The Artwork— the Work

Alain Cueff

In memoriam Philip Nelson

Throughout the twentieth century, debates about the possible redefinition of art and its essence have been both intense and frequent. And such speculation can indeed go on forever if, as Benedetto Croce wrote, aesthetics "is simply the permanent, constantly renewed and ever more rigorous reorganization of the problems arising in different periods from thinking about art."[1] However, little interest has been taken in the notion of the work[2] in itself, which is located on a horizon that is more anthropological than philosophical. And yet, over the years this notion has fluctuated and evolved in many significant ways that, while they do not always reach to the heart of aesthetics, do affect the way it is conceived and the relation to what, for lack of a better word, we continue to call art. The contours of the work of art have been traced in monographic contexts and instrumentalized for historicist or technical purposes but, from a generic point of view, its relation to intuition and materiality, its inscription in space and its apprehension are spontaneously considered to be self-evident. And museums, although prone to the occasional lapse, are thought not to present anything other than works of art. It is as if the fundamental uncertainty besetting art today were answered by the presumedly incontestable positivity and objective presence of the work – its *factual* presence, one might sometimes say. Whereas different media such as photography and cinema became commonplace or were assimilated in the course of the 1980s, and hybrid practices derived from performance blurred its contours, the work was still either shoehorned into traditional categories (painting, sculpture, etc.) or unquestioningly reduced to that of artefact or art object, which also had an impact on the way it was perceived and commodified.

In the history of the idea of the work and its vicissitudes in the early avant-gardes, of which the 1980s could well have been the last heirs,[3] we need first to look at the respective conceptions of the Dadaists and Marcel Duchamp.[4] While they may seem to have shared the same convictions and values, it was precisely that simple appearance of agreement that was the source of the misunderstandings whose course can be followed through to the present day. All of a sudden, in 1916 (the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* were barely nine years old), Dada in Zurich decreed

the necessary death of art, seen as one of the instruments of bourgeois alienation. Painting, be it Cubist, Futurist or Expressionist, was the target of repeated attacks because it embodied the aesthetic lie *par excellence*: its claims to sacredness were mere deceit and it complicated appearances unnecessarily.[5] The death of art was thus first and foremost the destruction of the conventional forms that condition the work. But *the tabula rasa*, the *sine qua non* of the revolution, was soon covered with objects of all kinds and rearticulated in accordance with intuitive procedures that must, in the name of the principle of liberty, dispense with any kind of justification. On the ruins of art, anything is possible, proclaims Dada (and that was effectively one of the central ideas that helped to establish the myth), even if in reality the ambition was limited to deciding what could be used. Tristan Tzara: "abolition of logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: Dada; of every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: Dada; every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada."[6] Whether it succeeded or failed, whether it promoted anti-art or laid the foundations of a new art, Dada managed to impose the idea that anything (waste, ruins, the abject and the insignificant, the derisory and the absurd) can be used and that nihilism is a value like any other. In this sense, which does not contravene the ideology that it claimed to fight, Dada proposed the model of a total economy that reactivated the domestic principle of "letting nothing go to waste." "Because the country was in ruins," wrote Kurt Schwitters, "out of economy I took whatever I had to hand. You can also make art with rubbish, and that's what I did, sticking and nailing it together."

On the base of a throwback to the Ancien Régime ("The king is dead, long live the king"), Dada opened the path to an operation that proved an enduring success: this thing held in the artist's hands and then almost immediately pushed far from him is art both because it is said to be and because it is indispensable as such to the work of grieving inaugurated by the same compulsive will. Therein disenchantment could find compensation and the assertions of the artistic ego could at last become collective. Much more than disinhibited spontaneity, the instantaneousness of the resolution of contradictory drives is the key to the Dadaist miracle.[7] It is important in this respect to proscribe the technical mediations that slow down the creative process and hamper its expression.[8] Thus the object (the fetish) easily substitutes itself for the work against the background of an absence, *bricolage* being a secondary aspect of its existence which, in its ritualized form, belies the summary character of the statement. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) is generally presented as the very paragon of the Dadaist attitude. Was there anything more to this than, by means of a linguistic operation, hallowing as an art object a commonplace object turned upside down and placed on a pedestal? Is there anything else at stake in the ersatz signed by R. Mutt than the effect of the Dadaist determination to use anything and everything to produce an artefact? Seen from this angle, the readymade is a Dadaist object *par excellence* and crystallized more

effectively than any other all the passions and sealed, so they say, the death of art and the abandonment of the notion of work.

