A Show of Hands

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A Show of Hands

Crafting Concepts in Contemporary Art

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INTRODUCTION

ILEANA PARVU

Making Concepts

At the entrance to the Albers exhibition dedicated to the artist couple at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris,[1] an oil on canvas by Joseph and a tapestry by Anni were hung side by side. Strangely, the spatial juxtaposition seemed to erase the differences between the two mediums. The superimposition of the colors gave the flat canvas a depth similar to that of the intertwining threads; the weft of the textile seemed palpable beneath the paint. Is there still a need to distinguish between painting and tapestry? Were the visitors not looking at fabric covered with paint and a painting made of colored fibers?

Lately, art-historical views on the relationship between art and craft have changed. In the introduction to a special issue of *Images re-vues*, Francesca Cozzolino and Thomas Golsenne have noted that the boundaries that once separated them are now "porous."[2] Elissa Auther has studied the works of fiber artists, postminimalist artists, and feminist artists to reflect on the hierarchy of art and craft,[3] while Julia Bryan-Wilson has examined the political significance of textiles, using a variety of cases from both categories.[4] Another way to subvert the division between these two mediums is to describe one through characteristics usually attributed to the other. Glenn Adamson has argued, for instance, that craft can give rise to theoretical thinking.[5] It is also possible to start from conceptual art—the twentieth-century movement that most clearly associated art and concept—but to foreground its materiality[6] or the way it is fabricated.

The first book to emerge from our research on modes of production in contemporary art[7] brought together numerous interviews with artists and art fabricators. It started with statements by conceptual artists who denied the importance of making—often in contradiction with their actual practice—and moved from there to the question of craft. In this new book, we take a different approach. From the outset, we stress the importance of both art and craft and situate them as anchor points for our thinking. Although the hands of the artists discussed here are not always at work in a literal sense, the notion of craft is an integral part of their oeuvre, critically and theoretically linked to concept.

Another feature distinguishes this book from the first: our research on art and craft involves works that do not come solely from North America and Western Europe and thus

introduces a corpus that includes practices on other continents. Our goal was to propose new ways of examining works based on the adoption of different and distinctive perspectives. But how could such an approach be applied to studying the relationship between art and craft, notions that have a long history in Europe? In a colonial context, the European system imposed itself as the only valid way of thinking about art, which led to the effacement of unique local practices in other cultures. Going back in time to find precolonial modes of making art would have been impracticable,[8] but it is possible to observe how European notions of art and craft have been conceived and put to the test in works by contemporary artists from other parts of the world.

Handcrafting and craftsmanship obviously underpin a great deal of artistic production. Yet despite current interest, we did not make the interconnections between art and craft the starting point of our examination. The history of Western art coincides with its separation from craft; one could even go so far as to argue that the notion of art, at least since the Italian Renaissance, has been founded on the extirpation of anything involving manual work.[9] Given this history, we started our research from the standpoint of craft's dissociation from art. Anglo-American conceptual art appears to take the incompatibility of the two for granted: in the second half of the 1960s, the idealist theory once again prevailed,[10] as seen with Joseph Kosuth, who stated that a work of art coincides with the idea underpinning it, and with Sol LeWitt, who stated that the concept is the most important aspect of a work of art.

But this is not the entire story of so-called "conceptual" art. Its links to craft are much closer than assumed by Michael Petry, who claimed that the conceptualism that emerged in the mid-1960s had "had its day" and that "in its place has come a resurgent interest in the beautifully designed and produced object."[11] LeWitt, for one, never considered that an artwork was made up of the idea alone: the work still needed to materialize—and even be executed—according to the highest standards: "The plan exists as an idea but needs to be put into its optimum form,"[12] he wrote. That said, his wall drawings were not always executed with the utmost care;[13] sometimes, a bare adherence to his plan appears to be the only goal. Still, LeWitt also trained draftsmen or assistants to take charge of making his wall drawings.[14] The importance given to technical skill in his work grew steadily, to the point of eventually rivaling the idea.

There is more to LeWitt's wall drawings than their meticulous execution, however. It would be no exaggeration to say that LeWitt's texts offer a theory on art-making. In his 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," the separation between conception and execution is clear.[15] In keeping with Aristotelian tradition, the idea comes from the artist's head and is realized by the craftsman. Nothing disrupts the relationship between the plan and its execution, which one might call transparent. A few years later, the question became more complicated. In LeWitt's text "Doing Wall Drawings," published in 1971, one word in particular recurs: the verb "interpret" in the first lines of the text appears again in the third paragraph. The plan "is interpreted by the draftsman. . . . The artist must allow various interpretations of his plan."[16] If one has to go through layers of interpretation to be able to execute a wall drawing, it is

because "making" does not reside simply in the literal materialization of an idea: "The drafts-man perceives the artist's plan, then reorders it to his own experience and understanding."[17]

No instructions can exhaust everything involved in making. When the draftsman starts to work, he must deal with a range of issues that are not included in the plan. As LeWitt explains, the draftsman must make "decisions,"[18] which, furthermore, not only concern the execution of the wall drawings but also participate in their conception. "There are decisions which the draftsman makes, within the plan, *as part of the plan*."[19] Here, making becomes the idea. The demarcation line that LeWitt had drawn in 1967 between fabrication and con-ception thus becomes blurred. The French artist Emilie Parendeau, whose practice consists of "activating" works by other artists, understands this perfectly. When she chose to make a new artwork from LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #43* (1970), one might have expected her to assume the role of draftswoman and produce the work.[20] Not at all—instead, she delegated the execution of the wall drawing to someone else. Her project *"A LOUER #6"* (2011) consists of modifying the plan for LeWitt's work, which she completed by adding the words "from edge to edge."[21] Parendeau thus intervened in the very conception of LeWitt's piece.

In the history of Western art, drawing is the medium most closely linked to the intel-lect.[22] It literally serves to externalize the idea. The location of the boundary, which in LeWitt's work separates concept from execution, is therefore far from trivial. Is it possible to delegate the execution of what is inside someone's mind? To make a wall drawing, the draftsman must, at a given moment, go beyond the instructions and assume the function of creator. Executing the work involves an irreducible part of conception, as LeWitt emphasized: "The draftsman's contributions are unforeseen by the artist, even if he, the artist, is the draftsman."[23] The pro-tocol for his wall drawings can even be seen as an investigation of or reflection on making, an aspect that brings LeWitt's thinking close to that of Duchamp. Neither LeWitt's delegation nor Duchamp's ready-made reveals a lack of interest in making. On the contrary, both are the limit points of a making-oriented experiment. Fabrication is put to the test at the two extremes: not making, and making like a craftsman.

At the beginning of the second half of the 1990s, Georges Didi-Huberman set out to reintroduce the "question of technique" in the discussion of Duchampian art.[24] He showed that it was of interest to articulate the ready-made in terms of what is presented as its anti-thesis, the handmade: "That is why the 'abandonment of skill' that the *readymade* seems to signify should be dialectically articulated with a series of statements in which Duchamp *reclaims 'making*,' and artisanal making in particular."[25] Some twenty years later, Lars Blunck adopted this same viewpoint in his study of ready-mades.[26] To begin with, he observed that Duchamp had made extensive use of the word "making" in his notes.[27] According to Blunck, Duchamp's question "Can we make works that are not art?" referred to two contradictory things.[28] First, he understood the word "art" in the etymological sense—from the Latin *ars*, meaning skill or craft, the equivalent of the Greek *techné*—meaning a work that is "not art" is one in which the artist's hand does not intervene. This was the side of the ready-made. But Duchamp also understood the word "art" in relation to handiwork or craft, meaning a work that is "not art"

is craft. And the importance of craft is palpable in both his words and his works, including *Chèque Tzanck* (1919), the *Porte de la rue Larrey* (1927) or the papier-mâché model dated to 1938, from which the miniature urinal for the *Boîte-en-valise* was made.[29]

The opposition of art and craft seems here to drive ways of thinking about making—first with regard to their separation, then surpassing this separation. Both Duchamp and LeWitt proceeded from one extreme to the other: from eliminating the use of the hand to supposedly give free rein to inventiveness (ready-made, plan) to working as craftsmen (reproducing instead of creating, executing a work by following instructions). But the disjunction of art and craft takes on a whole new dimension in the context of European colonization. In our attempt to broaden the corpus of research beyond Western artistic production, it was important that we not lose sight of the fact that this division made it impossible for practices of the colonized to attain the status of art:[30] what was made by the Other, by non-Europeans, could at most be considered craft. In his inaugural lecture for the Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Syriac language course at the Collège de France in 1862, Ernest Renan dismissed the contributions of the "Semitic peoples," claiming that "they have but little of Art in them and concluding that "our Art comes entirely from Greece."[31]

The exhibition *Global Conceptualism*, held in 1999 at the Queens Museum of Art, broke with the habitual classification of non-Western works as craft.[32] Putting an end to the dichotomy between center and periphery, the exhibition's organizers showed that conceptual art originated concurrently in several parts of the world, from a multitude of "points of origin." This was undoubtedly a laudable, even generous undertaking. Non-Western creators were no longer relegated to the bottom rung of the European art-making hierarchy, where they were considered craftsmen. But what about artists from the Middle East? How can we understand their absence from *Global Conceptualism*? Was this due to the persistence of the prejudices assimilated by Renan in his day? More generally, we need to ask whether a reversal such as the one put forth in *Global Conceptualism* truly constituted a change in thinking. If we apply the label "conceptual art" to works produced independent of the Anglo-American movement, are we not still claiming that a Western notion—in this case, conceptualism—can be universally applied?

Art historians engaged in producing a global narrative have sometimes expressed the wish for culturally specific terms for the non-Western works that they study. Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray have, on the contrary, been particularly eloquent in describing cultural purity and authenticity, which scholars of former colonies can be expected to reveal, as yet another Western myth.[33] It is certainly unrealistic to imagine that beyond colonization, we can find a pure theoretical framework free of Western notions. The impossibility of creating work independent of the Western system is also true of contemporary artists. We need only look at their education: many of them have studied in Western Europe or in the United States, and, even if this were not the case, the notions of art and craft and the distinction between them have infiltrated colonized countries, in particular through the establishment of schools that imitate European institutions.[34]

The case studies brought together in this volume focus on concept and craft in different ways. Circumventing the handmade can be a way of regaining the status of the artist long denied to those pushed to the margins of the Western world. Conversely, the notion of craft offers an opportunity to reconnect with local and regional modes of production, beyond the disrespect with which they were regarded in colonial times, and to show that artisanal skill is a vital part of artistic practice. Here, we approach the notions of art and craft from the perspective of their long history, which, at least since the Italian Renaissance, has been one of exclusion. We begin neither by collapsing the boundary between art and craft nor by inter-twining the two. We start instead from the perspective of their antagonism, observing how artists from various parts of the world test the notions of idea and concept by reflecting on what has been erased by the Western art-theoretical discourse, namely skilled craftsmanship.

The first part of this volume examines the role of technical skills in executing artworks. In the European art system, which, according to Larry Shiner, developed during the eighteenth century, the notion of skill is no longer relevant to the artist's qualities but is clearly pushed to the side of the craftsman.[35] It is associated with the body and with mechanical execution, whereas artists are supposed to create freely, like nature, their minds taking precedence over their bodies. Complicating the division between artist and craftsman, the first part of the book looks at skill in relation to practices valued for their conceptual characteristics. The importance of craft in Franz Erhard Walther's work is inscribed in the very structure of Erik Verhagen's essay. At first central, the figure of the artist is gradually supplanted by the person able to produce his works through sewing—in this case, Johanna Walther, the artist's first wife. In my essay, I explore how Ana Lupas, an artist trained in the field of tapestry and first known as a fiber artist, has drawn on her weaving skills to create collective actions that can be retrospec-tively linked to conceptualism.

The second part of the book proposes a reversal of the relationship between idea and material. While it might appear that, in a veritable conceptual practice, materials are only val-ued as the support for an idea, the cases examined here, although they stem from conceptual and postconceptual art, are free from such idealism. The subject of Christian Berger's essay is the paradox at the heart of Lawrence Weiner's work. On the one hand, the artist believes that, in order to exist as such, a work of art does not necessarily have to be fabricated. On the other hand, he describes his work as resulting entirely from his dialogue with the material. In his essay, Niko Vicario evokes a literary genre—the novel of circulation, or "it-narrative"—to examine the use of metal in works by Simon Starling, Pedro Reyes, and Hiwa K. He shows that the idea, far from controlling the way a project takes shape, is in fact engendered by working with metal: the material is not a mere means of expression but the driving force behind the work.

The third part of the book examines contemporary artistic positions that rethink the notions of the artisanal and the conceptual in the context of European colonization.[36] Nadia Radwan's essay begins with observations on the close link between craft and primitivism in Western discourse. From the European perspective, the colonized Other was at best a crafts-

man for whom creating a work of art would remain forever out of reach. Radwan shows that contemporary artists from the Middle East, her major focus here, have been able to move beyond these colonial connotations of craft; they use artisanal processes not only to create conceptual works, but also to reconnect with a long history of regional practices. The question of craft is posed quite differently in Chonja Lee's essay. The artists she studies are reticent about using craft but remain aware that, still, they sometimes may have to present themselves as possessors of artisanal skills to exist in the globalized art scene. The use of wax print textiles allows them to act as if they conform to this role: although based on industrial processes, their works appear to be handmade, thus manifesting the expectations projected onto them as non-Western creators.

The three essays gathered in the last section of the book develop the relationship between idea and making in different ways. In his essay on Ian Burn, Kim Charnley contradicts the thesis that the members of the Art & Language collective are, along with Joseph Kosuth, the most uncompromising practitioners of conceptual art. He does not present Burn as an artist-artisan—despite the fact that his biography seems to support this premise—instead showing how Burn posed the question of making in a new way in each of his works, most often drawing on the medium of language. Jean-Marie Bolay and Bénédicte le Pimpec focus on the notion of delegation in the work of John M Armleder. They observe that the artist entrusts others with the task of executing his works but, paradoxically, without concealing his pleasure in doing the work himself. Even more surprisingly, Armleder delegates not just the execution of the work but also its conception. Brenda Schmahmann's essay focuses on South Africa, examining in particular works by Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie, two artists usually excluded in the history of South African conceptual art. By looking at their work from a conceptualist angle, she gives a completely new dimension to the definition of the conceptualist idea that, rather than being determined before a work is executed, emerges from the very process of making.

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

Notes

1   Julia Garimorth, ed., *Anni et Josef Albers : l'art et la vie,* exh. cat. (Paris: Paris Musées, 2021).

2   Francesca Cozzolino and Thomas Golsenne, eds., "Par-delà art et artisanat : Approches processuelles et matérielles de la création," *Images re-vues : Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, special issue no. 7 (2019), https://doi.org/10.4000/imagesrevues.6321.

3   Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

4   Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

5   Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

6   See Christian Berger, *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

7   Ileana Parvu, Jean-Marie Bolay, Bénédicte le Pimpec, and Valérie Mavridorakis, eds., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain* (Geneva: Haute école d'art et de design; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2021).

8   Frantz Fanon's remarks about language in the West Indies or about psychological mechanisms in Madagascar can certainly be applied to ways of making things as well; the upheaval caused by colonization is responsible for their disappearance. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), pp. 25, 70.

9   Georges Didi-Huberman considers that Vasari intentionally failed to mention the contribution wax workers (*ceraiuoli*) made to sculptures by Donatello or Verrocchio, and that the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* thus, in a sense, invents "some well-crafted legends" about art. See "Ressemblance mythifiée et ressemblance oubliée chez Vasari : la légende du portrait 'sur le vif,'" *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome : Italie et Méditerranée* 106, no. 2 (1994): 430–31.

10 This did not prevent Mel Bochner from taking a stand against conceptual art by writing "Language is not transparent" on the wall of the Dwan Gallery in New York in 1970. See James Meyer, ed., *Dwan Gallery: Los Angeles to New York, 1959–1971* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 84.

11 Michael Petry, *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p. 6.

12 Sol LeWitt, "Doing Wall Drawings," *Art Now: New York* 3, no. 2 (June 1971), included in *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*, ed. Gary Garrels (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2000), p. 376.

13 Parvu et al., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire*, pp. 143–44.

14 Ibid., pp. 101–47.

15 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* (Summer 1967), included in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12–16.

16 LeWitt, "Doing Wall Drawings," p. 376.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid. The italics are mine.

20 Parvu et al., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire*, pp. 162–73.

21 Emilie Parendeau, "A LOUER #6," Mosquito Coast Factory, Campbon, 2011, https://www.alouer-project.net/?alouer=6.

22 Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact : Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), p. 93.

23 LeWitt, "Doing Wall Drawings," p. 376.

24 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'empreinte* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), included in *La ressemblance par contact*, p. 215.

25 Ibid., p. 208 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

26 In this respect, it is surprising that Lars Blunck mentions Georges Didi-Huberman's study only marginally. Lars Blunck, *Duchamps Readymade* (Munich: Edition Metzel, 2017).

27 Ibid., p. 15.

28 Ibid., p. 17.

29 See Ecke Bonk, *Marcel Duchamp: The Box in a Valise* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), pp. 203–04.

30 See Jessica Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), p. 9.

31 Quoted in "Renan on the Shemitic Nations," *The Anthropological Review* 2, no. 4 (February 1864): 58. In French, Ernest Renan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation,* Discours d'ouverture du cours de langues hébraïque, chaldaïque et syriaque au Collège de France (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1862), p. 16. My thanks to Nadia Radwan for bringing this text to my attention.

32 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999).

33 Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray, "Responding from the Margins," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 351.

34 On the establishment of schools of fine and applied arts in Egypt and Tunisia, see Nadia Radwan, *Les Modernes d'Égypte : Une renaissance transnationale des Beaux-Arts et des Arts appliqués* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 69–95, and Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École*, p. 13.

35 Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 115.

36 I quote here Okwui Enwezor in his conversation with El Anatsui: "I want to explore a seeming paradox in your work: the tension between the artisanal and the conceptual that is always part of your practice. Is there any disjunction you feel between these two poles, the handmade, highly crafted nature of your work and yet that the work is mostly driven by ideas?" El Anatsui believes that there is nothing paradoxical about this way of working. See El Anatsui, "Cartographies of Uneven Exchange: The Fluidity of Sculptural Form: El Anatsui in Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28 (Spring 2011), included in *Craft: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Tanya Harrod (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), p. 175.

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Shiner, Larry. *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

I   SKILLS

ERIK VERHAGEN

Flesh and Bones

Franz Erhard Walther and the Question of Craft

Regarding conceptual art, in the broadest sense of the term, the gap between theory and practice can be substantial, if not abyssal. The case of German artist Franz Erhard Walther, to whom this text is dedicated, is no exception to the rule. Although he has only been partially linked to the history of conceptualism, with his name appearing only sporadically in authoritative texts,[1] his place in the movement is indisputable. Walther not only participated in a number of events that in hindsight defined this phenomenon,[2] but he also collaborated for many years with one of the leading conceptual art dealers, Heiner Friedrich, who defended his work between 1967 and the last third of the 1970s. In addition, the question of eventually "overtaking" the art object in exchange for its "dematerialization" permeates his approach and, to a lesser extent, its acceptance and critical success.

