by the executives, who fall back on a service rhetoric: "I can give you what you need" or "What the clients ask for", etc. Now, as the narrator's voice explains, the firm fabricates napalm. A sordid reality is totally evacuated by the esthetics of the decor, the semantic field and the firm's logic of structural dispersion. An employee explains that he's been told he builds vacuum cleaners, while in fact they are weapons, or perhaps the opposite. It doesn't matter. In any case what transpires is the elegant spectacle of the tertiary as a functional deviation of industrial violence.

6.5 But after all, a work's quality can't be judged by its political pertinence.

Fig.2 exhibition project

An exhibition conceived and exhibited within a large business firm. The works would be invisible. The original floor plan of the architecture to be decorated would therefore be preserved: the entry hall, waiting room, offices, parking lot, advisory board's meeting room, security booth etc. Everything, from the restrooms to the terrace, from the shelves to the pen bins, from the telephones to the Post-its, from the painted murals to the contents of the binders-, would be made up solely of artists' works and installations. All the interior decoration would be made up of minimal, conceptual, pop, kinetic, and relational art works, etc. The representation of a large administration producing nothing. Let's bet that such an exhibition would manage, in an indefinable way, to create both desire and discomfort, and demonstrate the *inframince's* (infrathin's) artistic surplus value and the imperceptible sensory gap...or not at all.

⁷ Harun Farocki, Feu inextinguible, 1969, 16mm; 25 min., black and white