There are, however, considerable differences between the declarative regime of Dada, which seeks to make something of nothing, and the infinite circumvolutions of Duchamp, which seek to ruin totalities, to see how it is possible to give rise to metamorphosis. They engage "doing" beyond the mere resolution of a Western anxiety, and open up a highly complex relations to language, both before and after the work. Duchamp may have taken his time, mused and commented, but to no avail: "Dada was a negation and a protest," he wrote in 1961. "That didn't particularly interest me. Individual negation just makes you dependent on what you deny: a collective negation is meaningless. Dada was against dead forms, but perhaps they were making too much fuss about something that was already dead. My *Fountain* was not a negation: I simply tried to create a new idea for an object that everybody thought they knew. Anything can be something else, that is what I wanted to show."[9] Anything can be something else, but only under certain conditions that are not automatically acquired: to the pure and simple presence of the object, Duchamp opposed the duration of metamorphosis, that is to say, the duration of poetic utterance. The object in itself is no great shakes (it is a beginning, a meeting, to use his terms), it has exemplary significance and impact only in the time of the thought and the language that expresses it. The readymade is not the final fruit—self-enclosed and sterile—of a sudden expressive decision, but a stage in the elaboration of a space metaphorically designated as being endowed with four dimensions. Jean Clair has shed useful light on the mesh of correspondences and biographical references that make the *Fountain*, taken together with all its developments, a complex work that is infinitely richer than its trivial appearance would suggest.[10]

"I like breathing better than working," Duchamp told Pierre Cabanne.[11] The dandy pose must not be allowed to hide the reality of his position when, instead of building or taking down a cathedral, it might seem preferable to go on endlessly developing a secret web of thoughts. And not, like the Dadaists, to relentlessly multiply productions based only on the contrasts between juxtaposed elements. In this sense, the readymade was not the *terminus ad quo* of a thousand years of history, but at once the key, weak link and starting point of a questioning of the relations between action and language. Reprising in his own particular way the theme of *ut pictura poesis*, Duchamp used the object in order to produce its shadow, while being perfectly aware that, in keeping with Baudelaire's law of misunderstanding,[12] the former would prevail over the latter and the object, as it still does today, hide the work. Designed to produce shadows, the ready-mades inform the conception of the *Large Glass* (1915-1923) and almost literally find their role in *Tu m'* (Duchamp's last painting, from 1918). The œuvre— understood this time as the synchronous deployment of all the artist's works— is the sum of fruitful (or missed) meetings with the language that will give it its ultimate, posthumous form (posthumous insofar as the question of death no longer arises, or has indeed never arisen).

The idea of the work as an indispensable substratum of the artistic experience, and the idea of experience itself, was perpetuated both in Minimalism and in the work of Andy Warhol. Donald Judd was deeply influenced by the ideas of Barnett Newman, even if he ignored their spiritual dimension. For Newman, the work was almost indistinguishable from the idea of place: "What matters to a true artist is that he can distinguish between a place and no place at all; and the greater the work of art, the greater will be this feeling. And this feeling is the fundamental spiritual dimension. If this doesn't happen, nothing else can happen."[13] The sheer size of his paintings prevents them from becoming decorative objects and is conducive to the viewer's immersion in a place that he is invited to experience on its own terms and, ultimately, to appropriate.[14] We can find this conception of place echoed in the early work of Bruce Nauman, with the set-ups conceived more as places of physical experience for the viewer than as objects of vision. *Performance Parallelogram* (1970) and *Acoustic Corridor* (1973), for example, encourage the viewer to activate the work in what, even if it remains theoretical, is a significant transfer of roles. In an essay published in 1992 I myself discussed several artists from the 1980s[15] in relation to place, since this provides a way of apprehending the interweaving of different levels of thought and practice and to recognize the tangible effects of the articulation of sensible and abstract intuitions with the physical reality of images and materials.

Repetition and seriality are essential aspects of Minimalism, and so they are too in Warhol's work. An image (and an image is in itself material) can give rise to a virtually infinite number of works made in semi-mechanical fashion that itself leads to accidents of execution. The faces of Marilyn and Mao are thus subjected to multiple variations and interpretations on the very surface of the painting. Making the already-seen *appear* by repeating a sameness that is always different is the antithesis of the more or less critical restitution that Surrealist-inspired collage and its avatars give the illusion of accomplishing. And all these serial variations interact, constantly displacing the direction of the gaze and the conditions in which the image is perceived. Simultaneously, Warhol explores the forms of the gaze, both exercised and undergone, in an unprecedented corpus of movies in which the *Screen Tests* constitute the most significant ensemble.[16] Dedicated to the production of painted and filmed images, the Factory was a site of unremitting activity: "It is just work." Warhol created a context in which he subjected perceptions and actions to the metamorphic power of work, conceived as something that integrated every aspect of life. As he told Glenn O'Brien, "I like to work when I'm not working—do something that may not be considered work, but to me it's work."[17] In this way, he managed, through an operation that in principle is impractical, to simultaneously concentrate and extend the domain of the image.