   Dieter Groll is one of the only writers thus far to have examined the hypothetical congruity between Walther's trajectory and that of conceptualism, declaring that although "the other concept of oeuvre (*der andere Werkbegriff*) is without a doubt conceptual . . . Walther's art is not conceptual art. FEW does not only carry out concepts, but always seeks out the 'sensual part' as well. He never abandons the material side of the artwork, however minor, although in its object aspect, it may only be the pretext for the actual work."[3] Living in New York in the late 1960s, Walther was nevertheless a witness to the conceptual revolution, and at the time maintained numerous ties with some of its actors. In his "drawn novel," *Sternenstaub*, for example, the artist, as Groll points out, reconsiders his discussion with the critic Ursula Meyer, who at one point envisioned including him in her book *Conceptual Art* but then abandoned the idea:[4]

> Meet Vostell at Higgins' / accompanies me to Ursula Meyer's, who is to publish a book on "conceptual art" / Meyer wonders whether the book should also include alongside pure "conceptual art," conceptual works steeped in materials or whether it should be limited to strict "conceptual art" / she visits me two weeks later in the East Broadway loft / sees the drawing-manifestos for the MoMA space / Opportunity to philosophize about the concept, manipulation [of the pieces], language / I don't belong in her book.[5]

Although extremely close to both Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, to cite two of his New York friends, Walther maintained a critical stance toward the movement, speaking in detail about his incompatibility with conceptual art in his long interview with the writer Michael Lingner, one of the artist's exegetes, who, in contrast, insists on referring to him as a conceptualist:

> Replacing the materially formed work with the concept, that is, language, was a very beautiful idea, Walther asserted. It was an idea that cleared my mind and that suited me perfectly, because I had already been working with language for years. Conceptual art is intrinsically difficult to criticize . . . . Nevertheless, I could not accept the conclusions aimed at countering the possibilities of *material* language (Material*sprache*). I did not want to renounce the sensual side, the descriptive side, that is, of art as a mediator of real experiences. The visual analogy that helped me at the time best illustrates my attitude towards conceptual art. I would always say: they put up the scaffolding, the bones—perfect, you need the bones, otherwise the flesh won't hold. But it was necessary to add the meat.[6]

The notion of *Materialsprache* or material language to which Walther refers in this highly instructive passage sets in motion a reflection on the place occupied by craft in the artist's work. In this respect, it is relevant to return to his evolution and, in particular, to the key chapter in his trajectory that led him to appropriate a material, cloth, and a technique, sewing, which would eventually become his "trademark." It should be noted that his trajectory is composed of flashes of insight and very precocious developments, as well as a combination of circumstances that allowed him to shape an aesthetic partly dependent on extra-artistic factors and skills.

Before focusing on cloth and sewing, it is worth pointing out that one of the professional environments that encouraged the emergence of his practice very early on was that of pastry-making, in which he was immersed as a child and adolescent, because several members of his family, starting with his parents, were bakers. Walther claims that in some of his early works, he was reappropriating formal details or gestures that he had observed in that context.[7] The activities of making puff pastry or of filling or cutting out dough, for instance, not to mention the processual dimension inherent in these "actions," would soon nourish a catalogue of diverse and varied processes that Walther would apply to the approach he initiated in the second half of the 1950s. In some way, the question of craft, or at least of skill, was thus posed in his work from the very beginning, even if it was at first imagined by means of a rather unexpected re-transposition and decontextualization, which the artist realized for the first time in the 1970s, when his parents, looking through his *Werkmonographie* from 1972[8] drew his attention to the pseudomorphic qualities of works whose genealogy undeniably alluded to their professional sector.

But it was the discovery of cloth and sewing that constituted the veritable revolution from which Walther would build his mature work. This coincided with the artist meeting his

1 Johanna and Franz Erhard Walther with *Handlungsbuch I* (Handling Book I), Fulda, 1969

future (first) wife, Johanna Friess (fig. 1). He recalls their meeting in an interview made on the occasion of his exhibition at the Wiels contemporary art center:

> I was focused on developing my own concept of the artwork and the questions this raised. In the glued paper pieces, for example, the very notion of "gluing" bothered me because of its connotations of collage. The simplest thing would have been to produce works in metal or wood, but that would have been too banal. It was important for my own "hand" to be visible in the work, and I wanted to create something with a tactile materiality that could be associated with art. A neutrally rendered object couldn't achieve that. By then I had become close to Johanna, whose parents ran a "Wiener Hofschneiderei," a kind of specialist tailoring workshop in Fulda. We were in the workshop in March 1963, and lying on the table was a small cushioned pad known as a "tailor's ham," which was used when ironing the sleeve caps and shoulder sections of suits. It looked very similar to my glued paper pieces, but it had a seam around the edges. *Eureka*! It suddenly struck me that this was exactly what I'd been looking for. I'm not sure whether I started working on this idea right there and then, but I remember sitting in my studio making drawings for works that could be sewn, and Johanna immediately transformed these into sewn pieces.[9]

"Johanna immediately transformed these into sewn pieces." The modus operandi that emerges in this sentence would shape the division of labor—which started in 1963 and persists today—between the pieces' conceiver and their "fabricator." Although the delegation of a part, or even the totality, of the production of works is common in contemporary art, in approaches pertaining equally to minimalism, conceptual art, or Arte Povera, those delegations that lead to an exclusive relationship lasting nearly sixty years are exceptional; nor is Walther the only artist of his generation to have set his sights on fabrics associated with craftsmanship. For example, Alighiero Boetti, in the 1960s, also called on his wife, Annemarie Sauzeau, to "assist" him in embroidery operations before delegating the production of works to Afghan artisans starting in the 1970s. As Mark Godfrey notes:

> Boetti's method of production, of working with Afghan embroideries, had other important implications. "At this time," he later recalled, "not many artists had their work made by artisans." To the Italian audience of the period, embroidered cloths from Afghanistan were a difficult proposition. "Initial reaction was awful," Boetti said. The embroideries were "at once conceptually troubling and too pretty." This statement implies that it was not so much Boetti's hands-off approach to production, nor embroidery's association with "craft" rather than fine art per se that was problematic. In a context where Italian artists of the day were working with raw materials such as rock, glass, sacking, and coal, Boetti's embroideries could be seen as overtly feminine.[10]

It is worth noting that ten years earlier, when Walther "showed" his cloth pieces for the first time in the framework of his curriculum at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, he was confronted with the same lack of understanding and ridicule from his classmates as well as from Joseph Beuys, who exclaimed upon discovering the stitching, "So Walther has become a tailor now."[11] In addition, it is noteworthy that two facts in Godfrey's commentary on Boetti can be adapted to the Waltherian framework. The first touches on the alleged contradiction inherent in pieces that are "at once conceptually troubling and too pretty"; the other concerns sewing's gendered and "overtly feminine" dimension.[12]

Thus, Walther has always asserted an approach that combines flesh and bones, matter and concept. In his case, the importance of the former is all the more pronounced because the artist is unable to concretize the concept without the assistance of the person who initiated him in his matter and technique. He has never tried to take Johanna's place, never wanted to replace her despite the couple's problems (and breakup), and seems to have no difficulty in accepting the dependency relationship that obliges him to rely on her experience and expertise, as she alone is able to "give life" to her (ex-)husband's ideas.[13] Unlike Boetti with his multiple Afghan embroiderers, Walther developed a symbiotic relationship with Johanna. And yet the couple never *worked* in an "associative" configuration in the same way as the Bechers, Christo and Jeanne Claude, or Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

The question of Johanna's involvement and "responsibility" for the future of the work will undoubtedly be raised in the coming years. Walther's second and current wife, Susanne, wisely decided to initiate a wide-ranging reflection that has already given rise to a fascinating discussion between the two women during a day of meetings organized by Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2020.[14] This project will result in a book of interviews between Johanna and Susanne, in which the division of labor between Walther and those who have assisted him is expected to be subject to a "rereading." In the meantime, let us again consider this approach by associating a basic concept and a *Werkbegriff* with an artisanal dimension.

It is important to emphasize that Walther has said relatively little in the many interviews he has given or in the texts or manifestos he has written about the "materiality" of "his" cloths. One interview is extremely rare in this respect. Despite its exceptional nature, however, the artist's 1987 interview with Gert Selle has almost never been quoted by his commenters and exegetes. This perceptive interlocutor asked him why his *Materialbegriff*—a term that with some difficulty can be translated as "definition of materials"—was (almost) never accompanied by indications of the fabrics used, pointing out that his works manifest an aura that, in his view, was implicitly linked to the "quality" of said materials. According to Walther, the reason for not mentioning his favorite material, a thick cotton, was justified in that this fabric is only one of the many variables with which his works are "executed," including activations, the body, time, space, language, and history. "All these moments become the materials," the artist replied, "like stone or wood for the traditional sculptor. They define my *Materialbegriff*."[15] Walther stated in this interview that he had a lack of affect for the cotton he uses, asserting that he chose it for its "neutral" quality.[16] This argument was unsatisfactory for Selle, who contradicted Walther by indicating that the cotton generates "strong tactile stimuli."[17] One may therefore find the aura of the pieces, coupled with tactile stimulations, at odds with the "concept" the artist has asserted since the early 1960s, when he developed a *Werkbegriff* indebted to a participatory approach and dependent on the copresence of spectators invited to comply with an interactive and subjective imperative.

Since Walther appropriated cloth and sewing at a time when he was consolidating his "concept," it was impossible for him to assert the tactile, formal, or visual properties of his fabrics, let alone their artisanal quality. He would have been cornered into an approach praising "specificities": of materials (and of a technique) that he sought at the time to reduce to a point of departure for an aesthetic that was to transcend the material in favor of effects (in the sense that Jauss[18] might have understood it); and of a "plurality of experiences . . . fundamental experiences of oneself, with one's ideas, one's body, polymorphous objects, with other users; experiences that facilitate introspection, self-definition, self-expansion, self-production, orientation and awareness, in which measurement, energy, thought, time, place, weight, etc., are clearly made explicit."[19] It could even be said that in this ambitious program, the cloth's artisanal dimension was removed from the equation, and that the vast majority of his commentators clearly did not consider it useful to reassess Johanna's role and position, and even less the "overtly feminine" character of his technique, despite the fact that it lies at the

heart of his undertaking. Questioning or even renegotiating the division of labor between the conceiver and the "fabricator" of the pieces would undeniably expose us to something taboo, if not an epistemological rupture in terms of Waltherian exegesis.

Considering cloth in all its materiality also, in a sense, means taking into consideration a social and economic reality that until recently has rarely been put into perspective in analyses of the artist's work. For this purpose, I refer to a text by Gregor Quack (which I will mention again later), who was concerned with rereading Walther's work, and in particular his *1. Werksatz* (First Work Set), in the light of "social fabric." The *1. Werksatz* series is clearly the artist's magnum opus. Conceived between 1963 and 1969, it is composed of fifty-eight "pieces" made by Johanna. In accordance with these pieces, the "user" is invited to manipulate them alone or in the company of co-users. Again, the pieces are, in Walther's eyes, mere "instruments" enabling "self-definition," to use Kern's expression. This *instrumentarium* is essential to the success of that self-definition and one of the variables, which include time, space, my body or those of others, that enable us to complete the work's execution. In short, the pieces do not constitute the artworks. They cannot claim to enjoy the autonomy dear to certain modernist or minimalist approaches. They become works of art only after they have been activated, which of course confers on the pieces in question a status that is precarious, if not ambiguous. They are only instruments, and as such naturally evoke a musical metaphor. In this process of self-definition, both the composer (Walther) and the performers (users) are highlighted; the instrument, however indispensable it may be, is relegated to the background. Showcasing the cloth in the Waltherian enterprise, if we stay with this musical analogy, would be tantamount to mentioning the name of the luthier or excessively describing the soloist's instrument in a review of a violin concerto (which can, exceptionally, occur).

In his text, however, Quack aims to demonstrate that fabric is not a "neutral" entity, to revert to an adjective in the Waltherian lexicon whose contradictory nature has already been underlined, and to show that it concerns a "social fabric," conferring a property on his aesthetics that he had never put forth. For good reason: to think of cloth in this perspective would once again mean bringing to light "specificities" that are in many ways incompatible with Walther's approach. The fabric is not neutral. It constitutes a membrane. It protects me and allows me to interact with others. It allows me to see, but it also allows me to escape the gaze of others.

Adopting a gendered perspective without making it the focus of his argument, Quack conveniently reminds us that

> [w]e use uniforms and flags to tell friend from foe, the production and use of clothes marking both the oppression and the liberation of women, gendered dress codes have both oppressed the queer community and provided it with vehicles for free self-expression. No other class of commodity is quite as tightly intertwined with both the rise of industrial capitalism and the history of its critique as textiles. Whether they planned it or not, Franz Erhard and Johanna Walther would soon find themselves intertwined in many of these social

2 Franz Erhard Walther activating *Weste* (Vest), *1. Werksatz* (First Work Set), 1963–69, element # 11, 1965, at the Rhön Mountains, 1970. Strong canvas, foam rubber, glue, ca. 76 × 64 × 7 cm, circumference ca. 190 cm

meanings. This included, among many other factors, the reproduction of gendered divisions of textile labor. For nearly all of the cloth works they co-produced after 1963, Walther drew the shapes which Johanna, who worked as a seamstress for a local department store, would then put together with her sewing machine.[20]

Unlike Blinky Palermo, with whom he spent time in Düsseldorf, Walther did not use cloth to support a political position; his work, according to Quack, "helped to lay bare some of the basic mechanisms of social life (e.g., engagement, communication, avoidance),"[21] allowing viewers to realize "how such naked behaviors were interwoven with political ideologies and ideas."[22] "As important as the social connotations of fabrics were for Walther," Quack continues, "they do not alone explain the genesis of the work concept (*Werkbegriff*) that allowed Walther to turn his artworks into objects for use by viewers. After all, a number of the earliest textile pieces . . . still remained wall-mounted and somewhat pictorial. To fully complete Walther's turn toward the social, then, the use of fabric and his personal creativity had to coincide with external circumstances."[23] The author continues his analysis by focusing on certain pieces from the first *Werksatz* series that, for him, bear witness to Walther's "social situation," which in this case was rather lonely during the years spent developing this ensemble, given the hostile reactions it inspired. The fact that many of his pieces are the result of activities of isolation and protection, subtraction or concealment cannot be called into question,[24] nor can

3 Franz Erhard Walther activating *Plastische Rede* (Sculptural Speech), 1983. Cotton, wood, 365 × 470 × 40 cm, 6 elements. Collection Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle, Paris

the fact that the cloth largely contributes to their very real success. "To understand how the pieces in the *Work Set* can be understood both in relation to Walther's social surroundings," writes Quack,

> and as continually open to new and future uses, it is helpful to remember the multi-step nature of the fabrication of the *Work Set*. To take that process seriously is not just to acknowledge the immensely important role Johanna Walther played in her ex-husband and business partner's career, but also to sharpen our awareness of the fact that Walther himself wore various hats . . . throughout a work object's lifecycle. If pieces carry echoes of his biography, this is less because he invented them than because he was frequently the first person to wear and activate them.[25]

4 Franz Erhard Walther activating *Gelbmodellierung* (Yellow Modeling), 1980–81, at Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 1988. Cotton, wood, 500 × 1190 × 60 cm, 7 elements

This last argument is fundamental, because if Walther's pieces have a universal character and at no time focus on differentiations that could orient their use in a gendered, social, or cultural direction—if they are a priori usable by any "normally" constituted adult—then the artist serves as a model, not to say test subject, for each of them. In this respect, Johanna's contribution consequently conveys an approach that suggests a kind of "haute couture," progressively adapting to the evolution of the artist's measurements and weight gain. And if clothing is only incidental in the first *Werksatz,* limited to a few pieces that make use of it, as in *Weste* from 1965 (fig. 2) or *Positionen* from 1969, it is better adapted to his person and his body, even if it is not reducible to these specific sizes, in other works conceived by Franz Erhard and Johanna Walther. Just think of *Gelbe Skulptur* (Yellow Sculpture) completed in 1979,

5 Franz Erhard Walther, *1. Werksatz* (First Work Set), 1963–69 in *Lagerform* (Storage Form), exhibition view, Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, 1999

Standstelle und halbierte Weste I (Standstill and Halved Vest I) from 1982, *Plastische Rede* (Plastic Speech) from 1983 (fig. 3), or *Werkstatt* (Workshop) from 1983 and 1986.

In the late 1970s, Walther embarked on a new family of works, *Wandformationen* (Wall Formations) (fig. 4), which reinforced the artisanal dimension, for an obvious reason: although practicable, they return to a mural presentation and are de facto part of a pictorial filiation that the artist had abandoned in 1963, except for his drawings and works on paper, which he continued to present on the wall. These cloth paintings can no longer be reduced to simple points of departure, nor to *instrumentaria* serving as an intermediary for (inter)action. And although they do not enjoy complete autonomy, the history of Walther's exhibitions shows that they are most often presented in a mode that does not involve any form of activity, even if the artist may lend himself here and there to demonstrations (*Werkvorführungen*) whose character is both exceptional and ritualistic. Once Walther's works departed from a participatory perspective in the 1980s, again from a fully operational theoretical point of view, the artisanal aspect and quality of his works became more visible. This is true for all the families of works sewn by Johanna from the late 1970s on—for example, *Wandformationen* (Wall For-

6 Franz Erhard Walther, *Probenähungen* (Sample Sewings), 1969–2013, exhibition view, WIELS, Brussels, 2014

mations, 1979–86), *Configurations* (1986–92), *Handlungsbahnen* (Trajectories, 1997–2003), and *Körperformen* (starting in 2006)—so many variations in which forms and colors are shown on the walls or the floor through volumes in space, but above all through cloth, which constitutes Walther's preferred support: the flesh. The commenters who, until the 1970s, were still trying to minimize the artisanal dimension of Walther's objects should now rethink their positions. Moreover, today the artist is the first to assert that he thinks primarily in terms of "images,"[26] thus affirming the retinal and "object-oriented" turn his production has taken.

I should also mention a very specific stance that Walther takes in his work, a stance that intersects with two notions inherent to his approach: *Lagerform* (storage form) and *Probenähungen* (trial sewings). Both were established in the 1960s and can overlap, depending on the situation. *Lagerform* (fig. 5) consists in saying that a practicable piece is not necessarily practiced and that its inert, resting, and passive mode, distanced from manipulation, does not make the work non-activatable. Other modalities are, in fact, generated by the pieces at rest, starting with projections that allow spectators to imagine activation without necessarily enacting it. At once dematerialized and overmaterialized, *Lagerform* thus has a unique range insofar as the absence of manipulation is accompanied by a reification of the object that is diametrically opposed to the status of activation, which, it should be remembered, would demonstrate the negation of any form of materiality. But this reification under-

lines once again the artisanal dimension concretized through the objects presented as folded and/or enclosed in cloth membranes, also made by Johanna.

The *Probenähungen* (fig. 6) series was introduced at the end of the 1960s, more or less at the end of *1. Werksatz*. From this period on, Walther decided to keep the prototypes and samples that did or did not preside over the elaboration of his pieces. A living archive of his work, the *Probenähungen*, which initially did not have the status of a work of art, generate impressive ensembles with variable geometry, like a sort of curriculum vitae of Waltherian materials and forms. Not satisfied with simply reviving abandoned, fallen elements, *Probenähungen* embody an aesthetic of recycling that enables the artist and ourselves, the spectators, to give them a second life, as well as a great deal of visibility. These samples have been kept not in Walther's studio but in Johanna's workspace, where, for years, if not decades, she has been accumulating these traces, memories of forms, ghostly presences with a precarious status, almost or not yet works: for some, unfinished. One thing is certain: they reflect and magnify the artisanal aspect specific to this approach. In the interview made for Wiels, Walther revisited this ensemble, explaining that the pieces "started around the mid-1960s, when I realized that they had a visual and material quality, a form that was interesting even in its very lack of formalization. Then this dropped off for a while . . . . The idea came to me that these could potentially be works in their own right, and Johanna must have known that too, which is why she had held onto them all."[27] This is a rare, if not exceptional, statement by the artist incorporating his ex-wife[28] into the future of an artwork. This recognition may have been the first step in a process of empowering the woman who presides over the elaboration of Walther's cloth pieces and whose level of involvement will be reevaluated in the medium or even short term, because although the skeleton was clearly shaped by Franz Erhard, it is important to remember that we owe its incarnation to Johanna's unequalled and irreplaceable skills.[29]

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

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Notes

1 Although mentioned in books by Germano Celant (*Arte Povera* [Milan: Mazzotta, 1969]) and Lucy R. Lippard (*Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* [New York: Praeger, 1973]), Walther's name is absent from the catalogues *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989) and *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965–1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995) as well as from *Conceptual Art* by Peter Osborne (London: Phaidon, 2002) and *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality* by Anne Rorimer (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), to cite a few of the essential references on conceptual art. And while his work appears in Sophie Richard's *Unconcealed* (London: Ridinghouse, 2009), the author did not see fit to include Walther's name in the index of this indispensable book on the international network of conceptual artists.

