

Virilio used the example of in-flight entertainment as a system for ensuring that airline passengers should not actually experience their journeys: picnolepsy as transport technology, imagining a further enhancement in which passengers would simply be drugged and awake at their destinations oblivious to their journeys. He could hardly have foretold that the technological aesthetic of the screens mounted in aircraft would reproduce and automate this narcosis, dividing first the time of experience into fragments, then analysing the fragment into scans, fields and blocks, and, finally, organising transitions between them not just as erasures (under the rotating blade of the cine-projector's shutter) but as rewritten memories in the form of key-frame technologies. Inattention to experience has never been solely a medical condition: every child has to be taught to watch where they're going, and whole societies have been required to learn how to concentrate (Crary 1999). Virilio's picnoleptic analysis suggests, however, that the mechanised and digitised erasure of experience that he calls the disappearance of reality is very specific to our epoch.

See also: Aesthetics of Disappearance; Real Time; Technology

PITILESS ART

Joy Garnett

In his lecture 'A Pitiless Art' in *Art and Fear* (2003a [2000]), Virilio begins by talking about the pitiful or pitiless nature of contemporary art, and then stops to wonder why no one ever asks: '*but contemporary with what?*' (*AF*, 27). That 'what', is, of course, our less-than-whole, post-war, human condition. In suggesting that the peace achieved in defeating the Nazi terror actually comprises and extends that terror in innumerable, insidious and indiscernible ways, Virilio posits an 'aesthetics of disappearance' whereby the body is subtly dehumanised, and all that is human is denigrated *without pity*, from within. In quoting the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, '*I am the wound and the knife*,' Virilio (*AF*, 29) asserts that contemporary art after the Second World War represents neither critique nor palliative to our state of continued cultural disarray, but rather constitutes a non-cognisant expression of our post-war, still-catastrophic, state of being. In other words, we are our time, each and every day.

Virilio inserts his discussion of 'A Pitiless Art' into the debate over contemporary art's relevance and its perceived 'awfulness'. This is not an assessment of contemporary art's terrorising aspects, nor a measurement of its piety or lack of it; rather, Virilio's approach to the art of our era is one

that acknowledges its resounding lack of empathy or innate ‘pity’ regarding humanity, and posits the notion that contemporary art instead offers a figurative and metaphorical analogue to literal terror and terrorism.

Our pitiless contemporary art, then, according to Virilio, offers more evidence of the gaping wound left by our collective experience of the Second World War, an experience we have not fully acknowledged or accepted, nor have we engaged it philosophically as the authentic source and progenitor of our present condition. And because we cannot detach ourselves sufficiently from this state of obliviousness, we remain unable to stand outside or see beyond ourselves. Hence, our contemporary artists remain unable to see or acknowledge themselves as either wound or knife. Instead, contemporary post-war art flounders in oblivion, incapable of pity or empathy, and, by extension, incapable of self-love. Sustaining so heavy a burden of complicity – of culpability – for crimes against humanity, contemporary art has come to embody ‘a pitiless art’ in Virilio’s eyes, one that leans on glib cynicism and a refined sense of irony in its attempt to escape the humiliation and culmination of misery in earnest self-destruction. However, as Virilio points out, citing the twentieth-century suicides of Paul Celan and Mark Rothko, often it is literal suicide and self-annihilation that go hand-in-hand with the figurative murder and self-mutilation that contemporary art has come to comprise. In other words, self-destructive metaphors and positions of intellectual nihilism are in fact contiguous with the literal suicide of both the individual and even the state (Auschwitz; Hiroshima).

Virilio (*AF*, 50) opines, quoting George Bernanos, that ‘The world is sick, a lot sicker than people realize. That’s what we must first acknowledge *so that we can take pity on it* [. . .] *The world needs pity.*’

In distinguishing an art that is full of pity, an art capable of illustrating atrocity (Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece; Picasso’s *Guernica*), from an art that embodies it (Saatchi’s Young British Artists), Virilio employs the terms ‘demonstrative’ versus ‘monstrative’, and names contemporary art as an art of ‘presentation’ as opposed to ‘representation’, noting that we have become slaves to real time, that is, we are wed to our new capability to express ourselves only in the moment of the absolute present. We are rendered incapable of the kind of sustained effort of reflection that leads to empathy and self-knowledge; hence we are deprived of the capacity to *represent* at all. Here, Virilio mourns the demise of the relative and analogical character of the pre-digital condition, charging the nihilism of contemporary technology with the loss of the poetics of the ephemeral. We can no longer represent because we are caught, seemingly eternally, repetitively, in the absolute present, expressing ourselves and our pitiable condition, now and always, only as it happens, and, above all, *without pity*.