By basing itself on a radical interpretation of the readymade, and by invoking philosophical and semiotic models, Conceptual Art makes a clean break with the notion of the work which, for Art & Language, for example, belonged to an obsolete

tradition. With his skill at translating latent situations into trenchant terms, Joseph Kosuth substitutes the term *art work* with that of *art proposition,* which clearly indicates the self-reflexive nature of his project and his ambition to methodically implement the program of the end of art, or its resolution in philosophy: "Art before the modern period is as much art as Neanderthal man is man. It is for this reason that around the same time I replaced the term 'work' for *art proposition*. Because a conceptual *work* of art in the traditional sense is a contradiction in terms."[18] And by deciding that an art object is not affected by its realization, which moreover remains optional, Lawrence Weiner goes one step further, using the word "piece" instead of "artwork."[19] The term "piece" suggests a kind of juridical neutrality, but also the idea of the fragment, and these have remained current through to the present day.[20] In the context of Conceptual Art, it indicates more clearly than any other the disappearance of all exercise of sensibility, of all subjective perception since a piece of work is also a factual given that does not in itself call for any experience involving both the gaze and the mind. The physical reality of the work will not affect the perception of the principles that contributed to its mental elaboration. For, once again, material mediations here seem to constitute obstacles simply to be removed. While conceptual artists pay a sometimes rather insistent homage to Marcel Duchamp, it is, however, clear that they did so on the basis of a reading that does not take into account the disconcerting character of his materialization of a web of thoughts, and by the same token, sacrifices the unpredictable sensible and conceptual extensions that this entrains. In this way, Conceptual Art effectively acts out Roland Barthes' strange dream of the death of the author.[21] In contrast, it would be hazardous to try and do without a character known as Marcel Duchamp (painter, perspectivist and dandy) when trying to get to grips with the contradictions that run through his work.

By the early 1980s, the immateriality of the work, its dissolution in the absolute of the concept, no longer represented a viable alternative to objects exposed to fetishization. In a world characterized by the speed of its exchanges and the built-in obsolescence of technologies and information, images and objects, which sometimes seem to appear only because they are disposable, and where simulacra become references, "making" became a necessity once again. Not that the work could claim to ward off these historical processes, or that it would be able or want to restore an almost mystical idea of the presence of art as a form of compensation. More discreetly, but also more concretely, the point is to give the image a body, to restore to it a density whereby it could interpose itself in the constant flux of representations as a point where it all stopped, a critical moment where the gaze could be fully deployed: "Making" is not an impersonal operation, based on a system whose validity needs only to be verified in the protective space of the gallery or museum's white cube. But, since Warhol and Judd, making has had nothing to do with the notions of "skill" or *métier* as these were restrictively understood

by the academic art of the nineteenth century. Collaboration with specialist workshops, which becomes common during this period, should not be taken as the sign of withdrawal or resignation on the part of the artist, or as a devaluation of making, but rather as a way of obtaining the most exact result possible. Manual dexterity is replaced by agility in understanding and applying (and, if necessary, changing) contemporary means of production and dissemination. Far from being used literally, they are put to novel uses that undercut their power of alienation.[22] *Bricolage*, which goes hand in hand with improvisation and instantaneousness, no longer seems an appropriate *modus operandi*: it does not make it possible to incorporate into the work the time of its elaboration, which consists of the back-and-forth movements and mutual adjustment between intuition and reflection.

Whatever its practical modalities, making remains an operation that conjugates two types of thought, that of the imagination and that of the *ingenium*, ingenuity, which is "the faculty that connects disparate and diverse things"[23]—in other words, that constitutes heterogeneous parts into a single, coherent ensemble. The work now does not content itself with conveying facts, with juxtaposing ideas or images, but articulates them in order to create relations that are as meaningful as they are dynamic. It is thus impossible for it to remain "intransitive," as Barthes put it, and to enjoy the illusion of perfect autonomy on a horizon from which the triviality of the world has been miraculously evinced. Implicitly or explicitly, the work embraces a number of dimensions to which aesthetics does not always pay attention. Artists' psychological or autobiographical considerations, which up to this point had to a large extent been censored, now manifest themselves more often than one would expect. The question of the author is not a matter of dogma, and we can no more call for his disappearance than vouch for his existence. When there is a work, engaged to a varying extent with the world, there is an author, or, in other words, an author can always be deduced from the work that he conceived. "I think sometimes," says Charles Ray, "that good work really reveals something about the maker, whether it's what the work is about or not."[24]