2 Starting with *When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969 and Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972.

3 "Weiter ist der andere Werkbegriff ohne Zweifel konzeptuell, gleichwohl ist Walthers Kunst keine Concept Kunst. FEW führt eben nicht nur Konzeption aus, sondern sucht immer auch den 'sinnlichen Teil'. Nie gibt er die materiale Seite des Kunstwerkes auf, wie marginal auch sie beschaffen und in ihrer Objektseite nur der Anlass zur eigentlichen Werkhandlung sein mag." Dieter Groll, *Der andere Werkbegriff Franz Erhard Walthers* (Cologne: Walther König, 2014), p. 73 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

4 Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972).

5 Franz Erhard Walther, *Sternenstaub* (Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 2009), p. 909 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz). Some passages from the interview between Walther and Meyer were also printed in *Franz Erhard Walther: Werkmonographie*, ed. Götz Adriani (Cologne: DuMont, 1972), pp. 271–80.

6 ". . . an die Stelle der material geformten Arbeit das Konzept, d.h. Sprache zu setzen, war als Gedanke sehr schön. Es war eine Vorstellung, die für den Kopf reinigend war und mir sehr entgegenkam, weil ich schon seit Jahren mit Sprache gearbeitet hatte. Die Concept Art ist immanent schwer kritisier-bar . . . . Trotzdem habe ich die Entscheidung der Concept Art gegen die Möglichkeiten der *Material*sprache für mich nicht akzeptieren können. Ich wollte auf die sinnliche, auf die anschauliche Seite, d.h. auf die Kunst als Vermittlerin realer Erfahrungen nicht verzichten. Am besten wird meine Einstellung zur Concept Art an dem bildhaften Vergleich deutlich, der mir damals weitergeholfen hat. Ich habe immer gesagt: Die stellen das Gerüst hin, die Knochen—prima, die Knochen brauchst du, sonst hält das Fleisch nicht. Aber das Fleisch musste eben noch dazukommen." Franz Erhard Walther in *Zwischen Kern und Mantel: Franz Erhard Walther und Michael Lingner im Gespräch über Kunst* (Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1985), p. 29 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

7 See the author's interview with the artist, "The Work Can Never Be Finished: An Interview with Franz Erhard Walther," in *Franz Erhard Walther: The Body Decides*, exh. cat. (Brussels: WIELS; Bordeaux: CAPC Musée d'art contemporain; London: Koenig Books, 2014), p. 51.

8 Adriani, *Franz Erhard Walther: Werkmonographie*.

9 Ibid., p. 58 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

10 Mark Godfrey, "Boetti and Afghanistan," in *Alighiero Boetti: Game Plan*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art 2012), p. 166.

11 Verhagen, "The Work Can Never Be Finished," p. 58.

12 See also Gregor Quack's analysis cited below.

13   Although Johanna was occasionally assisted in these sewing jobs, no one could ever fully replace her. If Johanna should pass away or terminate her collaboration with Franz Erhard before he stops working, the question of how to continue this enterprise, which is certainly not limited to sewing, will have to be raised.

14   This interview between Johanna and Susanne Walther has been posted online: "Susanne Walther und Johanna Walther im Gespräch | Haus der Kunst, München," museumsfernsehen.de, December 15, 2020, https://www.museumsfernsehen.de/susanne-walther-und-johanna-walther-im-gespraech-haus-der-kunst-muenchen/.

15   Franz Erhard Walther, interview by Gert Selle, *Poiesis*, no. 4 (1988): 62 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

16   It is noteworthy that, regarding this point, Walther contradicts what he had stated previously, namely that he was "looking for a language. Something textile-tactile that could be incorporated into an art project. It couldn't be a neutral object." Verhagen, "The Work Can Never Be Finished," p. 58.

17   "[S]tarke taktile Reize." Selle, *Poiesis*, p. 62.

18   Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

19   "Vielfältige Erfahrungen . . . Grund-Erfahrungen eines Benutzers mit sich selbst, seinen Vorstellungen, seinem Körper, verschiedenen geformten Objekten, mit anderen Benutzern; Erfahrungen, die bei der Ich-Findung, der Selbst-Definition, der Selbst-Erweiterung, der "Selbstproduktion", der Orientierung und Bewusstseinsbildung helfen, indem so abstrakte Begriffe wie Mass, Energie, Denken, Zeit, Raum, Gewicht etc. anschauliches, Erleben warden." Hermann Kern, "Zeit, Energie, Prozess, Denken, Sprache—einige Aspekte der Arbeit von Franz Erhard Walther," in *Franz Erhard Walther: Diagramme zum 1. Werksatz*, exh. cat. (Munich: Kunstraum, 1976), p. 14 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

20   Gregor Quack, "The Social Fabric—Franz Erhard Walther's Transformative Artistic Practice," in *Franz Erhard Walther: Shifting Perspectives*, exh. cat. (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2020), p. 206.

21   Ibid., p. 207.

22   Ibid.

23   Ibid.

24   Examples include *Ummantelung* (1964), *Für Hügel und Berge* (1965), and *Stoffröhre* (1966).

25   Quack, "The Social Fabric," p. 208.

26   "I think primarily in terms of images, shapes, and sculptural spaces," Walther cited in *Franz Erhard Walther: Shifting Perspectives*, p. 156.

27   Verhagen, "The Work Can Never Be Finished," pp. 70–71.

28   To be clear, Johanna never sought to share her ex-husband's status as an artist, let alone his fame, preferring to remain in the shadows. See Johanna's online interview with Susanne Walther.

29   I allow myself to add in this last footnote that in meetings of the Board of Directors of the Franz Erhard Walther Foundation, of which I was a member, a great deal of time is spent on questions about the fabrication, conservation, and restoration of the works. Which is to say that these questions, and especially the answers given to them, are almost exclusively about Johanna and the central and indispensable role she plays in this family business.

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Craftsmanship from the World Before

Artisanal Skills in Ana Lupas's Participatory Actions

Conceptual art has been thought of in recent decades as a movement that went beyond the Anglo-American framework and emerged in different parts of the world simultaneously. The role played by the exhibition *Global Conceptualism* in broadening the conceptual corpus cannot be overlooked. Held at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1999, this exhibition sought to present artistic practices from all continents, and was divided into several geographical sections, with invited curators entrusted to cover each region. The curator of the Eastern European section, László Beke, included work by Romanian artist Ana Lupas, who took advantage of Beke's invitation to present photographs of *Humid Installation* from the early 1970s. Born in 1940 in Cluj, a city in Transylvania in western Romania, Lupas studied at the Ion Andreescu Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj from 1956 to 1962. Starting in the late 1960s, her work was regularly shown in national and international exhibitions and has become more widely known only recently. A broader public began to take an interest in her practice starting in 2016, when her installation *The Solemn Process* (1964–2008) entered the collections of the Tate Modern.

Although the inclusion of *Humid Installation* in *Global Conceptualism* might suggest that it is a conceptual work, Lupas was utterly unaware of the existence of a movement called "conceptual art" while developing it. The aim of this text, however, is not merely to examine the relevance of retrospectively positioning certain of the artist's works under the umbrella term of conceptual art. My primary objective is to question the place of manual and artisanal craftsmanship in a practice that, ultimately, may also have conceptual characteristics. During her studies at the Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj, Lupas specialized in weaving, and a large part of her subsequent artistic production was related to the field of fiber art. Her work was shown twice in the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne, affirming her position as a textile artist. With the understanding that her activity was carried out on a double foundation of weaving and what the artist called "actions," I will study the existing relationships between them. By exploring the articulation between hand and concept, my intention is more specifically to shed light on how Lupas made use of her solid manual and artisanal skills in her conception of collective actions.

1. The International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne

Starting with its title, Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen's 1973 book *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* highlights what the authors considered a major shift in the fiber art movement during the 1960s. Although it shared weaving's history, vocabulary, tools, and materials, the new textile practice that Constantine and Larsen called the "art fabric" movement set itself apart:[1] while weaving is a craft, art fabric was elevated to high art. In 1969, Constantine and Larsen had already focused on bringing this revolution to light in *Wall Hangings*, which they organized at the Museum of Modern Art in New York[2] and is generally considered to be the first exhibition to present weavings as veritable works of art. Both the exhibition design and the venue itself were critical in this respect. The show was presented in MoMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture—rather than that of the applied arts, the Department of Architecture and Design—and the hanging and lighting were comparable to the way paintings and sculptures were habitually displayed.[3]

In the 1960s, another change occurred in the field of fiber art, one that was specifically related to the creative process. Two different ways of working thus found themselves in direct competition. The best place to observe this contrast was undoubtedly the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne. The first technique, which had been in use in France since the mid-twentieth century, consisted of two steps.[4] The artist began by preparing a *carton*, or tapestry cartoon, a same-size painting of the planned tapestry. A craftsman called a *lissier*, or weaver, then executed the work by copying this guide as faithfully as possible. Conception and execution were thus distinctly separate. This approach was turned upside down in 1962, when Polish artists, who didn't use the *carton*, were invited to participate in the first edition of the Lausanne Biennial. From that moment on, two different camps existed.[5] Those using tapestry cartoons gathered around Jean Lurçat, a renowned figure who was president of the Association des peintres-cartonniers (The Association of Cartoon Painters) and one of the founders of CITAM (Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne, or the International Centre of Ancient and Modern Tapestry), the institution that organized the Biennial. This group was in opposition to those who advocated other modes of creating tapestries.

For Swiss writer and art critic André Kuenzi, the future of tapestry entailed abandoning the cartoon. In his book *La nouvelle tapisserie*, he even offered up an often unflattering image of Lurçat. He wrote that many weavers saw Lurçat as too "old-fashioned."[6] To define tapestry, as Lurçat did, as a "cartoon executed by some specialized craftsmen, the weavers,"[7] was at odds with the essentially Eastern European practices visitors discovered in the first editions of the Lausanne Biennial. From the start, Kuenzi supported "artists who, working without the cartoon . . . develop their ideas as they go along, on the loom, inside the material itself."[8] Kuenzi's encounter with Magdalena Abakanowicz was decisive in this respect. He had the opportunity to visit her studio during a trip to Poland in 1963, accompanied by Pierre Pauli, founder of the Lausanne Biennial. The artist's process, as she herself explained, was clearly a departure from the techniques defended by the tapestry-cartoon painters: "I start from a

1 Ana Lupas, *Tapis volant (l'œuf rouge dans le nid)* (Flying Carpet [the Red Egg in the Nest]), 1970. Wool, wire, leather, mirrors, and wood, 350 × 238 × 150 cm

model that I interpret while I'm weaving. I don't put a template under the loom, and as a guide, I have only the broad outlines of my composition, sketched out in black and white."[9] In relating her words, Kuenzi added that Abakanowicz showed him her starting point: "[A] tiny piece of paper on which a few lines had been drawn . . ."

Ana Lupas participated twice in the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne: in 1969, she exhibited a tapestry in which she turned away from figuration; and in 1971, the work shown took the form of a gigantic nest in which the artist placed a red egg (fig. 1). Suspended from the ceiling by cables, it moved away from the wall to become a three-dimensional object freely articulated in the space. Showing her textile works alongside those of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jolanta Owidzka, Jagoda Buić, and Ritzi and Peter Jacobi, Lupas seemed unquestionably to be a member of the group of Eastern European textile artists that had formed in large part thanks to the Lausanne Biennial. They all shared the same approach.

On each of the applications Lupas submitted to the Biennial's selection committee, she stated that she had done the weaving by herself in her studio.[10] The execution of her works had never been delegated to weavers.

Lupas was also connected to the Polish[11] or Yugoslav artists via another aspect of her work: her education. Unlike the French tapestry-cartoon painters, Lupas never studied to become a painter. Like her peers from other Eastern European countries, she had been working with textiles since her student years. She enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts in Cluj in 1956 and spent six years there studying weaving with the artist Maria Ciupe, whose importance she has often acknowledged.[12] In addition to various theoretical courses, her studies included technical courses in weaving run by professional craftspeople.[13] Furthermore, the weaving department there was not associated with applied arts. On the contrary, it was offered by the school of fine arts, thus granted the same status as painting and sculpture. Thus, Lupas's career is particular in that she acquired solid weaving skills within the framework of a visual arts education.

2. Tapestry and Conceptual Art

While Lupas's weaving culture has much in common with those of other Eastern European artists, her name is not closely linked to the history of fiber art in the same way as those of Abakanowicz, Owidzka, Buić, or the Jacobis. After participating in the fourth and fifth iterations of the Lausanne Biennial, she repeatedly tried to show her work there again. From 1973 to 1981, she submitted four applications to the selection committee. All of them were rejected. The impossibility of exhibiting her work at the Biennial undoubtedly lowered her chances of being perceived as a fiber artist in Western Europe and the United States. How can these multiple rejections be understood? Perhaps they resulted from Lupas's decision to move beyond the realm of weaving. Freed from the frontality of painting, fiber artists moved their works away from the medium to which it was historically attached, coming closer to sculpture and installation. But Lupas, no longer satisfied with working in ways rooted solely in fiber art, went beyond than creating textile works in three dimensions and turned toward other means of artistic expression.

From the mid-1960s, Lupas started to bring aspects of manual and artisanal craft into the realm of performance. In 1964, she initiated a collective project entitled *The Solemn Process,* which she continued for more than a decade. In the early 1970s, Lupas executed another participatory "action" titled *Humid Installation* in collaboration with peasant women (fig. 2). She submitted a proposal to the selection committee for the seventh Lausanne Biennial in 1975 for a large-scale woven piece based on *Humid Installation*. The application was rejected, implying that it may not have been entirely convincing. Another proposal for the Biennial's 1981 iteration, this time linked to *The Solemn Process,* was also refused, but this rejection most likely stemmed from its unfeasibility within the parameters of the Biennial. Rather than limiting herself to textile work, this time Lupas's proposal included a performance.
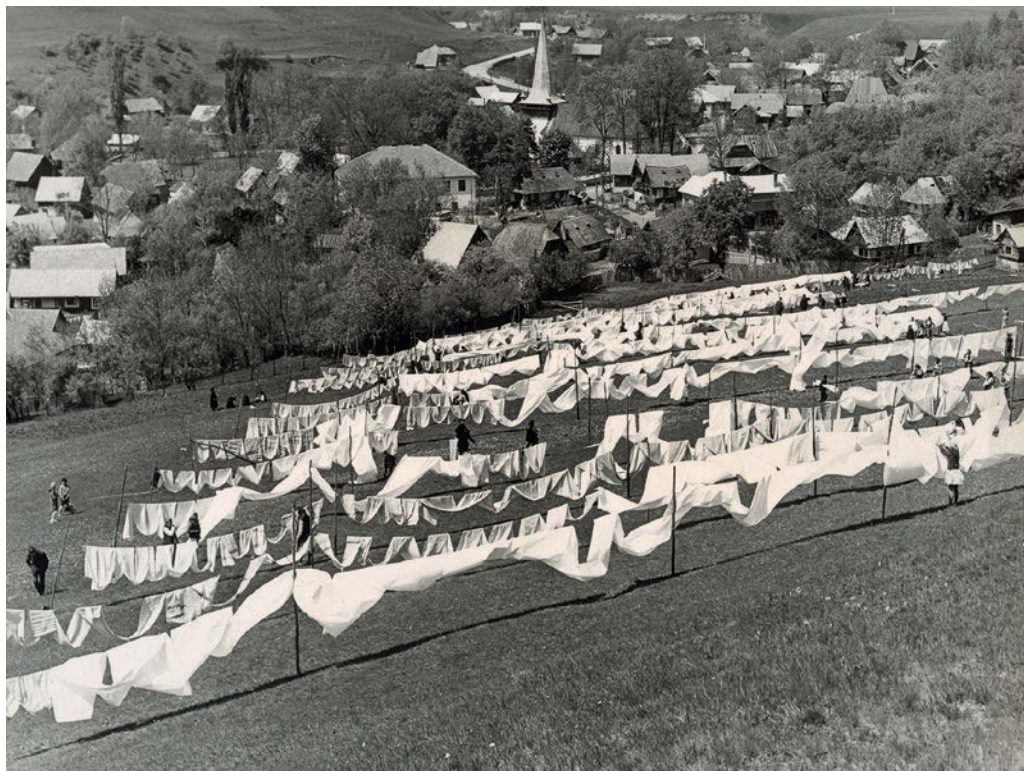
2 Ana Lupas, *Humid Installation*, 1970. Collective action, Mărgău (Romania). On the back of the photograph, the initial title of the work is indicated ("Flying Carpet, Symbol of Peace: Object Obtained through Action, Action of a Festive Nature"), along with another date of creation (1973)

In a handwritten note attached to her application, the artist specified that the performance would take place over a period of twenty-four hours. It was to involve two fixed, "preparatory" times, the first at 12:30 pm and the second at 12:30 am. What was Lupas intending to use this time for? What were the preliminary steps in the work? What were the "preludes to the Last Supper" described by the artist on her application? It is difficult to know more on this subject.[14] What is certain is that Lupas did not intend to pay less attention to the physical execution of a material artwork simply because she had turned to the medium of performance. There is no doubt that her proposal for the 1981 Biennial included an object. Based on the photographs sent to the selection committee (figs. 3–4) and the formats indicated in her application, we can identify this object as one of the monumental wheat wreaths crafted by villagers in Transylvania following the artist's instructions for *The Solemn Process*. By using performance, Lupas intended not to dematerialize her practice, but rather to provide insight into the work involved in making the wreaths. In this last application for the Lausanne Biennial, she sought to bring together, by means of performance, both the object that resulted from the project and the process of making in which it was rooted.
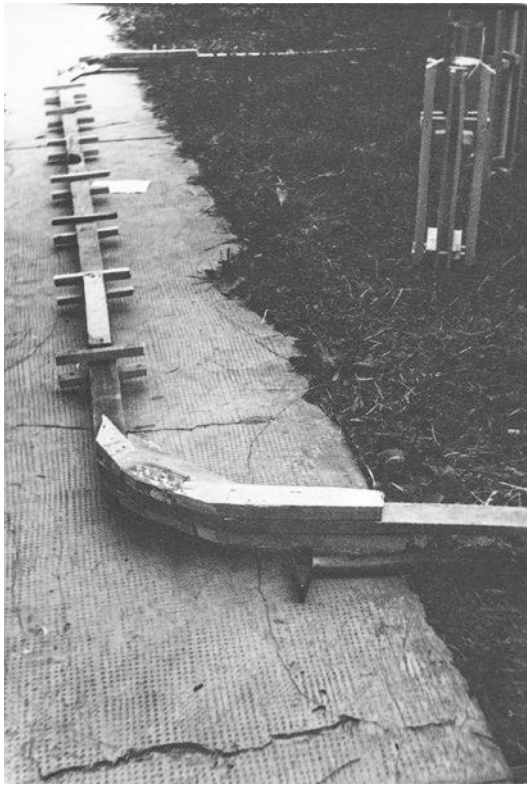
3 Ana Lupas, photograph of *The Solemn Process* project, proposed at the 10th International Tapestry Biennial Lausanne, 1981

The 1981 application was not Lupas's first attempt to show *The Solemn Process* in this way. Claude Ritschard's invitation to present a solo exhibition at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne two years earlier had given her the opportunity to think about the ways in which this long-term project could be presented to the public. The artist and curator had met in 1978 at the International Triennial of Tapestry in Lódź, where Lupas was showing her work. Although the exhibition in Lausanne, *Rencontre avec . . . Ana Lupas* (Meeting with . . . Ana Lupas), did take place, visitors never saw the performance imagined in connection with *The Solemn Process*. In this case, the inability to present the project was not due to its performative dimension, as it had been at the Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne. What was challenging for the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts was the inclusion of objects in the performance. In her letters to Lupas, Ritschard informed her that the institution could not afford the costs of shipping the works.[15] The artist was willing to bear the expenses of transporting the wheat wreaths herself. But how would she repatriate them when she did not have foreign currency? Lupas thought about putting them up for sale in Lausanne, although she would have had to make sure that the buyer could keep the works in an outdoor space, protected

4 Ana Lupas, photograph of *The Solemn Process* project, proposed at the 10th International Tapestry Biennial Lausanne, 1981

from birds and rodents. Ritschard could only state that the situation was "very complicated." She suggested that the artist envisage an "action," emphasizing the word, and that it should be based on documents.

