

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
1 September 2020

I started to write today's *Abwechslung/Distraction* as a brief introduction and invitation to drop by our virtual booth at the London Original Print Fair (LOPF). As it so often does, the note grew longer and longer, and I suddenly realized that all this philosophical (over)thinking will ever do is to make sure no one will make it to the "click" at the end. For that reason, I thought it might be best to relieve and absolve my readers early on:

C.G. Boerner @ the London Original Print Fair

It seems that for art dealers in the time of Covid-19, the omnipresence of technology comes to the rescue. It allows us to ignore the precariousness of the circumstances—just like the warm weather giving us the illusion that all is (fairly) normal again. Restaurants have set up tables on the sidewalks and we can go out for dinner (at least, that is, until one of those summer storms suddenly breaks loose):



But does the onslaught of online viewing rooms mean that art has now lost its aura? I feel that even as a nerdy old master print dealer I have to gradually accept that "the times are changin'" and that one might have to give the idea of an "online presence" the benefit of the doubt, accepting it as a possibility to alert the art lover who, after all, *does* care about the original, because otherwise she or he would hardly be a collector, right? A heartfelt "thank you" therefore to the organizers of the London Original Print Fair for generously providing this platform!

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Now let's take a moment to ask if, for the sake of argument, it could just be that not everything about the current crisis has been bad? After all, it did bring us take-out cocktails! Just imagine what level of ridicule would have greeted Greta Thunberg only half a year ago if she had suggested that we all stop traveling by plane. Actually, ridicule was exactly what Greta earned when she chose to take a sailboat for a carbon-neutral journey back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean last fall. As art dealers, all of us had long been faced with the ever-increasing proliferation of fairs, which we told ourselves we had to attend. And traveling there and back was the least of it. Didn't we all wonder, at the end of those events, while we were waiting for the shippers to arrive, what an astounding amount of waste each one of those art fairs created? Miles of carpeting thrown away after four days of use, wooden structures for the build-out of the booths heading for the dumpster, and so much more. (A shout-out is due, here, to our print-dealer colleague Fred Mulder, who through his own foundation was one of the first to address the question of reducing our carbon footprint at these events.)



Here we are now in our forced state of *Entschleunigung* (deceleration). And that we have not yet entered total stasis is due solely to the technological interconnectedness mentioned above—at least as long as our access to Wi-Fi does not get interrupted by said storm while we are sheltering in some country idyll (in most bigger cities, the chances to catch the Covid virus may be higher, but the wiring is conducted underground, diminishing the risk caused, at least in this respect, by falling trees).

I can't help feeling, though, that there is a fundamental irony underlying this current situation of ours. I was reminded of this the other day when reading an essay by the late French philosopher Paul Virilio (1932–2018). He was a shrewd observer of the impact technology has on our daily lives. He talks about his astonishment when he noticed video monitors beginning to substitute the mirrors at the end of each platform of the Paris Metro that had previously enabled the train conductors to see the goings-on behind them; or when tiny, invisible cameras began to be hidden in intercoms at the doors of apartment buildings; or when washing machines became computerized. He bemoaned the crisis of movie theaters now that people preferred watching films on huge screens in their homes. "Crisis of movie theaters" sounds familiar, but one senses that his observations are somewhat dated: aren't big home screens already considered rather tacky these days? Can't everyone in today's family watch whatever they want on their own tablet or phone? Given how divided today's society is, how convenient that we don't even have to agree on what to watch any longer . . .

Still, it is hard to believe that Virilio wrote his essay *L'Inertie polaire* back in 1989, over thirty years ago! While it took ten years for an English translation to come out (keeping the intransigent title of the original: *Polar Inertia*), I confess that what really drew my attention was the more accessible title of the German translation from 1992: *Rasender Stillstand*, or "racing standstill." It is eerie to realize how prescient Virilio's writing was. In one example, he talks about the then-new possibility of exchanging information in real time: "In fact, the faster information circulates, the more the control of all exchange increases and tends to become absolute. Omnipresence is meant to make such control the substitute for man's environment, his earth, his only milieu." Couldn't this be read as a premonition of those dreadful algorithms that follow up on every online choice we make today, telling us what music we might enjoy, film or show we might like to watch, or book we might want to read?

In the end, the question remains if Virilio's conclusion is correct. At least on the surface, the increasing speed of the flow of information did also increase the speed of our lives, and it ultimately needed the pandemic to bring it all to a standstill. But I don't think that this is what Virilio meant. His concern was the effect this overflow of information had on our minds. And here, I believe that his analysis still holds if we look around: any common ground between political parties has become illusory; income disparity is growing by the day; and the omnipresence of information allows everyone to retreat into her or his own echo chamber.

The lightning-fast onslaught of information that bombards us at any given moment might have accelerated our lives. However, the sheer quantity of this information has grown so out of proportion that the human capability to process it has long since been lost. As a result, instead of making progress, we *are* actually standing still. To keep within Virilio's imagery: we have become like geostationary satellites, which orbit Earth with a speed of 3.07 kilometers (or 1.91 miles) per second only to hover in exactly the same position in relation to Earth's surface (the technical term is "maintaining a stationary footprint on the ground"). And here we are now, trapped in our informational bubbles like David Bowie's Major Tom in his tin can—only that, unlike him, we can now be endlessly entertained by those clever algorithms that claim to know exactly what we want while we come trundling down . . .



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