Theory no longer provides a system. The point now is not to body forth ideas in accordance with predetermined models, but to articulate or meld ideas, sensations, images and materials into the same entity, the work, which is at once the place of generation and invention, of mutation and metamorphosis, where the coming together of thinking and making can take place. But it is clear that saying is not doing, and that doing is not stating (a position, an ambition) and does not aim to occupy a territory. This coinciding, which the avant-gardes rejected, should be understood as a perpetual and reciprocal transmutation of the demands of the imagination and of thought into those of concrete elaboration. It does not express itself in the regime of the omnipotence of creative power, or lead to an idealization of the artist.[25] With the exception of a few Neo-Expressionists, who play an important role on the art scene of the 1980s, we find no trace of a heroic artist figure credited with absolute power over the realm of the visible or over the elusive horizons of

art, depicting the truth or sublimity of the world. Most of the time, comments made by the artists themselves have nothing of the manifesto or program about them, but evidence a pragmatic approach that takes into account the duration and extension of language, and consequently the time and space of the work, which cannot unfold in the immediacy of a dogmatic discourse or rely on the guarantees offered by the museum. Language here is no longer conceived as a simple instrument of classification and positive definition, nor is it contained within its communicative role. As is comprehensively demonstrated by the work of Harald Klingelhöller, dedicated to the exploration of its metaphorical space, language is once again a relative, *poietic* space, open to contradiction and to incessant transformation. *Blaue Blume*: language is not a fortress, it is a living space that we inhabit and that inhabits us.[26]

If, on the other hand, anti-art has simply exhausted itself, this certainly does not mean that all the antagonisms have been resolved, all the tensions pacified, or that all the critical or experimental approaches have disappeared. The work of Jan Vercruysse is indeed founded on critical negativity, which is manifest in the series of *Atopies* (Atopias) and also the *Tombeaux* (Tombs).[27] Paradoxically, these works that question the conditions of possibility of art come into being by cancelling out their own premises. Instead of being taken as an inalienable historical and ideological given, art is exposed, its foundations and conventional roles imperiled. In the work of many artists, especially the early ones, we find a critical approach to the object and to the conditions in which it can be articulated with architectural or urban space. This is particularly the case with Reinhard Mucha, whose work, which uses elements taken from the environment where it is presented, explores the problem of figure and ground in all its current ambiguity. Or with Robert Gober, and most singularly his *Plywood*, a wooden plaque leaning against a wall that is a handcrafted replica of a piece of industrial plywood[28] and whose fragility and affective quality, as his *Sinks* do, destabilize the perception of the object. In the work of Franz West, critique is effectuated through a desacralization of the sculpted object, which is open to every kind of manipulation and seems in danger of disappearing into itself. And there are countless other examples of works whose dual physical and conceptual reality borders on a critical point that constitutes an extreme test of their substance.

In a much more spectacular way in the works of Martin Kippenberger and Mike Kelley (for whom performance becomes an essential element), experiment ceases to be a separate area of the work kept to the secrecy of the studio, and is on occasions even rendered visible, without there necessarily being any stress on the process. Experimentation and the assertion of the right to make mistakes (in the wake of Samuel Beckett and Bruce Nauman) are key stages in the progression of thought. For while it might indeed be impossible to identify objectives in advance, as Mike Kelley observed, the aim is to test the solidity of making and to avoid a systematization of method.[29] Making remains a way of simultaneously testing both the material and its possible forms, and as such both its immediate results and

long-term consequences are unpredictable. In other words, the work is not something self-evident with *a priori* guarantees based on unchanging criteria; its conditions of possibility are not provided for in advance as was the case with easel painting or with certain conceptual programs. In this sense, it is a progress, at once the process and its result; it is the sum of the deposited traces of experiences of diverse kinds or, one might say, the result of a process of displacement and crossovers whose logic is new every time.

However, not everything is available all the time, and nobody now would have the weakness to imprudently believe that anything is possible. Today we are well aware of the totalizing tendencies of utopianism, or even of its totalitarian foundations.[30] The idea formulated by Thomas Schütte, that "almost anything is possible," clearly expresses the fact that the work itself, by the very exigencies of its duration, is confronted with restrictions that are not ideological but practical. Indeed, it sometimes happens that what may appear to be an emancipatory possibility soon turns out to be either a constraint or a plonking banality. Because collage modified the relations within painting, it had for Picasso the critical and dynamic virtues that it later lost as a result of intensive use and the advent of new computer-based technologies. Today, collage is nothing more than a simple juxtaposition of objects that more often than not are coordinated only by a sociological discourse and an overdetermined contextual inscription.[31] And while the twentieth century did indeed throw up a great number of innovations and openings, there is, in contrast with what is sometimes the case in the sciences, no guarantee that these will remain valid. Its elaboration confronts the work with series of limits (practical, poetic, historical, etc.), and it is here, precisely, that the issues involved are manifested.