Lupas ultimately took her advice. She simply asked that the gallery in which the two-week-long exhibition would take place be equipped with a large table, a slide projector, and a 16mm film projector. Her works were shown only in reproductions. Her intervention mainly took the form of a reading-performance. She put books on the table that told the story of her family and read aloud long excerpts from them. The modifications made to her initial proposal did not prevent the Swiss art critic Françoise Jaunin from writing in the *Tribune de Lausanne* that Lupas had found a form likely to convey the "ferment of dynamism and communication" anticipated in the *Rencontre avec . . .* series, but which until then had not been achieved.[16] In her review, entitled "Tapisserie conceptuelle" (Conceptual Tapestry), she aptly described the situation, depicting the close link that existed between the two aspects of the artist's work. Lupas had taken a decisive turn that Jaunin saw as conceptual "without, however, abandoning the textile support."[17]

Yet how could she have produced conceptual art when she knew nothing about it? This movement had certainly not been visible in Romania in the 1960s and 1970s.[18] Very few Romanian artists at the time were even aware of its existence. When she was imagining her actions, Lupas had no knowledge of what was happening simultaneously in American or British art. And this is not the only difficulty in linking her practice to conceptual art. In addition, an entire aspect of her work went against the current of the conceptual art movement. Sol LeWitt, the first to use the term "conceptual art" in an article in 1967, wrote primarily about the separation between coming up with an idea for a project and executing it.[19] The division of labor into two steps that he wrote about is not dissimilar to Lurçat's conception of weaving, first prepared by cartoon painters, then executed by craftsmen.[20] This way of working was completely foreign to Lupas. The weaving technique she and her Polish or Yugoslav peers used did not conform to that of French tapestry. Those artists carried out all aspects of the process. They thus seemed to trace a path that was completely opposite the one conceptual artists would create some years later.

Nonetheless, associating Lupas's practice with conceptual art is not unjustifiable. One can look to several elements of her work, starting with the way the artist referred to her collaborative projects as "actions." The word seems to have been used spontaneously, without any connection whatsoever to American or Western European art.[21] It was part of the original title of *Humid Installation*: "[A]n object produced by means of an action."[22] A full range of notions that resurfaced during the conceptual art movement thus appear relevant to Lupas's work. As soon as she initiated projects whose realization required the participation of numerous people, Lupas found herself in the position of providing instructions, plans, and sketches. She was the bearer of an idea that would lead to an artwork, so long as others agreed to execute them. Doesn't this accurately describe the separation between conception and execution made by Lurçat or LeWitt? If not, it is for the simple reason that Lupas circulated freely between these two poles and did not see her work as limited to the project stage. Another distinction from conceptual art involves the question of technique. According to LeWitt, art is conceptual insofar as it is "free from dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman."[23] In 1981, writing about this same period, Ian Burn was less enthusiastic, even suggesting that conceptual art was responsible for a loss of manual skills among artists.[24] Delegating the execution of a work of art, he explained, eliminated the artist's desire to acquire those skills through rigorous practice and extended training.

But Lupas's art bears no trace of the "deskilling," to use Burn's own term, that he blamed on conceptual art. On the contrary, her works are based entirely on her technical skill. The specificity of her practice is that her craft served not only in producing her weavings but deeply informed her entire practice, in particular her collective projects. While her works are not without what might be called conceptual qualities, their dissimilarities to conceptual art seem to predominate. In addition, when Lupas used the word "action," she hardly planned to dematerialize her practice. The object made through artisanal processes was at the origin of her actions. Despite these differences, is it possible to situate Lupas's work in the conceptual

art movement? As previously mentioned, in 1999, five photographs of her *Humid Installation* were presented in the exhibition *Global Conceptualism*.[25] With the word "conceptualism," the exhibition undoubtedly succeeded in emphasizing the differences between Anglo-Saxon conceptual art and artistic practices in Latin America. It is less clear whether the term does sufficient justice to works produced independently of the conceptual movement.[26] It is as if, in order to be shown, they had to conform to norms of which their creators were unaware while making them. However, if drawing connections between Lupas's actions and conceptual art is instructive, it not only underlines the elements that approximate conceptual art. It also, and above all, enables us to observe how this example can act upon the framework into which it is retrospectively introduced. What we understand as "conceptual art" actually changes when we include works like Lupas's as part of the movement. It then becomes necessary to stop opposing conceptual art to technique, craft, and skill, in order to closely link conception to manual or artisanal execution.

3. *The Solemn Process*

The main mission of the Transylvanian Museum of Ethnography as it was conceived by its first director, Romulus Vuia, in the 1920s was the preservation and restoration of the traditional peasant culture in Romania and its neighboring countries.[27] Significantly, preservation and restoration were precisely the goals Lupas set for herself when, two years after completing her studies, she went to a Transylvanian village to begin her project *The Solemn Process*. Her intention was to revive, with the villagers' help, a regional custom that consisted in making wreaths out of ears of wheat to give thanks for the abundance of the harvest. In 1964, when she began this action, the custom had become obsolete; only the village elders remembered the skills needed to create these objects. The artist thus had to focus on reconstituting these gestures and techniques. She stayed with the villagers so that they would learn from her how to make the wreaths. The work recommenced every autumn, with those who had mastered these gestures teaching the others. Lupas would have liked to pass this knowledge from one generation to the next indefinitely. Her wish was not realized, but, according to the artist, the farmers' interest in wreath-making persisted for more than ten years.

Lupas's practice clearly hearkens back to the issues that inspired the establishment of the first ethnographic museum in Romania back in 1923.[28] But the difficulties the artist had been forced to confront were completely unknown at the time. While Vuia feared farming culture might disappear due to urban homogenization,[29] the world that Lupas sought in part to save had already vanished. It was a victim of the collectivization of Romanian agriculture carried out from 1949 in close collaboration with the Soviet Union.[30] This campaign officially ended in 1962, when the communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej declared it was complete.[31] A very small number of peasants may have benefitted from the establishment of this agricultural system.[32] For most, collectivization constituted a major trauma of the Socialist

period.[33] It is generally considered responsible for destroying the fabric of the social relationships typical of rural life, and for the transformation of peasants into rural proletarians.[34]

The Solemn Process could only take place in one of the few villages that had escaped collectivization. Since the reform of Romanian agriculture was contingent upon major territorial variations,[35] mountainous or hilly regions were often spared because the soil's poor quality and the fields' limited size clearly reduced the farms' productivity;[36] in this context, Transylvania had the lowest rate of collectivized arable land in the country.[37] To execute her project, the artist thought it best to go to the native village of her grandfather, the historian Ioan Lupas, where she still had family. Since the wheat yield was depleted there, she needed to find another location. During her frequent visits to the Museum of Ethnography, she met a teacher living in Mărgău, a village near Cluj, who invited her there to continue her project.[38] It was there that The Solemn Process would take place each autumn until 1976. The endless repetition in which Lupas wished to inscribe her project was not inspired by exaggerated ambition but reflected the artist's commitment to saving what little she could from the past before it completely disappeared.

Analyses of The Solemn Process often emphasize its temporal indeterminacy. They posit the project as untethered to temporality and open "at both ends."[39] Intended to go on indefinitely, it also reached back into a world before, eluding any notion of time. The word "ancestral" often reappears in describing the craft she was trying to rescue from oblivion.[40] Sebestyén Székely wrote that Lupas's actions are defined by their anti-historical character.[41] However, The Solemn Process does provide temporal reference points. The communal rituals that Lupas revives in this project are specific to Transylvania's history. In Austria as well as in Hungary, monumental wreaths made of ears of various grains were crafted for harvest festivals. In the late 1960s, Helmut Fielhauer sent a questionnaire about these objects (Erntekronen) to many villages in Lower Austria as part of his research on folklore.[42] The wreaths he described from the information he obtained clearly resemble those in Lupas's work.[43]

Unlike in Austria, it was certainly impossible to reproduce imperial wheat wreaths with crosses on top in the context of a communist regime. However, several aspects, including their vertical structures arising from a circular base, their presentation suspended from beams and their large format, show that the objects Lupas produced with Transylvanian villagers do not differ significantly from those made in the Austrian (and also Hungarian) countryside. The wreaths crafted in the context of The Solemn Process are therefore not ahistorical objects. They pertain to a specific cultural framework and bring to mind the period when Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But Lupas's project has a more modern temporal reference point in Romanian ethnography of the interwar period.[44] Her sensitivity to the interconnectedness of the region's material cultures resonates with Vuia's attempt to account for the mutual influences of the Romanian, Magyar, and Saxon populations of Transylvania in terms of craft.[45]

The wreaths also evoke the whirlwind of the harvest festival. Lupas's hands were rather tied, and even if she had wanted to, she would not have been able to resurrect a great number

of festive rituals. It is therefore interesting to note that of all possible activities—processions, dances, games, songs, meals[46]—she selected the wreath-making process. She proposed that villagers learn how to make these objects, then keep them to decorate their yards and houses. Their pleasure was limited to the acquisition of technical knowledge. Lupas produced over a hundred drawings to guide the participants. Her documents detail the various steps in forming the wreaths: assembling wooden elements to form skeletal support structures, using knotting patterns to attach the wheat bales, fixing a wire mesh skin over fabric padding, creating sheaves to be sewn onto the mesh. Since diagrams were not sufficient for teaching the villagers the necessary skills and techniques, Lupas worked alongside them, passing from group to group, showing them her own way of working.

Precisely which gestures did the artist wish to rescue from oblivion? How did she come to understand them? Where did she find them? In the proposal she submitted to the selection committee for the tenth Lausanne Tapestry Biennial, she included a list of materials intended for the performance related to *The Solemn Process*, indicating how these objects had been produced. Some were traditional peasant crafts; others were woven industrially. The only thing the artist described as a "personal manual technique" was the work made with ears of wheat. What does this mean? At the beginning of the project, the wheat wreaths were probably no more than a memory. Lupas probably knew less about the process than what it led to. And in order to realize objects that exist only as mental images, it is not enough to reconstruct gestures from the past. It is necessary to invent new processes. The artist thus had to find "personal" ways to bring the wheat wreaths back to life.

4. *Humid Installation*

In Mărgău, where *The Solemn Process* was repeated year after year, Lupas organized another collective project in the early 1970s. Women villagers agreed to remove laundry from their closets, dampen it, and hang it in a meadow to dry in the sun (fig. 5). The work is currently titled *Humid Installation*; its title was undoubtedly changed in the early 1990s, when the artist wanted to emphasize the water flowing down from the damp fabric.[47] The original title, "Flying Carpet," evoked the motif of flight. Lupas returned to this theme often, exploring it in several of her weavings and textile sculptures, including *The Flying Machine on a Holiday* (1971). However, "Flying Carpet" does not seem sufficient to describe the action carried out with the women from Mărgău. When the Romanian journal *Arta* published two images of this work in 1974, this first part of the title was accompanied by the words "symbol of peace."[48] In fact, this apposition was a strategy. It served to circumvent censorship by making it appear that the work addressed one of the communist authorities' favorite themes. To complete the text, Lupas specified that "the object was produced by means of an action" and that "this action had a festive character."[49]

5 Ana Lupas, *Humid Installation*, 1970. Two photos printed on paper in the 1970s, artist's original text, 70 × 100 cm each; original cloth roll, 50 × 720 cm

Object and action: Wasn't the artist plainly naming here the two poles around which she intended to organize her practice? She succeeded in bringing together terms that in conceptual art are most often at odds with one another. What do they mean specifically in relation to *Humid Installation*? A photograph taken during this action shows fabric sheets spread out along fifteen parallel clotheslines that fill an entire meadow,[50] while below one can see the bell tower and houses of Mărgău. Women are busy with their laundry or chat in small groups. Lupas created a convivial moment, perhaps imagined as a village fair, using the yards of heavy, handwoven cloth the women kept in their homes. Unlike *The Solemn Process*, *Humid Installation* does not depend on making something, since the fabric already exists. The sheets do not become the object that Lupas names in her description of the work until they are activated,

by being unfolded and set in motion. They are flying carpets once hung on the clothesline, swelling in the wind.

The fact that Lupas gathered women together for a supposedly feminine activity may have suggested that she had a feminist agenda. In 1981, the American magazine *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* published a photograph of *Humid Installation*.[51] The image was printed alone, without any article discussing or even mentioning the work. It was reproduced in a rather unexpected spot: at the bottom of a page, at the end of an interview in which three Vietnamese women, exiled in the United States, explain the reasons leading to their decisions to have children.[52] Including a photograph of *Humid Installation* in *Heresies* was tantamount to assigning a political meaning to Lupas's action, in that its simple inclusion implicitly linked the work to the feminist movement. The caption below the image, followed by some biographical information on Lupas, showed that the editors were not totally un-informed—but it seems clear that the editorial team had no direct contact with the artist. Their lack of knowledge about the specific conditions in which the work came about led them to assume that Lupas's work had been encouraged by the government, even though, in real-ity, the artist had been obliged to carry out her project covertly. The caption in *Heresies* ended with a reference to an improbable "communist collective near Cluj" that the editors believed had helped Lupas to build her large-scale sculptures.[53] And their enigmatic description of "indigenous bread-making and hay-stacking forms" can perhaps be identified as the wheat wreaths in *The Solemn Process*.

This misunderstanding was mainly due to the belief that Lupas was a feminist in the American sense of the term.[54] The feminist movement organized from the 1960s onward in the United States and in Western Europe did not, in fact, have any authority in communist Romania. Before 1990, feminist ideology was not diffused in the country in any way.[55] And this is not the only reason that feminism in its Western form could not exist in Romania. In a communist regime, it was unthinkable to fight for individual rights, for access to personal autonomy.[56] But the emancipation of women was part of the collective Marxist program. It was therefore the government's role to enact it. Rather than coming about as a result of social demands or expectations, equality between men and women was imposed from the top down.[57] What the editors at *Heresies* saw in the photograph of *Humid Installation* was certainly not the work's specific content. Instead, they thought they recognized in it the questions that concerned them. Still, their perspective is not uninteresting, since it testified to the open-endedness of Lupas's action and its capacity to speak to others, even outside the context in which it had been realized.

Although there is probably no justification to speak of feminism within the context of Eastern European communism, specific measures did enable Romanian women to achieve relative economic independence.[58] Their emancipation as produced by communism came via a unique path: that of professional activity.[59] The working world in Romania provided an anchor for the principle of equality between men and women. Mihaela Miroiu has noted that at least in the early days of communism, women did not define themselves as mothers, wives,

or daughters.[60] What prevailed in their identity construction was their function as electricians, tractor operators, lawyers, and teachers. Lupas seems to have turned away from this "state proto-feminism," to use Miroiu's expression,[61] when she asked the peasant women of Mărgău to hang their linen in the sun. In the countryside, roles were clearly differentiated and determined.[62] To ask the men of the village about domestic matters would have been an aberration. However, it is unlikely that Lupas was trying to show in *Humid Installation* that domestic tasks were exclusively the responsibility of women. Her intentions certainly lay elsewhere.

Lupas did not intend to carry out an action that dealt primarily with the place of women in Romanian society. As present as the women may be in *Humid Installation*, their presence happened implicitly. The first impulse for the work thus came from the object. At the artist's request, the peasant women did not remove clothes, sheets, or linens from their closets; in most cases, they brought out fabric provisions from which they would draw, when needed, extra rolls of cloth that they and other women in their families had handwoven in hemp, linen, or cotton threads. To participate in Lupas's action, it was most likely enough for them to wet the cloths they had in storage. The acts of washing, bleaching, and softening the fabric were effectively carried out only once, when the weaving was completed.[63] In *Humid Installation,* Lupas was thus working with an object that she knew would soon become obsolete. The domestic production of textiles involved labor that farm women had been increasingly able to avoid since the 1960s.[64] They had stopped weaving when it became possible to procure industrial materials. *Humid Installation* thus joins *The Solemn Process* in that both actions were driven by the artist's attempt to withstand the oblivion she saw lurking just around the corner for the villagers' craft.

Lupas had always tried to preserve the memory of what she knew was in danger of disappearing. In this way, her work is a memorial. But the grounds on which this was accomplished were variable. For several decades, the artist endeavored to preserve the memory of her own work, and her concern for the preservation and restoration of her artworks marked a turning point in her production.[65] Still, it would be inaccurate to think that Lupas was involved only in conservation. To transform an action into a perennial work constitutes a veritable artistic project, all the more so since an object in its final form must tremble with the fragility of transience. Lupas also gave her work a more clearly commemorative side when she used her *Humid Installation* to create a monument. In 1991, she installed her *Memorial of Cloth* on Bucharest's University Square in memory of the protesters who had clashed violently the previous year with police and coal miners brought there from the Jiu Valley by the government. Twenty years after it was installed in Mărgău, the artist covered the sheets with bitumen. The fabric was no longer hanging in the wind: blackened and weighed down, it was suspended from iron bars.

It was to rescue whatever she could from oblivion that Lupas turned to the peasant world after completing her studies. In the 1960s, the upheavals this world had undergone since the end of World War II predicted the failure of its traditions to survive. Both *The Solemn Process* and *Humid Installation* arose from shaping this ethnographic material. It does not

seem impossible to link them retrospectively to conceptual art. On the one hand, unlike LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, or Lawrence Weiner, Lupas had little pretense of remaining at the idea stage in her work;[66] in addition, the materiality of the object seems to take on an importance for her that it did not have for these conceptual American artists. On the other hand, *The Solemn Process* and *Humid Installation* could have been considered conceptual works as soon as Lupas conceived them without the need to execute them herself. Ultimately, however, we should not limit ourselves to inscribing them in conceptual art. We should instead observe how their inclusion calls into question our understanding of the conceptual art movement. While LeWitt believed that conceptual art "is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman,"[67] Lupas's actions did not owe their existence solely to the knowledge she derived from manual and artisanal craft. They also went beyond it, as celebrations of the crafts and skills of the peasant world that were in the process of disappearing.