It is this "almost" that each artist must determine for himself. In other words, they must endow possibility with plausibility,[32] not on the basis of realism but in accordance with a tension between the original intuition and its concretisation, between the work and its inscription in the world. It is perhaps in this sense that we need to understand Schütte's insistence on the notion of the model[33] and the increasingly frequent passage from the model to its full-scale realisation. The status of his models and their presence in space is undecidable rather than, strictly speaking, ambiguous: they are the product of a trial of strength between the imagination and the resolution of practical and formal problems.[34] This pragmatic approach to limits does not seek in any way to produce spectacular effects of contrast but, rather, to rigorously encapsulate the possible. Another conception of theatricality emerges, not at all founded on the presumed sensation of presence, but as the consequence of this testing of the possible in the production of the work. This theatricality is often ironic in Schütte. It is disconcerting in Charles Ray's *Firetruck* and later in his series of mannequins, sarcastic in the work of BazileBustamante (*Francis Ford Coppola*, 1982), offhand in the paintings of René Daniels and exposed to self-mockery in Rodney Graham. It becomes more grating, however, in the paintings and films of Jack Goldstein and in the sophisticated *mises en scène* of

Jeff Wall.[35] Whatever the major differences between these works, they all share a theatricality that draws attention to itself and provides no interpretation or text that might direct them towards the solution of an enigma.[36]

This non-illusionistic theatricality has one characteristic that can also be found separately: the abandonment of those strategies of generic and stylistic exclusion resorted to by Dadaism and Fluxus, on the one hand, and Minimal and Conceptual Art, on the other. Consequently, it does not open onto eclecticism (understood here as the undifferentiated use of a catalogue of forms and ideas), but marks the disappearance of prejudices about the nature of images or forms and their supposed uses, and possibly defines other dividing lines. Images and abstractions are no longer seen as antagonistic (James Welling makes images whose figurative or abstract aspects do not affect their fundamental nature, and Günter Förg has put in place a twofold practice in which the opacity of "abstract" painting enters into a kind of dialogue with architectural photographs), questions of content are no longer seen as obstacles to conceptual rigour (as is attested, among others, by the work of Reinhard Mucha, who elaborates a subjective landscape, or by Luc Tuymans' relation to the political), originality is no longer a value in itself (this tenet being one of the bases of the work of Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine). In other words, the different genres and values on which many an aesthetic discourse has been based have lost their relevance, their capacity to frame and structure the elaboration of works.

The characterization of this situation as "postmodern" is predicated on a dogmatic vision of modernism as assuming continuous evolution and progress, as a one-way vision of—and faith in—history.[37] The notions of stylistic mixing and nomadism, of hybridization and pastiche are not appropriate when it comes to understanding the works mentioned here. It is not a matter of taking advantage of the very improbable dissipation of historical consciousness and enjoying the hypothetical freedom that this might afford. Artists simply feel the need to look for paradigms that are adapted to specific situations and indeed use them discriminatingly and—we will come back to this—articulate them with circumspection. Everything suggests that artists' primary concern here is to limit their repertoire of themes and procedures. One could almost see this as a necessary effect of specialization. But if that is indeed the case, then this specialization is not based on models of authority to be recognized or rejected, nor does it concern objectives to be attained, or products: it is based on what remain individual methods. If, through to the 1950s, the historic avant-gardes had to deal with a field of ruins that was constantly being ruined afresh, then the 1960s see the beginning of the very orderly reign of an overabundance of objects and images that has provoked what, speaking of another period, Simon Schama has called "the embarrassment of riches." Artists could not miss this embarrassment or avoid interpreting it. To limit resources and constrain ideas to their ultimate extreme, to in a sense impoverish and rarefy them—these are all ways of avoiding the dilatory powers of abundance.

The 1980s were the moment when different paradigms inherited from painting, sculpture, photography, cinema and Conceptual Art could coexist and be articulated together. When Charles Ray describes his own work in relation to sculpture, what he is referring to is not a narrow conception of the discipline but a certain apprehension of space. And, if artists as different as Mike Kelley and Richard Prince use photography, this does not mean that they can be seen as photographers or as "doing photography." They use it as one medium among others, and above all in the context of a broader visual thought process. What counts are not the techniques themselves or the genres and sets of rules that they prescribe, but the procedures and paradigms that they open up. Photography thus makes the frame increasingly important, and also contributes, as a tool, to the process of analyzing and selecting images. Cinema (which is an integral part of the work of Jack Goldstein and, also, Rodney Graham) has introduced the problem of the succession and displacement of images, of their disappearance and remanence. Whereas video (central to the practices of Stan Douglas and Gary Hill), which produces continuous flow of images in which the frontiers separating one image from another dissolve, is in a sense its antithesis. Montage, as a structural procedure, takes over from the idea of collage and sees the extension of its uses and role. This availability of different paradigms and their possible articulation are not the gratuitous or caricatural effect of some postmodern liberalism, but much more a necessity at a time when making work has ceased to consist in imitating or idealizing the real.