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

Notes

1   Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973), p. 7.
2   Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *Wall Hangings,* exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969).
3   See Rossella Froissart and Merel van Tilburg, "De la tapisserie au *Fiber Art* : Crises et renaissances au XXe siècle," *Perspective*, no. 1 (2016): 138.
4   Katharine L. H. Wells, "Artistes contre liciers. La renaissance de la tapisserie française," in *Decorum : Tapis et tapisseries d'artistes,* exh. cat. (Paris: Flammarion; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2013), p. 56.
5   Giselle Eberhard-Cotton and Magali Junet, *De la tapisserie au* Fiber Art *: Les Biennales de Lausanne 1962–1995* (Milan: Skira, 2017), p. 48.
6   André Kuenzi, Erika Billeter, and Kuniko Lucy Kato, *La nouvelle tapisserie* (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1981 [1973]), p. 32.
7   Ibid., p. 24.
8   Ibid.
9   Ibid., p. 185.
10 The questionnaires Ana Lupas filled out when applying to the Lausanne Biennial are kept in the archives of the Fondation Toms Pauli. I would like to express my thanks to Giselle Eberhard-Cotton, who headed the Fondation Toms Pauli until 2023, and its current director, Magali Junet, for allowing me to consult the archive of the Biennial.
11 See Marta Kowalewska, "Pologne : En quête de sens," in *De la tapisserie au Fiber Art*, p. 164. In her biography of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Joanna Inglot notes that the artist graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in the department of textile design, not painting, as has often been stated. See Joanna Inglot, *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz: Bodies, Environments, and Myths* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 124, n. 28.

12 See Sebestyén György Székely, *Maria Ciupe: Textile Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cluj: Quadro Gallery, 2018), p. 34.

13 This information was provided by Marina Lupas Collinet during a video conference interview with the author on April 15, 2021.

14 Despite my research and interviews with Giselle Eberhard Cotton and Marina Lupas Collinet, the exact content of this performance remains unknown.

15 The correspondence concerning the organization of the exhibition *Rencontre avec . . . Ana Lupas* held from January 4 to 17, 1982, is kept in the archives of the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne. I extend my thanks to Manuela Giovannini for allowing me to consult them.

16 Françoise Jaunin, "'Rencontre avec . . .' Ana Lupas : Tapisserie conceptuelle," *Tribune de Lausanne le Matin : TLM*, January 15, 1982 (translation by Laurie Hurwitz).

17 Ibid.

18 See Cristian Nae, "Notes on the Concomitant Subversion, Revision and Solidifying of an Alternative Art Canon," *Revista Arta*, nos. 20–21 (2016): 7.

19 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 12.

20 Katharine Wells claims that delegating the execution of the work to another party makes tapestry a precursor to both minimal and conceptual art. See Wells, "Artistes contre liciers. La renaissance de la tapisserie française," p. 55.

21 According to information provided by Marina Lupas Collinet during a video conference interview with the author on June 9, 2021.

22 The performance's original title, *Flying Carpet*, printed in a caption in the journal *Arta*, no. 2 (1974): 7, included the phrase "an object produced by means of an action."

23 LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," p. 12.

24 Ian Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (or the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)," in *Conceptual Art*, p. 395.

25 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. 268.

26 On the contrary, Piotr Piotrowski finds this exhibition is an excellent example of the horizontal practice of art history. See Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p. 33.

27 Romulus Vuia, *Muzeul etnografic al Ardealului* (Bucharest: Impr. Fundației culturale Regele Mihai I, 1928), p. 3.

28 Lupas's relationship to Vuia's ethnographic project is not only intellectual and artistic but also familial. In 1929, an open-air ethnographic museum opened in Cluj thanks to the support of the artist's great-uncle, Iuliu Maniu, prime minister at the time. See Tudor Sălăgean, "'Grădina neamului': 90 de ani de la înființarea primului muzeu în aer liber din România," adevarul.ro, June 23, 2019, https://adevarul.ro/cultura/patrimoniu/gradina-neamului-90-ani-dela-infiintarea-primului-muzeu-aer-liber-romania-title-1_5d0fd951892c0bb0c6b6d28c/index.html. The artist's grandfather, the historian Ioan Lupas, was a specialist of the peasant world, especially that in Transylvania, on which he undertook much research.

29 Vuia, *Muzeul etnografic al Ardealului*, p. 4.

30 See Constantin Iordachi and Dorin Dobrincu, eds., *Transforming Peasants, Property and Power: The Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania, 1949–1962* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), p. 2.

31 See ibid., p. 11.

32 See Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949–1962* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 3.

33 See ibid.

34 See ibid.; Iordachi and Dobrincu, *Transforming Peasants, Property and Power*, p. 6; and Aurora Liiceanu, *Nici alb, nici negru: Radiografia unui sat romanesc, 1948–1998* (Bucharest: Nemira, 2000), p. 89.

35 See Kligman and Verdery, *Peasants under Siege*, p. 143.

36 See ibid., p. 144.

37 See ibid., p. 145.

38 This information was given to me verbally by Marina Lupas Collinet.

39 In the words of Marina Lupas Collinet in her unpublished text "*The Solemn Process* – Reliquary for Infinity," "timelessness is open at both ends."

40 See Marina Lupas Collinet, "Drawings Handbook," in *Ana Lupas: Drawing* The Solemn Process (Bologna: P420, 2021), p. XIII.

41 Sebestyén Székely, "On a Map, in a Different Time," in *Ana Lupas: Drawing* The Solemn Process, p. XIX.

42 Helmut P. Fielhauer, "Palmesel und Erntekrone: Zwei Folklorismus-Skizzen aus dem Niederösterreichischen Festkalender," in *Helmut P. Fielhauer: Volkskunde als demokratische Kulturgeschichtsschreibung: Ausgewählte Aufsätze aus zwei Jahrzehnten*, ed. Olaf Bockhorn, Reinhard Johler, and Gertraud Liesenfeld (Vienna: Institut für Volkskunde der Universität Wien, 1987), p. 309.

43 Ibid., p. 313.

44 In Romania, the interwar period was propitious for ethnographic studies. Under the direction of Dimitrie Gusti, a vast project of study of rural life was carried out at the time. It led to the creation of the National Village Museum in Bucharest in 1936. See Juliana Maxim, *The Socialist Life of Modern Architecture: Bucharest, 1949–1964* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 129–35. Ramona Novicov notes that Ana Lupas's father was friends with ethnologist Ernest Bernea, a researcher at the Bucharest School of Sociology, which was founded by Gusti. His son, the painter Horia Bernea, reorganized the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest and was appointed its director in 1990. See Ramona Novicov, "Ana Lupaş: Soliloquies," Institutul Prezentului, November 2019, https://institutul prezentului.ro/en/2019/11/15/ana-lupas-soliloquies/.

45 Vuia, *Muzeul etnografic al Ardealului*, pp. 23, 35.

46 In comparison, most ethnographic studies of the harvest festival (*Erntedankfest*) focus very little on material culture. Claudia Elena Zidaru, in her article on fall rituals of the Saxons in Southern Transylvania*,* mentions religious ceremonies, decorating the altar and chants in German. Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann's extensive research on harvest customs in nineteenth-century Germany focuses on the ritual "Binden und Lösen." See Claudia Elena Zidaru, "Considerations on Autumn Traditions of Saxons in Southern Transylvania," *The Yearly Review of the Ethnographic Museum of Moldavia*, no. 9 (2009): 323; and Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Erntebrauch in der ländlichen Arbeitswelt des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1965).

47 Under the title *Humid Installation,* in 1994, Lupas presented another version of this work in the group exhibition *Europa, Europa: Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa* (Europe, Europe: The Century of the Avant-Garde in Central and Eastern Europe) held at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn.

48 "Covor zburător, simbol al păcii," *Arta*, no. 2 (1974): 6–8.

49 These four elements appear in French as the title of the work on the back of a photograph of the Mărgău action that Lupas included in her application to the scientific committee of the Lausanne Tapestry Biennial in 1975.

50 *Humid Installation* occupied a surface of some 3,000 square meters.

51 *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* 4, no. 1 (1981): 73.

52 The photograph of *Humid Installation* was published in an issue devoted to the question of the links between feminism and ecology. The editors wanted among other things to shed new light on reproductive rights. "Editorial Statement 13," *Heresies* 4, no. 1 (1981): n. p.

53 Ibid., p. 73.

54 On the problems that an interpretive model based on American feminism may pose when applied to the Eastern European situation, see Agata Jakubowska, "The 'Abakans' and the Feminist Revolution," in *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, ed. Sascha Bru et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 253–65; Beata Hock, "Communities of Practice: Performing Women in the Second Public Sphere," in *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, ed. Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 202–18.

55 See Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie: Teorii politice feministe* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2004), p. 188.

56 See ibid., p. 185.

57 See Petruța Cîrdei, "Femeia comunistă între realitate, doctrină și propagandă," *Annals of the University of Bucharest/Political Science series* 14, no. 2 (2012): 75–76.

58 See Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie*, p. 188.

59 See ibid., p. 213, and Cristina Liana Olteanu, Elena-Simona Gheonea, and Valentin Gheonea, *Femeile în România comunistă: Studii de istorie socială* (Bucharest: Politeia-SNSPA, 2003), p. 78.

60 Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie*, p. 213. These remarks resonate with Magdalena Abakanowicz's statements about the status of women in Poland. See Inglot, *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz*, p. 68.

61 Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie*, p. 211.

62 See Liiceanu, *Nici alb, nici negru*, p. 167.

63 See Tudor Pamfile and Mihai Lupescu, *Cromatica poporului român* (Bucharest: Socec și C. Sfetea, 1914), pp. 172–78.

64 See Magdalena Buchczyk, "To Weave or Not to Weave: Vernacular Textiles and Historical Change in Romania," *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 12, no. 3 (2014): 328–45.

65 Lupas devoted herself entirely to the preservation and restoration of her works from the 1980s onward. See Alina Şerban, "Ana Lupas," AWARE (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions). https://awarewomenartists.com/artiste/ana-lupas/.

66 About the gap between the declarations of conceptual artists and the realization of their works, see Ileana Parvu, Jean-Marie Bolay, Bénédicte le Pimpec, and Valérie Mavridorakis, eds., *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain* (Genève: Haute école d'art et de design; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2021).

67 LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," p. 12.

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II MATERIALS

CHRISTIAN BERGER

Lawrence Weiner's Material Actions

Lawrence Weiner repeatedly emphasized the importance of materials in his practice. At the beginning of 1969, when asked what constituted the object of his work, he replied, "Materials"—even though his main concern lay not with them, but with art.[1] He articulated a distinct position in the field of conceptual art during the late 1960s by explicitly referring again and again to materials and material-based processes in his work, which he carried out himself as well. Yet he also conceived of material execution not just as a distinct and secondary step in the realization of a work, but as a strictly optional possibility. Thus, Weiner's practice at the end of the 1960s presents a remarkable, seemingly paradoxical example in the context of the present volume: while working with materials remained an important aspect of his practice, he dramatically relativized the status of (material) execution, albeit without going so far as to advocate for a "dematerialization" of art.[2]

Having determined that his works were already fully realized in their linguistic form, Weiner systematized his approach at the end of 1968. In a crucial step, Weiner laid down the foundation for his future practice, which would continue until his death in December 2021, in two key publications: the artist's book *Statements*, published in December 1968 with the gallery owner and exhibition organizer Seth Siegelaub, and his "Statement of Intent" (sometimes also referred to as "Declaration of Intent"), produced at about the same time and published shortly thereafter in the catalogue of the exhibition *January 5–31, 1969*, likewise organized by Siegelaub.

As will be demonstrated below, the linguistic actions in *Statements* and *January 5–31, 1969* each decidedly refer to materials. Weiner thus developed a practice based on two apparent contradictions: First, although many of his works were strongly anchored in materiality, they can be fully realized without the use and manipulation of materials. Instead, they may exist in the form of language alone, the materiality of which cannot be reduced to the material dimension of linguistic signs or to the reference to concrete materials, but encompasses the possibilities and effects of its use in different social contexts.[3] Second, not only did the artist derive his underlying understanding of art from this definition, but he also declared this to be a distinctly political choice. Yet no direct political legibility or "message" emerges from one's

reading of the corresponding processes; the actions appear commonplace, almost banal, and they do not suggest any obvious political agenda. Hence, at least two paradoxes emerge: The artist, especially in his early work, continually referred to materials and their treatment, but at the same time increasingly reduced the material manifestation of his work exclusively to the realm of language. In doing so, he continually defined his actions in explicitly political terms, while refusing to make any direct political statement through his works.

This essay explores these tensions. First, it takes up the significance of Weiner's apparent renunciation of material and goes on to consider the concrete material dimension of Weiner's practice. It then analyzes his shift to an increasingly general concept of material and object before assessing the political potential of this approach as well as its limits.

1. *Statements*

Statements (fig. 1) presents a series of linguistically condensed descriptions of relatively simple actions in uniform typography, without other elements, such as sketches or illustrations. The small-format, sixty-four-page paperback was published in an edition of 1,000 copies.[4] Its monochrome, gray cover presents the title in all caps, with the name of the artist in standard capitalization below it. The lower-right corner displays the price of $1.95. Inside, the single-sided pages contain a total of twenty-four descriptions of actions, each involving fairly everyday materials, such as "One sheet of plywood secured to the floor or wall" or "One sheet of clear plexiglass of arbitrary size and thickness secured at the four corners and exact center by screws to the floor." The short texts are each placed in the center of the page, with uniform typography and a consistent column width. If line breaks occur within individual words, they are wrapped directly from line to line, without a hyphen, as in the following example:

> A removal of an amount of earth from
> the ground
> The intrusion into this hole of a st
> andard processed material

Another one reads:

> One hole in the ground approximately
> one foot by one foot by one foot
> One gallon water base white paint po
> ured into this hole

Statements is divided into "general" and "specific" statements. Due to the similarity of the described actions, the strict separation into two categories seems surprising at first. For

instance, the pairs of examples cited above each include a "general" statement followed by a more "specific" one. Overall, the "specific" statements provide slightly more precise specifications relating to quantities or dimensions. Moreover, by the time of the book's publication, some of the "specific" statements had already been sold or given away.[5]

Certain "statements," a few of them with slight variations, may also be found in the *January 5–31, 1969* catalogue. In this pivotal exhibition, with its straightforward title relaying the opening and closing dates, Siegelaub presented works by Weiner, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Joseph Kosuth in a rented office space in Manhattan. Crucially, Siegelaub conceived of the catalogue as a platform of equal importance to the exhibition in the gallery space. He assigned a total of four pages to each artist that covered the following categories: a list of exhibitions; two pages of images; and a statement. Weiner published his programmatic "Statement of Intent" here for the first time. As reproduced there, it reads:

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[6]
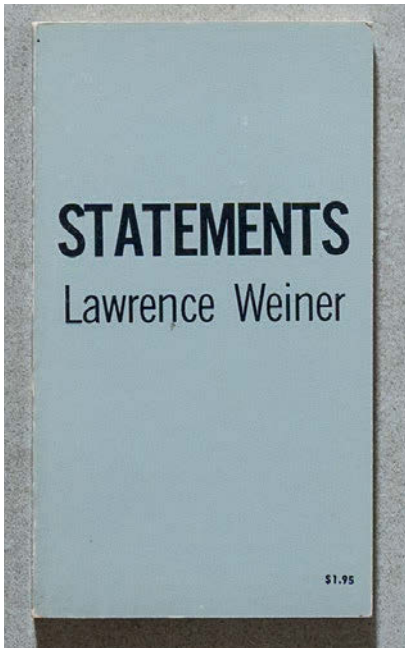
1a Lawrence Weiner, *Statements*, 1968. Front cover
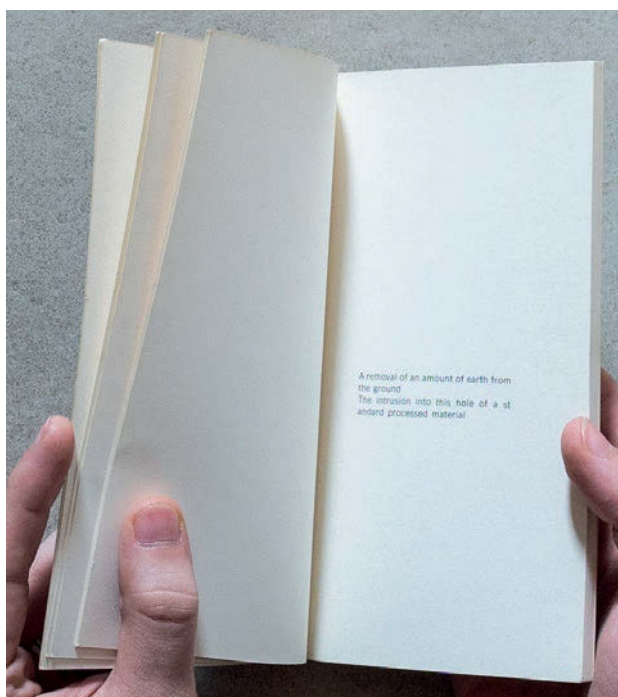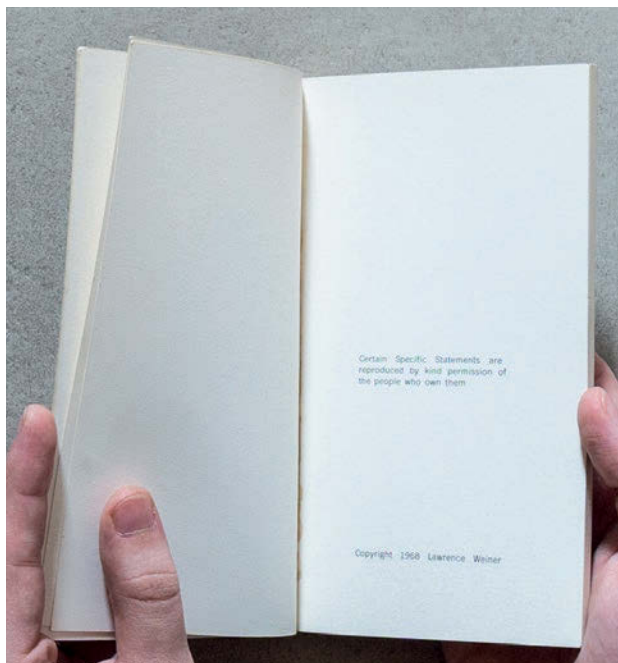
1 b—c Lawrence Weiner, *Statements*, 1968. Two double-page spreads

A central aspect of Weiner's practice, then, is that the actions described in his "statements"—he used the term in its accounting sense as a "receipt of goods or services"[7]—do not necessarily have to be performed. Once the artist has set them down in language, all further decisions are delegated to the "receiver." This can be a person who purchased the work, a curator who presents it in an exhibition, or even a member of "the public" more generally.[8] Here, Weiner radicalizes the fundamental "clou" of conceptual art, that is, the separation between work and execution, not by merely declaring the latter as secondary, but by systematically conceiving it as one of several possibilities from which the recipients may choose.[9] Significantly, Weiner delegates the broadest possible decision-making authority to the recipients while radically withdrawing any importance from the act of execution itself. In fact, it no longer has to take place as such.

This raises questions on various levels about the potential implications for the figure of the artist, the understanding of materials, and the artist's conception of the recipient and the public. Whereas the artist holds primary importance in conventional thought, Weiner placed equal emphasis on the materials and the recipients, both of which are traditionally seen as passive receivers of artistic acts.[10]

Weiner himself continually referred to the political dimension of these issues. He resolutely refused to give any instructions as to how his work should be executed, condemning such stipulations as "aesthetic fascism."[11] Thus, the precise linguistic composition of the statements was of great importance to him. In each of them, he refers to the treatment of materials without specifying an actor. Verbs take the past participle (e. g., "An amount of paint poured directly onto the floor and allowed to dry") or are replaced by nouns (e. g., "A removal to the lathing or support wall of plaster or wall board from a wall"). The statements are, in Weiner's own phrasing, simply "stated facts."[12] Because the timeline is open, they can refer to a past as well as a present or a future event, so that the actions may be realized continually in different contexts.[13] It is precisely this combination of openness and the potential for concrete realization that characterizes Weiner's practice. For him, this is also what defines its political dimension.