From this point of view, painting (which, seen in technical terms, is, according to a tireless rhetoric, destined for imminent death) is in a very interesting position. Considered as a paradigm that allows a certain kind of image to emerge, not as an illusionistic window but as a screen, or rather as the place of confrontation of successive projections, it remains the archetype of the work, even if has changed by incorporating parameters alien to itself. The painting of René Daniëls, free of its myths of origins and ends, is like a matrix generating series of metamorphoses based on a limited number of inaugural images. "When I paint a series of pictures," he said in 1983, "I see that the same forms keep coming back. I don't do it on purpose, it comes out of a process that I can't control. And yet I can gradually see something coherent taking shape."[38] For Helmut Dorner, albeit in a more abstract form, it is again the place of constant modification, of critical displacements that give rise to provisional configurations in which the painting is at once signified and signifier. His painting works more or less according to the same model as speech, which perpetuates itself only through its continual transformation. Seriality, which can be found in the work of these various artists in different inflections, is a particularly important characteristic. It exposes the image to its factitiousness and restores to it by other means a consistency that is neither conventional nor absolute but relative to the different stasis of its manifestations. In other words, the image is no longer a representation measured against an external referent, but a material that becomes, through repetition, both structure and ornament, both the pillar

and the detail of a whole that has a present existence. The work of painting consists in this coming forth of the image independently of both the true and the false.

Because of the complexity, omnipresence and persuasive power of the contemporary world's system of media representation, truth criteria have become indiscernible and, as Guy Debord said, "In a world that is truly upside down, the true is a moment of the false."[39] Or, as Nietzsche wrote before that, "The apparent world is the only one. The 'true' world' is merely added by a lie."[40] Whatever the actual means used, the problem of the work's truth is raised not in terms of external, worldly controversy, but in accordance with rules that are elaborated in the present of the work. In other words, truth exists only as a sensation or feeling and its validity is case-specific. It is significant that a considerable number of works from the 1980s should achieve a de facto autonomy in a form of saturation, such that their parts can no longer be distinguished from each other. The memory of the all-over is clearly present in James Welling's *Untitled* (Aluminum Foil) pieces, but also in the series of architectural structures by H. H. Richardson whose unusual framing closes the works in on themselves, or in some of the early *Tableaux* by Jean-Marc Bustamante. We find a similar construction of the image using completely different resources in the *Black Lemons* by Thomas Schütte, or again in *Rabbit* by Jeff Koons, in which the puerile image, materialized in stainless steel, is at a point of extreme tension. Contents and container become, in a sense, mutually indistinguishable.

In a world characterized by a constant exchange between the "real" and the "virtual," the notions of truth and originality are exposed to the same emptiness. The reuse of existing forms and images has a long history in classical art, and appropriation art is a practice that may seem academic (the student learning by copying the masters), outrageously simple (cancelling the invention that is the core value of art), ostensibly tautological (nothing looks more like a Walker Evans photograph than the reproduction of one) and, finally, extremely banal (print works churn out thousands of images every day). What determines the difference between a work of art with its original aura and that work reused by Sherrie Levine is not the intention or the discourse that, from a strictly conceptual point of view, would justify it, but the sensation that, between the image and its duplication, there exists an unconscious space of oblivion, lost in limbo: "There's an emptiness in Warhol's work that's always been very interesting to me because of that vibration I was talking about. There are three spaces: the original image, his image, and then a space in between, a sort of Zen emptiness — an oblivion in his work that's always been very interesting for me."[41] Levine's gesture seems limited, and yet it manages to make work—in other words, to affect the components so deeply that a double metamorphosis occurs: that of the image and of the gaze. The procedures used by Richard Prince are more complex, and modify the nature of the visual information several times over. They involve advertising images that are devoid of aura, yet they effect the same kind of transformation, making visible what familiarity prevented

us from seeing: "In the illustrated magazines, people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving."[42]

If the notion of reality has itself become irrelevant, inapplicable and impalpable,[43] the work is elaborated not by opposing to different strata of representation the invention of new and previously unseen images, but by elaborating the place of a gaze whose capacity to grasp the visible has been restored, when in contrast media images are conceived in order to grab hold of the gaze and deprive it of its cognitive virtue. The work is an obstacle to the undifferentiated flux of sensorial stimuli, a suspension of the chaotic nature of the world.[44] It does not consist in a simple statement of intent, in an impromptu coming forth of the object and image, nor does it organize the forgetting that would wrest the beholder away from the world. Through the work are concretized the conditions in which the gaze can become conscious of itself, not in an analytic reflexivity, but in the movement of its reverberation in language. It is precisely that moment when appearances really can be trusted, not because they contain the truth, but because the work, which is not a means of externalizing or manifesting expressions, signifies without defining and restores a duration to the experience of the gaze. A holistic condensation of speech and doing, made indissociable in a single instance, a contraction of heterogeneous and contradictory elements, the work is experienced as the simultaneous deployment of memory and presence.

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Porto, Museu Serralves, 2006,
pp. 38-50.

1 Benedetto Croce, "Aesthetica in nuce," in *Ultimi Saggi*, Bari: Laterza, 1963. **2** Throughout this essay, the simple term "work" has been preferred to "artwork" or "work of art," precisely because of the problematic nature of the notion of art. This is not a dilemma that arises in French, where the word œuvre implies art when used in an aesthetic context. **3** This is debatable, but it seems to me that in the last few years new works have not been inscribed through the intermediary of historical analysis. Or, in any case, the nature of the approach to history and way it is used have changed, so that history is now more readily seen as a synchronous web of eclectic references. **4** Initially a communitarian enterprise, Dada of course diversified, particularly because of its geographical dissemination, and the artists involved all developed in distinct ways, responding in contrasting ways to the original spirit. There is no room here to consider in detail the differences of perspective from Zurich, Berlin or Paris. See Marc Dachy, *Archives Dada*, Paris: Editions Hazan, 2005. **5** See Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto 1918," in Œuvres *complètes*, Paris: Flammarion, 1975. Trans., R. Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets*, New York, 1951. Reprinted in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 248-253. **6** Tristan Tzara, *op.cit.*, p. 253. **7** "What we are celebrating is at once a buffoonery and a requiem mass." Hugo Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, Munich and Leipzig, 1927. Translation in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 246. **8** "The new artist [...] creates—directly in stone, wood, iron, tin, boulders—locomotive organisms capable of being turned in all directions by the limpid wind of momentary sensation." Tristan Tzara, *op. cit.*, p. 250. **9** Letter to Ulf Linde, 1961, in *Affectionately, Marcel, The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. F. Naumann and H. Obalk, Ghent and Amsterdam: Ludion, 2000. **10** Jean Clair, *Sur Marcel Duchamp et la fin de l'art*, Paris: Gallimard, 2000. **11** Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1971. **12** "It is by universal misunderstanding that all agree." Charles Baudelaire, "Mon cœur mis à nu," in Œuvres complètes, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, p. 704. **13** Barnett Newman, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews" (1969), *Selected Writings and Interviews*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990, p.289. **14** Carl Andre distinguishes three successive phases in the history of sculpture, namely those of form, structure and place: "In my work I have always avoided the architectural danger. I think that a sculpture can very easily become architectonic and that so-called Minimalist sculpture is, to a great extent, architectural sculpture. That is not very satisfying for sculpture. For me the problem was (and nearly always is) to make a kind of sculpture that one can enter into, but which is not architectural, like a Japanese garden, for example, or any other garden." Interview with Irmeline Lebeer (1974), in *L'art, c'est une meilleure idée,* Nîmes: Editions Jacqueline Chambon, 1997. **15** Namely, Jean-Marc Bustamante, Robert Gober, Harald Klingelhöller, Reinhard Mucha, Thomas Schütte and Jan Vercruysse. Alain Cueff, *Le lieu de l'œuvre*, Bern: Kunsthalle, 1992. **16** See the catalogue raisonné of *Screen Tests*, edited by Callie Angel, New York: Abrams, 2006. **17** Interview with Glenn O'Brien, published in *High Times* in 1977, reprinted in Kenneth Goldsmith (ed.), *Andy Warhol, I'll Be Your Mirror*, New York: Carrol & Graff, 2004. **18** Joseph Kosuth, *The Sixth Investigation, 1969, Proposition 14*, Cologne: Gerd de Vries/Paul Maenz, 1971. **19** "1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership." "Untitled Statement," in Kynaston McShine (ed.), *Information*, New York Museum of Modern Art, 1970, p. 134. **20** The term has found its way into French from English. In German, the term is *Kunststuck*. **21** "...once an action is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer in order to act directly upon reality—that is, finally external to any function but the very exercise of the symbol—this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins."

Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (trans. Richard Howard), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Balzac is simultaneously the hero he describes, the voice of his age and Balzac the private individual, the writer of *La Comédie humaine*, the philosopher, the psychologist, the high-liver—in a word, everything that constitutes what we call the "author" and that, to various degrees, contributes to the quality of his vision. **22** We should, however, note that the manual element has far from having disappeared, as can be seen from the patient work of Harald Klingelhöller, Charles Ray and Robert Gober, and of course painters. **23** Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. Trans. L.M. Palmer, London: Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 96. **24** Charles Ray, "Anxious Objects. Interview by Robert Storr", *Art in America*, New York, November 1998. **25** The sometimes grandiloquent idealization of the artist by certain avant-gardes ("Erect on the summit of the world" wrote Marinetti) indeed tended to evade the question of the author. **26** *Blaue Blume* (Blue Flower) is both an image conceived by Novalis (whose conception of language goes much further than the clichés usually associated with Romanticism) and the title of a sculpture by Klingelhöller (1984). **27** See my text, "A Thousand Tombeaux," in *Jan Vercruysse*, exhibition catalogue, Venice Biennale, Venice, 1993. **28** "[*Plywood*] was not in fact plywood, but a core of chipboard laminated with 1/8' fir obtained directly from the plywood manufacturer." Trevor Fairbrother, *Robert Gober*, exhibition catalogue, Rotterdam and Bern, 1990. **29** "You always make things mean something—you might abandon them, but you make things mean something for the moment because you need to do that. So, artwork for me has always been the production of a provisional reality, and then you produce another one, and you produce another one, and you produce another one. But you have to take it seriously; otherwise, it doesn't have any psychological or social function at all." Mike Kelley, "Interview with Sergio Bessa," in *Zingmagazine 6*. **30** See: Frédéric Rouvillois, "Utopie et totalitarisme," in *Utopie, La quête de la société idéale en Occident* exhibition catalogue, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Fayard, 2001. American edition: "Utopia and Totalitarianism," *Utopia, The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, The New York Public Library, New York: The New York Public Library/ Oxford University Press, 2000. **31** "The shelf with objects is a nexus of social interaction. I tested the physical presence of an object—something loaded with the patina, the evocations, the markings of its history. People have strong feelings about objects, because they're in their space. It's not like a picture, which is essentially illusionistic, framed, removed and on the wall. In this regard, the shelf with objects is a display, a presentation." "Haim Steinbach Talks to Tim Griffin," New York, *Artforum*, April 2003. **32** "The possibilities that one must employ," wrote Diderot, "are plausible possibilities, and plausible possibilities are those of which there are more reasons than not to wager that they have passed from the state of possibility to the state of existence in a certain time limited by that of action." Denis Diderot, *Essais sur la peinture* (1766), Paris: Editions Hermann, 1984, p.34. **33** "Fundamentally, my works are almost always in the nature of a proposal [...] they exist in the form of models." Thomas Schütte, "Inside and Outside," in Interview with Martin Hentschel *Thomas Schütte* in exhibition catalogue, Bern, Paris, Amsterdam, 1990. **34** "Problem-solving as modus operandi," as Lynne Cooke puts it in *Thomas Schütte, Scenewright, Gloria in memoriam, In media res*, New York-Düsseldorf: Dia Art Foundation and Richter Verlag, 2002. **35** "In dramatic art, the burden of non-liberty is on the point of becoming visible, becoming an object of rational thought. This generally implies the description of a crisis, a moment in which beings are living an experience that calls their existence into question. I try to show this 'liminal' or critical situation when, at the same moment, a person is not themself." "Jeff Wall: Typology, Luminescence, Liberty, Interview with Els Barents," in Jeff Wall, Transparencies, New York: Rizzoli, 1987. **36** Juan Munoz is one of the few artists to

have endowed his installations with a narrative dimension and his figures with a spectral appearance. **37** "The adherents of modern principles who are incapable of taking a critical distance in relation to modern principles, of considering those principles not from their habitual standpoint but from the standpoint of their adversaries have already conceded defeat: they show by their actions that their fidelity is a dogmatic fidelity towards an established position." Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13 (1946): 326-67. **38** René Daniëls, "Interview with Anna Tilroe," *Haagse Post*, 12, 1983, p. 82. See exhibition catalogue *René Daniëls*, Eindhoven and Paris: Fondation René Daniëls, 1994. **39** Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (1988), Paris, Gallimard, 1992. English translation: The Society of the Spectacle, AK Press, 2005, p. 9. **40** Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in Walter Kaufmann (ed., trans.), *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin, 1977, p. 481. **41** "After Sherrie Levine," interview with Jeanne Siegel, New York, Arts Magazine, summer 1985. **42** Siegfried Kracauer, *Mass Ornament, Weimar Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 58. **43** Richard Prince neatly expresses the conflict between sensations and the real in a striking short-circuit: "When my little girl falls on the pavement and her teeth go through her lower lip and I have to take her to the hospital and watch her get stitches, I don't really think about 'almost real.' I don't think about what's real anymore." New York, *Artforum*, March 2003. **44** "Life," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, "is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate. Life imposes by brute energy, like inarticulate thunder; art catches the ear, among the far louder noises of experience, like an air artificially made by a discreet musician." Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Humble Remonstrance," 1884.