Since Weiner understood language as a fully valid manifestation of his work, he did not need to document the actions performed or include further information—a process that could make it difficult to delineate the work and its documentation in other conceptualist practices. Weiner was averse to the clandestine return of the conventional art object in the form of photographs, notes, and certificates.[14] However, this was but one reason for his steadfast rejection of documentation. Even more importantly, he consistently refused to define or privilege a particular form of execution—whether by the artist himself or the individual recipients. For Weiner, who also explicitly refused to proscribe meaning to his statements, this rejection of (photographic) documentation held a political significance, because it allowed the recipients to repeatedly invest his statements with new meanings.

The significance of concrete materials and the methods by which they are handled or manipulated emerges most clearly in the early works, such as those included in *Statements*.

The actions described are reminiscent of contemporary postminimalist, process-oriented prac-tices, such as that of Richard Serra.[15] While Weiner relativized such observations by empha-sizing the abstract, language-based character of his work, he also revealed that he was quite conscious of such phenomena:

> With STATEMENTS I attempted to pull together a body of work that concerned itself with traditional 1960s art processes and materials. It was not anti-minimal sculpture; I was trying to take non-heroic materials—just pieces of plywood (nobody thinks about plywood), in-dustrial sanders (everybody has one)—trying to take everyday materials, and give them their place within my world of art, with the same strength and the same vigor, but without the heroics. These works are decidedly non-macho, but they turn out to be the tough guy in the bar. I wanted people to accept the value of these sculptures because they were functioning as sculptures, not because they were associated with the factory, the foundry, the quarry, the man-things that in those days deemed to mean something.[16]

Weiner explained his actions here in terms of their everyday nature and the deliberately ordi-nary character of the materials. At the same time, he situated them in the artistic context of his time to ensure the legibility of his practice while also marking a certain distance from it. In addition, he turned against the bold assertion of masculinity in practices where large masses of material were manipulated by industrial means. Distancing himself from these "man things," he defined for himself a different artistic self-consciousness while demonstrating his sensitivity to the gendered connotations of artistic action.

Importantly, the quoted passage also reveals a cultural familiarity with the things used, that is, the ordinariness of materials such as plywood or tools such as a sanding machine. This motif came into play in Weiner's practice in various ways. In his exhibitions, for example, he always referred to materials that were known and available in their respective contexts.[17] The everyday nature of these materials meant that there was no need for a demonstration of the stated processes. This is important, because if the artist had chosen materials and processes that were unfamiliar to their respective audiences, he would either have to perform such a demonstration on site or provide some form of documentation—both options that Weiner steadfastly rejected as a regression to the traditional art object or an unwelcome determina-tion of the work's precise material manifestation.

Overall, he attempted to safeguard himself against a relapse into traditional principles of art making, which he deemed as particularly problematic from a political perspective, by several means: first, by delegating the decision-making about how to execute the work (as opposed to the mere execution itself); second, by dispensing with supplementary documentation; third, by selecting materials that were familiar at their respective destinations; and fourth, through the type of actions to be performed with the materials—as will be discussed in the next section.
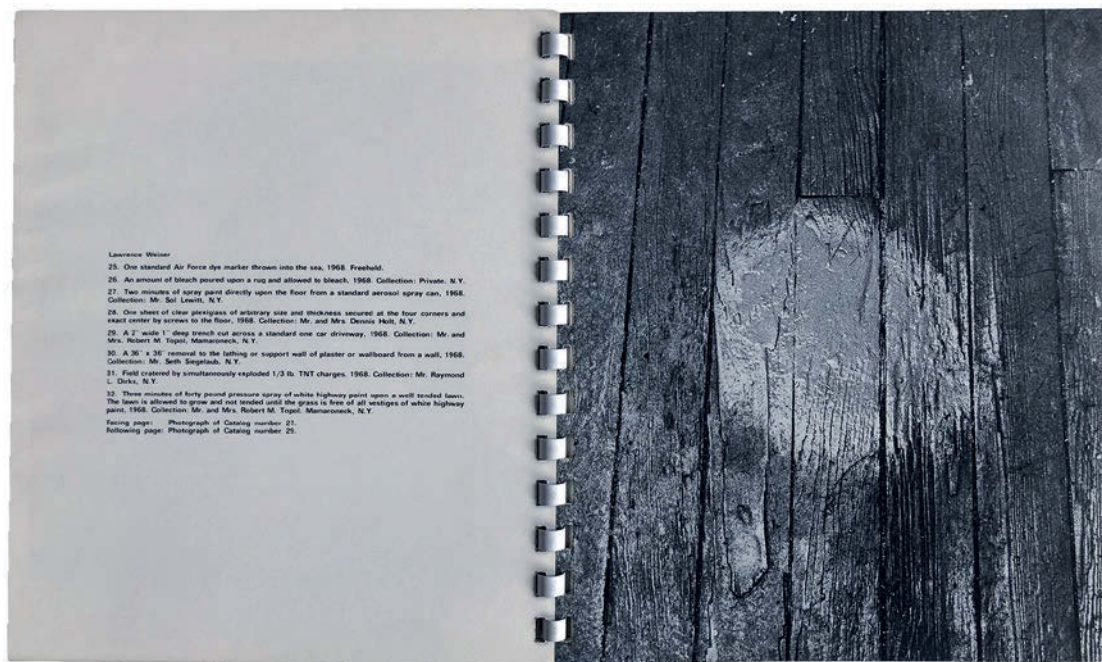
2 Lawrence Weiner, *Two Minutes of Spray Paint Directly upon the Floor from a Standard Aerosol Spray Can*, 1968

2. A Studio Artist

It was crucial that the specified actions aligned with the way they were carried out in everyday, nonart contexts. Weiner's *Two Minutes of Spray Paint Directly upon the Floor from a Standard Aerosol Spray Can* (1968, fig. 2), a work included in *January 5–31, 1969* with an illustration, is based on the principle of applying spray paint from a conventional commercial spray can onto the floor for two minutes.[18] In an interview that he gave in spring 1969 to the artist Patricia Norvell, Weiner cited this example to explain how materials should be used in his works. Never, for instance, would spray paint be directed at a wall:

> See, I would never, when I was doing the spray pieces, spray paint on a wall, because it's an unnatural act. . . . It becomes a contrivance. It becomes man over material again. But if you've ever watched a car stripper, they spray on the floor constantly. That's how you clean out your nozzle; that's how you check the color and everything else. It's always sprayed down, so that was fine.[19]
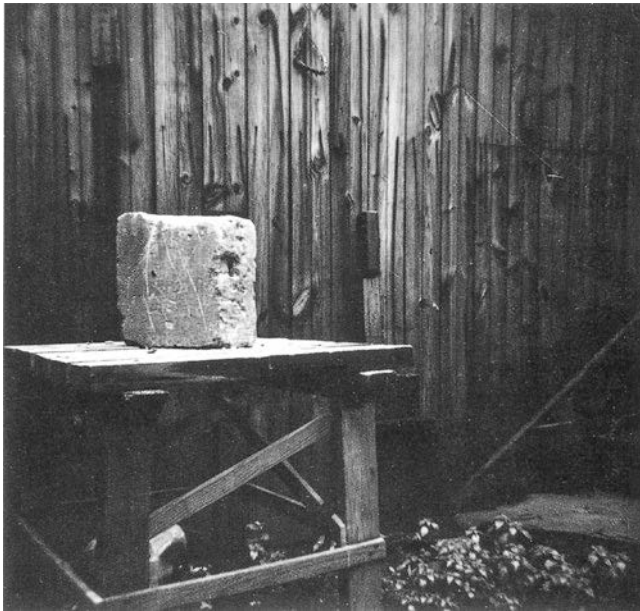
3 Lawrence Weiner, *What Is Set upon the Table Sits upon the Table (The Stone on the Table)*, ca. 1962–63. In the backyard of Weiner's Bleecker Street studio, New York, 1963

In this fascinating early statement, Weiner directly addresses the problem of human intellectual dominance over the material. Striving to follow the logic of materials' "natural" use, he turned to their application in everyday contexts—particularly in processes of work as labor. This focus on *labor*, rather than *work* in general or *craft*, defines one of the sociopolitical dimensions of his practice.

In the same vein, it would be a fundamental misunderstanding to equate Weiner's deliberately general reference to materials with a lack of interest in them. His preference for language as a form of expression was by no means motivated by an attempt to distance himself from the materials. Thus, while he did depart from traditional concepts of the artwork and from the object-bound conventions of its making, he consciously rejected the modernist logic of concentration and reduction in the sense of a radical intellectualization. Instead, as Benjamin Buchloh has convincingly argued, Weiner's model of art is based on maintaining tensions, on dialectics instead of tautology, on contextual connectivity instead of purity.[20] One way these processes of negotiation played out was through engagement with materials. This is also why the artist repeatedly affirmed the need to get to know a material intimately and revealed the pleasure he took in familiarizing himself with materials in the studio:

> When I find myself with materials I don't quite understand, I go out and schlepp a lot of it to the studio. I'm still basically a studio artist. I play with materials, I'll build a piece, I'll schlepp in a stone, I'll make ice, I'll do the whole thing. I see that as research.[21]

By describing himself as a "studio artist," Weiner deliberately placed himself in the tradition of sculpture.[22] In contrast to his previously cited statement about how to use a spray can, here he understands *work* in an individual as opposed to a societal sense, as *craft* instead of *labor*. These considerations, which emphasize the need to gain familiarity with a material, echo Richard Sennett's notion of a "material consciousness." In *The Craftsman,* he introduces it as "a continual dialogue with materials" that overcomes the divide between understanding and doing, observing and making. [23] This assertion closely echoes Weiner's emphasis on the crucial importance that the "conversation with the material" held for him.[24]

At the same time, he abandoned an approach traditionally associated with artistic "creation," a rather lofty term that has often been replaced by the more sober "work" in recent discourses around art.[25] Weiner himself referred to this transformation of materials according to one's own imagination as "expressionist."[26] Here again, his guiding principle was the ethically and politically grounded refusal to dictate aesthetic decisions to the recipients—for him, this would be tantamount to "authoritarian art."[27] It follows that presenting raw or standard processed materials emerged as the only plausible solution, as in *What Is Set upon the Table Sits upon the Table (The Stone on the Table)* (ca. 1962–63, fig. 3), an early work to which Weiner frequently referred. In this case, after some consideration, he decided to present a block of limestone in its "raw" state on a wooden table instead of giving form to the material and thereby subjecting it to his imagination, in accordance with the logic of Aristotelian hylomorphism:

> Aristotelian logic no longer existed. But all our heroes used Aristotelian logic. What was I supposed to do? So the stone was a way to deal with it. Something that had its own presence. In the end, putting it on the table and leaving it like that was the solution.[28]

Weiner's statement echoes notions of truth to material, which emphasizes working with the inherent qualities of materials. The artist later expanded upon this notion: artists took it upon themselves to pay attention to materials and defy expectations, since all materials have the potential to behave in new, unanticipated ways.[29] In the words of artist and critic David Batchelor, Weiner's works collectively imply "an ethical relationship with a material world . . . not intrusive, not exploitative, not self-aggrandizing; respectful, restrained, informal and often reversible; generally provisional or temporary; always curious."[30]

Weiner's own authorial self-restraint encompassed the materials as well as the recipients. It also related to the world as a whole, which he believed should not be burdened with even more unnecessary human products. In 1969, he resolutely declared to the critic and artist Ursula Meyer, an important early chronicler of conceptual art, that

> [i]ndustrial and socioeconomic machinery pollutes the environment and the day the artist feels obligated to muck it up further art should cease being made. If you can't make art without making a permanent imprint on the physical aspects of the world, then maybe art

is not worth making. In this sense, any permanent damage to ecological factors in nature not necessary for the furtherance of human existence, but only necessary for the illustration of an art concept, is a crime against humanity . . . . Big egocentric expensive works become very imposing. You can't put twenty-four tons of steel in the closet.[31]

These considerations should not be equated with today's ecologically motivated artistic approaches. While Weiner's statement points to important—and surprising—similarities, other factors stand in the way of such an anachronistic parallelization. For instance, between 1967 and 1977, Weiner developed proposals for explosions and the use of firearms, or for pouring a liter of heavy motor oil into the Gulf Stream.[32] Although a single bottle of motor oil would cause limited ecological damage in the Gulf Stream, such proposals mark a clear distance from ecologically motivated practices of the time, such as those of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison or Alan Sonfist.[33] Given this, it is all the more remarkable that Weiner echoed ecological considerations and an expanded notion of "ecology" that extends beyond the preservation of nature.[34]

3. Everything Is an Object

Looking back on his early work, Weiner later emphasized that he had increasingly favored the "general idea of a material" over its specific manifestation. In a guest lecture in March 1972 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, he explained this transition as almost didactically motivated, further illustrating the breadth of his understanding of material:

> The major point probably would be that all languages are transfers. It all refers back to a material, whatever that material is, so there is no basic difference between the formats of "an object tossed from one country to another" and "to the sea by the sea" or just "turn red as well as black"—there is not a basic difference in structure itself. It's just that in the beginning, when I was attempting to explain publicly what this constituted as making art, I felt it was better, the first year or so, to only let the language refer to specific objects that people could see, could understand completely. After that enters the culture, you're a little bit freer to deal with the idea of an *idea* being a material as well, or a phenomenon being a material without being phenomenological.[35]

Weiner thus emphasized the recipients' own responsibility, not only by delegating to them the question of execution, but also through the deliberate underdetermination of the linguistic specification as an "incomplete relationship" of language to objects.[36] He was convinced that the use of language left his works "more open for the user."[37] It would ensure both a certain "shelf life" when taken up by later generations as well as a degree of flexibility through its connectivity to different cultural settings.[38] This would also reduce the historical and local lim-

itations of his works, since they can be realized anew in different contexts. In his conversation with Meyer in 1969, he explained how the respective contemporary form of the materials used would, to a certain extent, also change the dating of his works:

> If art has a general aspect to it and if someone receives a work in 1968 and chooses to have it built, then either tires of looking at it or needs the space for a new television set, he can erase it. If—in 1975—he chooses to have it built again—he has a piece of 1975 art. As materials change, the person who may think about the art, as well as the person who has it built, approach the material itself in a contemporary sense and help to negate the preciousness of 1968 materials.[39]

The possibility of creating works that can be updated repeatedly, which is afforded through a particular use of language, is, therefore, essential to Weiner's practice. He addressed this possibility both in terms of the materials' historicity as well as cultural attitudes toward them. In the above statement, he upholds the promise of linguistic transparency and a confidence in its stable referential character.[40] Simultaneously, however, he accepts the very instability of this referential function, which results from language's abstract character and its iterability. Viewed in this light, his preference for the general over the specific is wholly consistent—after all, abstraction increases the potential for a statement to take on different meanings in different contexts.[41]

When referring to materials and objects, Weiner not only reflected on their scientific properties but also their integration into cultural and economic value systems. In addition, he differentiated between "object" and "material": whereas an object is already conceptualized, materials are intended for, and exclusively find their purpose through, use.[42] Over time, the category of the object became increasingly important for him, and it tended to replace that of the material. By the 1970s, he declared his art to be fundamentally concerned with "the relationships of people to objects and of objects to objects in relation to people."[43] New scientific ways of looking at the world also seem to have stimulated Weiner's more open approach to categories such as "material" or "object." As he explained in 1969 in conversation with Patricia Norvell:

> You have to change a little bit your idea of what a physical object is. Everything is a physical object. We're living in a time when now they know . . . if you're thinking of tying your shoelace, that sends off a certain amount of electrical power. It sets up something in space; it occupies space for a given time . . . . Therefore it's an object. [Pause] So everything is an object. It's just the idea of realizing and accepting the fact that one object is not necessarily better than another.[44]

In a later conversation with the critic Sabine Vogel, Weiner also drew on the concept of energy, using it in a rather broad sense. In this context, he referred to the transformation of

worldviews that had occurred as a result of recent findings in the natural sciences: "We know that all ideas are energy, and even thoughts are energy. The question about whether it is an object like our parents know it or like we know it is not really the question."[45]

In 1969, Weiner had already declared that he could use entire countries as material for his art—in fact, he argued, everything could become an art material, with the important exception of people.[46] Later, he stated that "everything" was an object, including sentences.[47] In doing so, he drew criticism for using these categories loosely and metaphorically, an approach to which important proponents of conceptual art, including the members of Art & Language, strongly objected.[48] Conversely, other contemporary voices, such as the critic Amy Goldin and her coauthor Robert Kushner, promoted this openness. They challenged fundamental tenets of analytic conceptual art, which was exemplified by the early work of Art & Language in Britain and by Joseph Kosuth in the United States, when they wrote:

> But to examine the nature of art in terms of physical materials versus intellectual concepts is fatal. Those categories repeat the old body/soul bag which leaves important aspects of artistic experience unacknowledged. If you disregard the social dimensions of meaning you are forced to puerilities like "man's spiritual needs." . . . Moreover, the "problem" of materiality is a false one. We can take intellectual stimulus or satisfaction from physical objects or make physical responses to "intellectual objects."[49]

With his very open definition of the object and his focus on social contexts, Weiner circumvented the dangers of such a purely self-referential, analytic conceptual art. His recourse to materials in their found state is first and foremost a turn against the privileging of the intellectual, a materialism that regards matter as such and thereby valorizes it, instead of relegating it to a preliminary stage in a process that involves its transformation and the creation of meaning. This attitude is also susceptible to a political reading. A statement made by Carl Andre in characterizing his own practice, but which also seems applicable to Weiner and others, invites such an interpretation. In conversation with the critic Jeanne Siegel, Andre said that his art did not necessarily convey political content, but was political nonetheless. For, as he continued: "Matter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position I think, essentially Marxist."[50] This statement could be read either as a conflation or as a confusion of different understandings of materialism—a Marxist historical materialism on the one hand and a more general antonym to idealism on the other. At the same time, it indicates how the endorsement of materials could operate as a political statement in its own right—not as a clear manifestation of a historical materialist standpoint, but as an expression of sympathy for it.[51] Weiner's own self-designation as a "materialist" needs to be situated in this context as well.[52]

Nevertheless, the problem of an enduring adherence to the ideal of artistic autonomy also arises in Weiner's work, albeit in a modified way. As Gregor Stemmrich has rightly observed, Weiner's stipulation that his statements operate independently from their cultural context also restricts the possibilities of their effectiveness. According to Stemmrich, the attempt to "escape

an ideological overdetermination caused by the cultural context" entails the danger of limiting one's art to pure self-referentiality. By contrast, the very acceptance of one's own ideological entanglements is what brings about social effectiveness.[53]

4. The Artist and Politics

Weiner's insistence on the direct referential character of language seems essential to his practice: only in this way can a work be fully realized in its linguistic version, as set forth in his "Statement of Intent." Consequently, Weiner characterized language in a later published statement as follows:

> IT (LANGUAGE) SEEMS TO BE THE LEAST IMPOSITIONAL MEANS OF TRANSFERRING INFOR-MATION CONCERNING THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS WITH MATERIALS FROM ONE TO ANOTHER (SOURCE)

At the same time, he emphasized its own material character and concluded:

> BEING ITSELF (LANGUAGE) A MATERIAL ONE IS THEN ABLE TO WORK GENERALLY WITH RATHER SPECIFIC MATERIALS[54]

It was from this identification between language and object that he derived his self-image as a "realist artist."[55] Julia Bryan-Wilson has pointed to the modernist traits inherent in this identification as a "realist" as well as the notion that materials can operate free from any symbolic reference, albeit with regard to Andre, whose artistic self-conception was similar.[56] Weiner avoided the latter problem by continually emphasizing that the execution of his works was dependent upon the context. He did not, however, explicitly state how to determine the social efficacy of his practice. By attempting to withdraw his statements from associations or entanglements with specific cultural contexts, he limited their effectiveness and ultimately confined them to the realm of art. This does not, however, diminish the political nature of his work—especially if, in line with Weiner's views, art itself is understood as a system within society. While consistently refusing to communicate political subject matter or opinions, he constantly negotiated the political implications of artistic activity and pursued a highly specific politics of authorship, which manifested itself in the conception and the precise phrasing of his works.

Weiner repeatedly emphasized the political accountability of his practice without advocating for an explicitly political art.[57] He explained his principles in a feature published in *Artforum* in September 1970 under the heading "The Artist and Politics," which presents multiple views on what forms of political action artists should take in light of the "deepening political crisis in the United States." It is striking that so many of the artists were skeptical about art

that directly expresses political attitudes or content, even as they underscored the political implications of their own practice, or of artistic practice in general.[58] Although Weiner's response generally aligns with the others, it stands out in its emphases. First, he rejected the possibility of any normative statement, writing that he could only comment on how artists *could*, rather than *should*, act, because anything else would constitute "fascism."[59] Ultimately, he continued, all art is political from the moment it becomes known; but if it becomes "useful, even to the extent of entering the culture," then it becomes "history." Directly political art, on the other hand, was nothing but "sociological propaganda." The character of art as art, rather than as a historical relic or "propaganda," would only be preserved if it resisted any form of definition. But even as he stressed art's special role, Weiner rejected the notion of any privileged position for artists, who were "but one vocational unit in a sociological system."[60] With statements such as these, he strongly emphasized the social foundation of his art, which remained central to his artistic approach. Particularly in his early work, he turned to the artistic treatment of materials and their use in society in order to negotiate these questions. Subsequently, he derived his ethically and politically grounded sense of artistic responsibility, which characterizes his practice and has allowed it to remain relevant and relatable to others to this day. Weiner's politics of art emerges as a politics of artistic practice that turns against outdated conceptions of the artist with their authoritarian and sexist connotations. By radically changing the understanding of artistic work, Weiner challenged these problematic notions and paved the way for new forms of practice that could build on and expand from the model he developed.

Notes

1   Arthur R. Rose, "Four Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Weiner," *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 4 (February 1969): 23.

2   The influential notion of a "dematerialization" of art was introduced by the critics Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler in 1968, and later restated in Lippard's pivotal anthology *Six Years*. See Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968): 31–36; Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972: A Cross-Reference Book of Information on Esthetic Boundaries: Consisting of a Bibliography in Which Are Inserted a Fragmented Text, Art Works, Documents, Interviews, and Symposia, Arranged Chronologically and Focused on So-Called Conceptual or Information or Idea Art with Mention on Such Vaguely Designated Areas as Minimal, Anti-Form, Systems, Earth, or Process Art Occurring Now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia and Asia (with Occasional Political*

Overtones), Edited and Annotated by Lucy R. Lippard (New York: Praeger, 1973). For a discussion and contextualization, see Christian Berger, "Wholly Obsolete or Always a Possibility? Past and Present Trajectories of a 'Dematerialization' of Art," in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, ed. Christian Berger (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

3   Jacob Stewart-Halevy points out a transformation within conceptualist practices from a purely abstract understanding of language to one that emphasizes the social contexts of its usage, that is, the material dimensions of language *practices* (but does not include Weiner in his examples). Jacob Stewart-Halevy, "Ian Wilson, Conceptual Art, and the Materialization of Language," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*. Similarly, Trevor Stark analyzes Weiner's work as an "aesthetic proposition working through the social objectivity of language" and argues that the artist's "linguistic materialism depended neither on the objecthood of the referent nor on the materiality of the signifier." Trevor Stark, "Lawrence Weiner's Materialism," *October* 180 (2022): 106. Sabeth Buchmann demonstrates how Weiner's work transcends conventional material–object paradigms through their potential for constant actualization or rematerialization, afforded by the artist's particular use of language "as a form of production." Sabeth Buchmann, "Language Is a Change in Material: On Lawrence Weiner's Ellipses," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, p. 171. Dominic Rahtz argues that the "ethical and political meaning" of Weiner's work "depends on the possibility that language consists in action as well as statement, that language is capable of acting in and on the world as well as referring to it, and that it is itself material and real." Dominic Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism: Art in New York in the Late 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 141. See also Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

4   Lawrence Weiner, *Statements* (New York: Seth Siegelaub, 1968). See Weiner's book for the examples cited below.

5   Weiner, n. p.: "Certain Specific Statements are reproduced by kind permission of the people who own them." On the issue of quantities and measures, see Gregor Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner—Material and Methodology," in *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner 1968–2003*, ed. Gerti Fietzek and Gregor Stemmrich (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 435. Dominic Rahtz questions this distinction and instead refers to the connection with preexisting ownership in the "Specific Statements." Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, pp. 141–43. See also Anne Rorimer, "Lawrence Weiner: 'Displacement,'" in *Robert Lehman Lectures on Contemporary Art*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1996), p. 24: "[T]he statements are more or less specific depending on the variable number of singular details that they contain, but general statements can become specific by means of particular historical, cultural, and contextual inscriptions."

6   Seth Siegelaub, ed., *January 5–31, 1969*, exh. cat. (New York, 1969), n. p.

7   Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner—Material and Methodology," p. 435. See also Lawrence Weiner, "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig [1990]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 237 (addition original): "The word 'statements' in my first book [*STATEMENTS*] was not even about utterances but referred to what you get at the end of the month, after used services. When you get your American Express bill, it says 'statement enclosed.' . . . That's all *STATEMENTS* ever was. It told you how many pieces of stone were moved and where." According to Peter Osborne, the "Statement of Intent" results in an ontological division of the work into several possible outcomes, some of which will never be realized. Peter Osborne, "Survey," in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Phaidon, 2002), p. 31.

8   Weiner defined a certain proportion of his work as "public freehold" that cannot be sold, a move that he justified as his attempt to stay true to his political convictions and "stay pure." Lawrence

Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 127. In the same vein, he explained his motivation to put work on posters and other ephemera that were published in a comparatively large print run. See Patricia Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," in *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegelaub, Smithson, Weiner by Patricia Norvell*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 104; Lawrence Weiner, "Interview by Ann Temkin and John Ravenal [1994]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 322.

9 Sabeth Buchmann, "Conceptual Art," in *Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Hubertus Butin (Cologne: Snoeck, 2014), p. 53.

10 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 105: "I don't approve of art that you cannot supposedly experience unless you do prescribed things, because that's choreography and, to me, really and truly is aesthetic fascism." Here, Maria Marschall detects an "inflationary use of the term 'fascism'" ("inflationäre Verwendung des Begriffs 'Faschismus'") on the part of the left during this period, referring to Gerd Koenen, *Das rote Jahrzehnt: Unsere kleine deutsche Kulturrevolution, 1967–1977* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2002), p. 113. Maria Marschall, "Lawrence Weiner: Terminal Boundaries—Aspekte der Grenzthematik in der künstlerischen Konzeption und den Spracharbeiten 1968–2002," (PhD diss., Universität der Künste Berlin, 2006), p. 52, n. 132, https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-udk/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/21/file/marschall_maria.pdf. Mike Sperlinger nevertheless identifies certain implicit instructions in Weiner's works, such as the request to consider them as art or to understand the function of the linguistically framed statements with regard to the work. Mike Sperlinger, "Orders! Conceptual Art's Imperatives," in *Afterthought: New Writing on Conceptual Art*, ed. Mike Sperlinger (London: Rachmaninoff's, 2005), pp. 14–15.

11 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 105.

12 Ibid.: "All of the pieces, if you read carefully, are stated facts." On the importance of "fact"-based ways of thought within the period, see Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact During the Cold War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

13 Gerti Fietzek, "Lawrence Weiner," in *Künstler: Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, ed. Lothar Romain and Detlef Bluemler (Munich: Weltkunst Bruckmann, 1991), pp. 7–8. According to Liz Kotz, Weiner's practice reflects a general tendency in the art of the 1960s, according to which a template or idea may be realized several times; her use of the terms "specific" and "general" is reminiscent of the corresponding distinction in Weiner's *Statements*. Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, p. 175; on Weiner in particular, see ibid., pp. 198–212. Sabeth Buchmann here identifies parallels to poststructuralist understandings of language, especially in the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. See Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica* (Berlin: b_books, 2007), pp. 84–85. In a recent article, Trevor Stark convincingly traces Weiner's "materialism" to the capacity of language to bind itself ever anew to phenomena or processes. On Weiner, he writes: "His work's materialism lies in language's capacity to bind itself to the world in an unforeseeable multiplicity of ways." Stark, "Lawrence Weiner's Materialism," p. 113. See also Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, p. 162: "For Weiner, it was the general nature of reference in language and the universality of grammar that meant that it was not subject to the ideological determinations that a specificity of reference would entail."

14 Compare the following quotes: "When artists . . . present large sheafs of papers, photos, objects, all signed, sealed, delivered, insured, they haven't dematerialized anything, they've just substituted six reams of papers and six reams of photos for a large stone sculpture." Lawrence Weiner, "Lawrence

Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp [1972]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 48. Also see ibid., p. 53, as criticism directed at the term "conceptual art": "[T]he majority of those who consider themselves 'conceptualists' are the ones who inundate you with tons upon tons of documents, documentation, clocks, photographs, drawings, tables." On the phenomenon and understanding of documentation in this context more generally, see Christian Berger, "Douglas Huebler and the Photographic Document," *Visual Resources* 32, nos. 3–4 (December 2016): 210–29.

15   See for example Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, p. 209. She elaborates on this observation by includ-ing Richard Serra's *Verb List* (1967–68) in the discussion.

16   Lawrence Weiner, "A Conversation with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh [1998]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 374.

17   Lawrence Weiner, "I Don't Converse with Heaven: Interview by Jean-Marc Poinsot [1989]," in *Hav-ing Been Said*, p. 182: "The materials I use, which I refer to, are ordinary materials that people are familiar with. . . . It's possible that a material that to me seems very ordinary, very commonplace doesn't exist in a particular small town, here or in another country, but that would be my mistake."

18   In *Statements*, the work appears as *One Aerosol Can of Enamel Sprayed to Conclusion Directly upon the Floor*. Weiner, *Statements*, n. p.

19   Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 106. See also Weiner, "A Conversation with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh [1998]," p. 374: "The spray can is an object that contains a whole range of chemical and physical compounds and vernacular and daily usages. It was the looked-down upon-thing, it is about the not-skilled."

20   Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Posters of Lawrence Weiner," in *Lawrence Weiner: Posters*, exh. cat. (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1986), p. 173.

21   Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 124. See also Weiner, "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig [1990]," p. 236: "I become interested in some material. It could be limestone, it could be the idea of blue light or something, and I start to accumulate 'information' about whatever it is. In the studio, I move that material around, and when it comes to a configuration that makes some sense and I begin to understand why I was interested in it, I translate that. It's language, from what I see."

22   See also Weiner, "I Don't Converse with Heaven: Interview by Jean-Marc Poinsot [1989]," p. 182: "What interests me when I make a piece is finding a material and working with it. My work is truly materialistic, just like that of historical sculpture. That's why I am a studio artist. Then I translate the material into language."

23   Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 125.

24   See Julian Heynen, Stefanie Jansen, and Peter Schüller, eds., *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2008), p. 9: "It was a kind of conversation with the material. I was desperate to find out what my relationship to these materials was." ("Es war eine Art Gespräch mit dem Material. Ich war verzweifelt darum bemüht, herauszu-finden, wie meine Beziehung zu diesen Materialien war.") The statement refers to the work *What Is Set upon the Table Sits upon the Table (The Stone on the Table)*, as discussed below.

25   See Friederike Sigler, "Introduction," in *Work*, ed. Friederike Sigler (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Art Gallery and MIT Press, 2017), pp. 16–17.

26   See Lawrence Weiner, "Red as Well as Green as Well as Yellow as Well as Blue: Interview by Irmelin Lebeer [1973]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 72: "What makes Rauschenberg so interesting—the com-bines—is that he never attempted to transform the material. He attempted to use the material in a sense of notation, not in a sense of a found object. He used it to construct a parable. And that

is what makes the work interesting, as opposed to an expressionist work." On Weiners "vehement anti-expressionism," see also Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner—Material and Methodology," p. 430.

27 Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 121.

28 Heynen, Jansen, and Schüller, *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 9. On the Aristotelian understanding of matter, see Manfred Stöckler, "Materie," in *Neues Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, ed. Hermann Krings et al., vol. 2 (Freiburg: Alber, 2011), p. 1502.

29 Heynen, Jansen, and Schüller, *Lawrence Weiner*, p. 29.

30 David Batchelor, "Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side to Form a Row of Many Colored Objects," in *Lawrence Weiner* (London: Phaidon, 1998), p. 76.

31 Ursula Meyer, "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," in *Conceptual Art*, ed. Ursula Meyer (New York: Dutton, 1972), p. 217.

32 See, e. g., Lawrence Weiner, *Works* (Hamburg: Anatol AV und Filmproduktion, 1977), no. 044: *One Quart Heavy Grade Motor Oil Poured Into the Gulf Stream* (044); *A Field Cratered by Structured Simultaneous TNT Explosions* (030); *A Rural Stone Wall Breached by Detonated High Explosives* (069); *A Wall Shattered by a Single Pistol Shot* (060); *A Tree Bored by a Rifle Shot* (072). In interviews, Weiner repeatedly referred to a field of craters that he had created in 1960 near Mill Valley outside San Francisco by means of explosions. See e. g., Lawrence Weiner, "From an Interview by Jack Burnham [1970]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 34; Weiner, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp [1972]," p. 44.

33 On the relationship between ecology and Land art, see James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow, "The Big Picture: American Art and Planetary Ecology," in *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, ed. Alan C. Braddock and Karl Kusserow, exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Princeton University Art Museum, 2018). Also see Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Time of the Force Majeure: After 45 Years, Counterforce Is on the Horizon*, ed. Petra Kruse and Kai Reschke (Munich: Prestel, 2016); Alan Sonfist, ed., *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art* (New York: Dutton, 1983).

34 For the important distinction between "ecology" and "environmental care" in this context, see Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems*, p. 68.

35 Included in Peggy Gale, ed., *Artists Talk: 1969–1977* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004), p. 74. See also Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 121: "I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my existence dealing with the general idea of materials rather than the specific." See also Meyer, "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," p. 218: "I personally am more interested in the *idea* of the material than in the material itself."

36 Lawrence Weiner, "Gordon Matta-Clark: From an Interview by Joan Simon [1984]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 156. As Birgit Pelzer notes, this is further accentuated by the strongest possible linguistic density. Birgit Pelzer, "Dissociated Objects: The Statements/Sculptures of Lawrence Weiner," *October* 90 (1999): 87.

37 Weiner, "Interview by Phyllis Rosenzweig [1990]," p. 235.

38 Ibid. Weiner drew on everyday examples here that relate to specific works and possibly his experiences in their realization. For example, people in Germany and the United States would associate differing ideas with the word "rubber ball," and white paint in France would differ fundamentally in production and appearance from white paint in Germany. Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 107. On Weiner's strategy of displacement as a way to overcome minimalist site-specificity, see Birgit Eusterschulte, *Robert Barry: Materialität und Konzeptkunst* (Paderborn: Brill, 2021),

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pp. 104–06. The term also formed the title of an important exhibition by Weiner at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York in 1991 and the accompanying artist's book: Lawrence Weiner, *Displacement* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1991).

39 Meyer, "Lawrence Weiner, October 12, 1969," pp. 217–18.

40 See also Dieter Schwarz, "The Metaphor Problem, Again and Again: Books and Other Things by Lawrence Weiner," in *Lawrence Weiner: As Far as the Eye Can See*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Donna M. De Salvo, exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), p. 170: "If Weiner locates the difference between literature and art in the fact that literature is subjective while art is objective, he implies that language as object disappears, allowing total permeability with respect to material reality."

41 Dieter Schwarz, "Moved Pictures: Film & Videos of Lawrence Weiner," in *Show (&) Tell: The Films & Videos of Lawrence Weiner: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Bartomeu Marí and Alice Weiner (Gent: Imschoot, 1992), p. 96.

42 Gregor Stemmrich, "Lawrence Weiner: Material, Language, Tic-Tac-Toe," in *Lawrence Weiner*, ed. Goldstein and Salvo, p. 221. See also Monika Wagner, "Material," in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, ed. Karlheinz Barck, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), p. 867. She highlights that, in contrast to "matter," the term "material" refers exclusively to substances designated for further processing.

43 See Weiner, "Section 2," *Artforum* 20, no. 9 (May 1982): 65: "Art is and must be an empirical reality concerned with the relationships of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings."

44 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 109 (ellipses original).

45 Weiner, "From an Interview by Sabine B. Vogel [1990]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 234.

46 Norvell, "Lawrence Weiner, June 3, 1969," p. 107.

47 Weiner, "Early Work: Interview by Lynn Gumpert [1982]," p. 127.

48 See Terry Atkinson, "From an Art & Language Point of View," *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (February 1970): 36–40. He directed this criticism at Robert Barry in particular. See Christian Berger, "A World of Things Can Be Done with This Incredible Material: Robert Barrys Arbeit mit ungreifbaren Materialien und Energieformen," in *Kunst und Material: Konzepte, Prozesse, Arbeitsteilungen*, ed. Roger Fayet and Regula Krähenbühl (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2022), p. 74.

49 Amy Goldin and Robert Kushner, "Conceptual Art as Opera," *Art News* 69, no. 2 (March 1970): 40. The phrase "man's spiritual needs" is a quote from Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," *Studio International* 178, no. 915 (October 1969): 137.

50 Jeanne Siegel, "Carl Andre: Art Worker," *Studio International* 180, no. 927 (November 1970): 179.

51 See Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, p. 2.

52 "I am still basically a materialist because I consider everything we use to be material." Weiner, "Lawrence Weiner at Amsterdam: Interview by Willoughby Sharp [1972]," p. 48.

53 Gregor Stemmrich, "Das Konzept der 'Literalness' in der amerikanischen Kunst," *Texte zur Kunst* 7 (October–1992): 112: "Der Widerspruch, der hier aus der Perspektive des 'social historian of art' auftauchen kann, besteht darin, daß die Kunst in ihrem Bestreben, einer ideologischen Überdetermination durch ihren kulturellen Kontext zu entgehen, eine Praxis der Repräsentation nur in bezug auf sich selbst begründet und sich damit denjenigen Zwängen entzieht, die sie zu akzeptieren hätte, wenn sie sich ihrer kulturellen Wirkungsmöglichkeit und Verantwortung nicht selbst berauben will."

54 Lawrence Weiner, "Regarding the (a) Use of Language within the Context of Art [1978]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 84.

55   See Weiner, "Interview by Hilde van Pelt [1982]," in *Having Been Said*, p. 138: "Language is not the subject. The subject is indicated by language, whereas the work thus becomes a total object. This is what makes me a realist artist."

56   Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 80.

57   Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, pp. 162–65. In interviews, Weiner repeatedly referred to himself as an "(American) socialist." See the numerous mentions of these terms in the index of Fietzek and Stemmrich, eds., *Having Been Said*.

58   Carl Andre et al., "The Artist and Politics: A Symposium," *Artforum* 9, no. 1 (September 1970): 35–39. Similar questions were raised by Lippard's benefit exhibitions for initiatives against the Vietnam War, some of which featured the same artists, such as Jo Baer, Robert Barry, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt. See Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, pp. 140–48.

59   On the distinction between "could" and "should," see Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism*, p. 165.

60   Andre et al., "The Artist and Politics," p. 39. See Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, exh. cat., (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press; Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003), pp. 25–51. She characterized the self-image of artists at that time "not as artists producing (in) a dreamworld but as workers in capitalist America" (ibid., p. 27). See also Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, p. 4.

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It-Narratives for the Twenty-First Century

Metallic Flux and the Spoliations of Contemporary Art

In late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, the genre known as the "it-narrative," or "novel of circulation," followed a single object's journey between contexts.[1] The protagonists ranged from waistcoats to stagecoaches, with several it-narratives centering upon a metal coin, as in Helenus Scott's *The Adventures of a Rupee* (1782). Scott writes, in the voice of the eponymous object: "They apply the strongest force of fire to my body, till every part of my substance assumes a liquid state. I am next poured into a mould, which gave me the roundness and character I still retain. After I had undergone these changes, they called me RUPEE."[2] Coins proved to be able-bodied narratological vessels not least because of their role in exchange but also, I would argue, because they embodied the shape-shifting, castable property of many types of metal, moving between solid and liquid states.

Indeed, metal—and its material and symbolic shifts—is a site through which to think about particular linkages across disparate locations as well as, more generally, about the material bases of circulation, exchange, and value creation under capitalism. As Karl Marx wrote in *Capital*: "In order, therefore, that a commodity may in practice operate effectively as exchange-value, it must divest itself of its natural physical body and become transformed from merely imaginary into real gold" in an "act of transubstantiation."[3] Metals such as zinc, aluminum, and copper and alloys such as bronze and brass innately possess this quality of "transmutation,"[4] as when Marx, bringing to mind the it-narrative genre, writes that "the only difference, therefore, between coin and bullion lies in their physical configuration, and gold can at any time pass from one form to the other. For a coin, the road from the mint is also the path to the melting pot."[5]

If it-narratives, and more recently "thing theory,"[6] have been terms for understanding this phenomenon in literature, art history has frequently framed such mobile and contingent relationships between objects and their political, cultural, and historical recontextualization as *spolia*, which Dale Kinney defines as "materials or artifacts in reuse."[7] While originally specifying fragments of ancient Rome incorporated into later objects and buildings, *spolia* now denotes, per Kinney, "any artifact incorporated into a setting culturally or chronologically different from that of its creation."[8] Accordingly, Richard Brilliant reminds us, much

cultural property might be considered *spolia* when he writes that "museums are filled with the *disiecta membra* of other cultures, often torn from their original contexts."[9]

But whereas much spoliation deploys the legibility of the reused element to mobilize and appropriate its symbolic value, the melting down and reformation of metal presents somewhat unique ambiguities, as there is no recognizable formal trace of the object from which the material has been derived. Ittai Weinryb's study of "the bronze object" during the Middle Ages in Italy explores this peculiarity of metallic flux, analyzing how the same substrate morphed between sculpture, musical instrument, and weapon. Weinryb writes: "The biography of the bronze object is therefore embedded in the material rather than in the form. In the intrinsic particles of the bronze object lies what we might term its hereditary code, for the material from which it is composed may in the past have formed and in the future form the body of another object."[10] Therein lies the compensatory value of it-narratives for objects made from materials that can be utterly transformed between states of matter, telling the story of the apparently self-evident yet ultimately elusive thing.

This essay pursues the it-narrative as a means of understanding the ways in which contemporary artists explore both the transmutational properties of metal—embodied in practices of spoliation—and the various forms of making that contribute to this material metamorphosis. Focusing on projects by Simon Starling, Pedro Reyes, and Hiwa K, artists interested in tying contemporary concerns to a longer history of extraction, mobility, trade, and violence, I argue that this history both speaks, and remains mute, through metal. Their work asserts the persistence of both materiality and artisanal modes of making amid a fantasy of dematerialization dominated by digital forms of circulation and fungibility. Processes of making, both those of the artist but just as often those of artisans employed by the artist to complete the task-at-hand, are conceptually essential to the work and obscured by the state-shifts to which metal is subjected, casting ambiguity on the relationship between the particular "it" and the narratives it invisibly embodies. Complicating the history of the ready-made, these artists raise questions concerning the degree to which objects both do and do not testify to the variably intellectual and artisanal labor that have shaped and reshaped them.

I begin with a number of projects by Starling, analyzing their materiality (and their material flux, in particular) in relation to the notion of flow in the digital era. Relevant here is the dynamic between the "finished product" and the obscurity produced by a global division of labor that alienates the consumer from the sites and particulars of making. I then turn to a specific work by Pedro Reyes and claim that his retooling of found objects is a political shift premised on a material one. Remaking models the subversive uses to which a thing can be put, autonomous from the intentions of its original designers and manufacturers. I dwell most extensively on a project by Hiwa K that suggests the conversion of matter's geopolitical (and transreligious) import. The works of these artists converge around what Hiwa K calls a "reverse archaeology," positing a nonlinear understanding of the object in relation to making. The transformed object, presented as art, is in fact possessed of a mutability that belies its inert appearance, and these artists indicate that this has much to tell us about making in the twenty-first century.

1. With and against Flow: Simon Starling's Loops

In the mid-1990s, Simon Starling began incorporating, disassembling, reassembling, and mimicking extant objects, characterizing these new things not as Duchampian ready-mades but as "work, made-ready." In an interview with Francesco Manacorda, Starling characterized his work's preoccupation with metamorphosis: "Often it's been a very material shift. Perhaps the form is retained, but the constituent material of that form is changed, or alternatively the materials are morphed into new forms."[11] In the extensive writing about Starling's works, primarily penned by curators and critics, metal is rarely emphasized, despite its recurrence as the most frequent medium of the artist's investigations. Here I will foreground works in which metal is the material transformed in a variety of ways.

With *Work, Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern* (1997), Starling constructed a Marin "Sausalito" bicycle "remade using the metal from a Charles Eames 'Aluminium Group' chair" and an Eames "Aluminum Group" chair using the Sausalito's metal (fig. 1).[12] Starling has described the work as one that "inverts the notion of the ready made [sic] in a simple but labour-intensive act of transmutation . . . . What resulted were two handcrafted, degraded, mutations of their former manufactured selves."[13] One would be hard-pressed to deem them as counterfeit and yet their transformation into each other is the (invisible) crux of the work. Presented within a single eye line, the bike leaning against a white pedestal and the chair resting atop another, the two objects bear a covert relationship to one another and to their own constituent making. In a recent email, Starling recalled that "that piece was made very much by-hand . . . . In large part the work was carried out by me at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios. . . . I just remember that being this wonderful moment when you had almost nothing—a set of empty sandcasting moulds and a couple of pots of molten metal."[14] The artist was also careful to mention that "[t]wo stages of the process were outsourced—the casting of the tubular aluminum (which was done by an industrial foundry outside Glasgow called Archibald Youngs) and the welding up of the frame," a task for which he "found a local fabricator to help."[15] Here, an expenditure of labor, both Starling's and those of the people he contracted, exceeds that of the ready-made, in which something previously manufactured is put on display and the artist's artisanal labor is reduced to zero.

Excess proved elliptical in subsequent projects such as *Quicksilver, Dryfit, Museumbrug* (1999), in which Starling embarked on a boat trip in the former Dutch colony of Suriname, where he collected solar energy that in turn powered an aluminum boat through Amsterdam's canals. Next, he cut the second boat in half, using its aluminum to create a replica of a lump of ore he had found in Suriname. Following a similar logic, in *Work Made-Ready, Les Baux de Provence (Mountain Bike)* (2001), Starling, on a bicycle trip from England, visited a mine in France from which he obtained bauxite, the raw material of aluminum, which he in turn deployed to replicate the bicycle on which he had ridden. Numerous other works by the artist concern and are made of metal; here I have emphasized a few in which material transformation is key.

1 Simon Starling, *Work Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern*, 1997. Bicycle, chair, two pedestals, dimensions variable. Installation view from *Concrete Light* at Limerick City Gallery of Art

The relationship between Starling's metal objects, on the one hand, and the processes of making and remaking that constitute them, on the other, are conveyed by an "it-narrative" that lets the object speak, with the artist at least rhetorically occupying the role not of creator but of interpreter. As Daniel Birnbaum writes: "Altered or taken out of context, they lose their muteness, and elaborate yarns spin from them."[16] Here, Starling's notion of "telltale sculptures" proves important. As the artist explained in an interview with Christiane Rekade, "'Sculptures,' because they generally only become talkative for me once they have been through some kind of transformative process, have taken a journey of some kind, have been displaced or transmuted—things that contain the sound of their own making—that talk about their roots or what have you. The objects become talkative when they are co-opted into a sculptural practice—when the ready-made gets remade or augmented."[17] This conjures the idea of objects as not only animate and agential but also as providers of testimony, or narratives conveyed by an "it."

Starling has addressed the dynamic between his particular, often idiosyncratic modes of making and an era increasingly characterized by overseas outsourcing and invisible labor:

> I'm really interested in what it means to make something in a culture in which our connections with making and manufacture are increasingly distant—we have become estranged from the things we use every day. In part what the work attempts to do is unpack processes of production either by creating a self-imposed set of restrictions or limitations or simply by tracking materials or manufacture back to their roots—countering the disconnection between an object and its making.[18]

His work thus both mirrors and corrects what Marx understood as the "phantasmal" relationship between a commodity and its constituent labor; projects like *Work Made-Ready, Les Baux de Provence (Mountain Bike)* more specifically take us back to the site of extraction; in *Quicksilver, Dryfit, Museumbrug*, colony and metropole are linked in a chain of material continuity and flux through the medium of aluminum. His work asks questions about making in the twenty-first century.

To some degree, the shape-shifting and apparently smooth shifts between states of matter—when metal objects become other metal objects—in Starling's oeuvre suggests a seamless world marked by the globalization of what Manuel Castells termed "flows." This type of globalization also characterizes what Zygmunt Bauman deemed a "liquid modernity"; it manifests aesthetically in the putatively friction-free morphing of digital imagery and in a rhetoric of dematerialized virtuality that are the hallmarks of the turn of the twenty-first century, when Starling embarked on these projects.[19] Consider, for instance, claims made at this time by anthropologists and sociologists that objects are "infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency."[20] This fits with a certain postmodern logic that imagines meaning is endlessly fluid and, I might add, endlessly metallic. While on the one hand Starling's work resists this narrative of seamless, virtualizing globalization, instead emphasizing materiality and making, often expending an excess of labor to produce something that might have been presented ready-made, he does seem to engage with the idea that anything can be anything else. The mutability and fungibility of metal present particular tensions, as material qualities that seem paradoxically to parallel digital plasticity.

In *One Ton II* (2005), five platinum prints, the number of prints that can be made with a single ton of ore, capture the photographic image of a South African mine, located in Potgietersrus and belonging to the company Anglo Platinum (fig. 2).[21] As Mark Godfrey puts it: "The photographs were thus 'of the mine' in two ways: they depicted the mine, and were actually made from material that could have been sourced there."[22] Within an early twenty-first-century techno-social context, Starling's exploration of the geopolitical, material, and labor relations undergirding photographic practice in the nineteenth century, when platinum prints were most common, was a means of regrounding photography as a materialist practice, in the midst of digitality's dematerializing rhetoric. Speaking of the five prints comprising this work, Starling said: "They're photographs, but they're very much sculptures too."[23] As with the two transmuted metal objects comprising *Work, Made-Ready, Kunsthalle Bern*, *One Ton II* required artisanal collaboration, in this case with 31 Studio in England, with whom Starling "was able to calculate the number and size of prints that [he] could produce with one-tons worth of ore."[24] And, as the artist recently noted: "I also remember the kind of shanty town next to the mine that was apparently the rehoused villagers that once occupied the land where the mine now sits."[25] In absenting both miners and displaced residents, in compressing process to image, the prints comprising *One Ton II* are the most efficient form of poetic economy. What is rendered invisible is as important as what appears.

2 Simon Starling, *One Ton II*, 2005

Here we can consider what Starling's it-narratives include and what they omit. They telegraph us from the mine to the print, which we usually encounter far from South Africa. They wordlessly compress "content" with "material." They *crystallize* (a term that, perhaps not incidentally, connects metal's solidification—metal is itself possessed of a crystalline structure—and Marx's writing on money, exchange, and circulation) while also spinning out from the object's apparent autonomy. Some details are included and some are left out, in some ways replicating the phantasmatic relation of labor to the disingenuous self-evidence of the commodity. Like the commodities they analyze, these works of art challenge those who encounter them to puzzle over how they came to be.
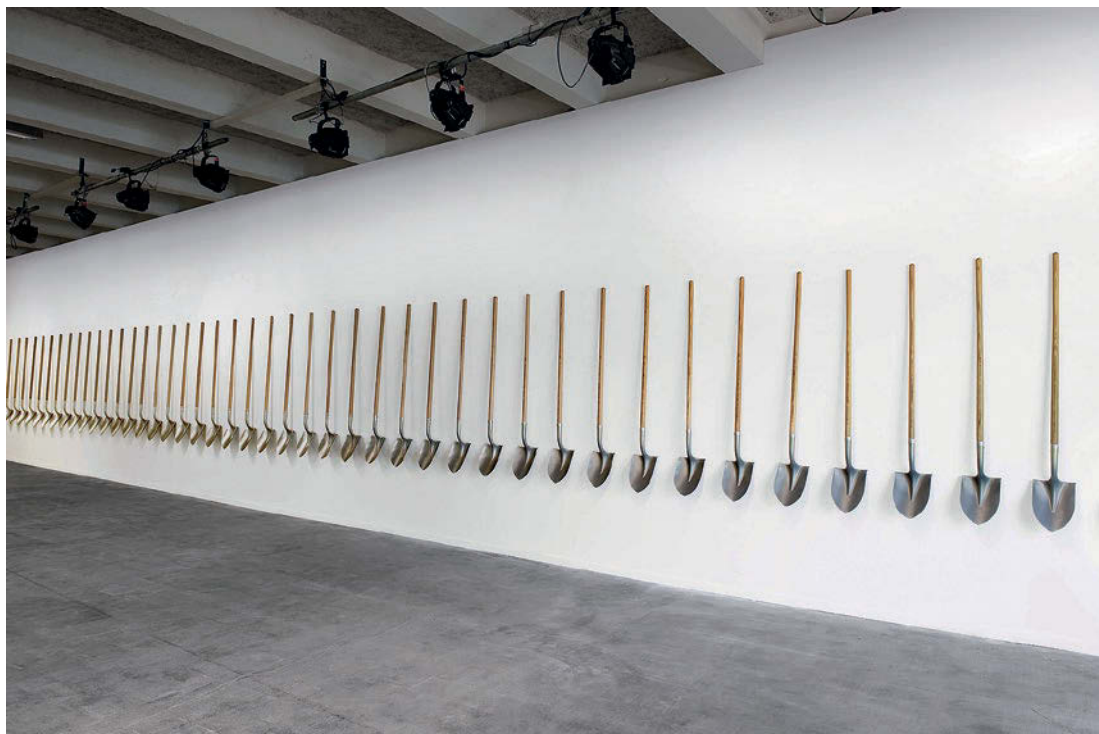
2. Retooling: Pedro Reyes's *Palas por pistolas*

Pedro Reyes is an artist whose works are wildly diverse in their mediums, methodologies, and logics. Here I focus on a particular project in which metallic transformation functions as a key rubric for a twenty-first-century it-narrative. *Palas por pistolas* (Shovels for Guns, 2007) began as a commission from the Botanical Garden of Culiacán, Sinaloa, and was conceived amid the intensifying violence characterizing Mexico's Calderón presidency. A television ad campaign broadcast in Culiacán prompted the donation of 1,527 guns in exchange for household goods, including domestic appliances.[26] The weapons were collected by the Secretaría de Defensa, who "publicly crushed" them "with a steamroller," thus exposing the guns to a kind of karmic violence. The steel was then transported to a foundry, where it was melted down and then molded by a hardware factory into 1,527 shovels that would be used to plant the same number of trees (fig. 3).[27]

Each stage of the process involved Reyes's collaboration with a distinct group of makers (and unmakers) whose expertise, equipment, and know-how were instrumental. These steps were documented in five videos that, in an exhibition context, complement the display of a select number of shovels, filling in the gaps obscured by the objects' opacity regarding their own narratives. We see the solicited-for guns in the television ads, rendered useless by the military police, shipped off in boxes, turned liquid and glowing when exposed to extreme heat, flattened into sheets, cut into shapes, exposed to heat again so as to be molded, emerging as what we would recognize as shovel blades, and finally used—in their new status as tools—by a group of young people to plant trees. Whereas Starling elides stages of the process, Reyes includes supplemental material to fill in these holes.

We can understand Reyes's work as an intervention, even prior to the liquefaction and functional retooling of the guns, as a removal of weapons from circulation within the transnational arms trade.[28] The artist coagulates—*crystallizes*—circulation into (temporarily immobile) things that become objects of our often underinformed apprehension; as such, they become what Igor Kopytoff called "terminal commodities."[29] Nevertheless, they are not rendered useless, as in the conventional understanding of the Duchampian ready-made, but rather given new use values.[30] As such we might consider them, with notable differences, in relation to Starling's inversion of Duchamp's ready-mades into works "made-ready." Whereas Duchamp took functional objects out of the realm of their conventional use, Reyes produces functional objects, rather than pure objects of contemplation. More specifically, the logic of *Palas por pistolas* may be interpreted as wordplay on Duchamp's ready-made, using a found snow shovel, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915). In the work by Reyes, the (fire)arms are broken as a prelude to the fabrication of shovels, which are themselves not an endpoint but a tool for yet other ends.

When displayed hanging from the wall of an art institution, Reyes's shovels do recall the ready-made, though they were far from merely found objects; rather, these newly fabricated tools both did and did not bear the trace of their former lives as guns. To some degree,

3 Pedro Reyes, *Palas por Pistolas*, 2007–Present. 1,527 guns melted into steel to fabricate 1,527 shovels, to plant 1,527 trees. Installation view at Biennale de Lyon, 2009

this material relationship to the "hereditary code" (Weinryb)[31] of transformed metal recalls Starling's *One Ton II*—in which the photograph imaged the site of its own substrate's mining—or his earlier remaking of one object into another, as in his works "made-ready." The particular material shifts structuring *Palas por pistolas* could be understood as a literalization of Reyes's aim with his practice, which, as articulated in an interview with Robin Greeley, was to "transform matter into a new shape," seeking to recalibrate "the interaction between the individual psyche and material reality. As the material changes, there is a parallel psychological change that has both symbolic and real effects."[32]

Consider *Palas por pistolas* in light of Kinney's characterization of *spolia* as "survivors of violence, about which they might be mute (if they bear no visible signs of it) or eloquent. The burden of testimony rests largely with the spoliated object, if it survives to bear witness."[33] Here we might recall Starling's claim, in the interview with Rekade, that objects "generally only become talkative for me once they have been through some kind of transformative process" and consider that such a "transformative process" may tend to render objects (and their constituent histories and cultural formations) "mute" as often as "talkative," not least when appropriated through violence.[34] The question of whether Reyes's shovels "speak" to the history of violence in which they were entangled in their former lives as guns is an open

one. Indeed, Reyes's appropriation may be understood as inverse to that of conquest and war in which things generally become *spolia* (the etymological link to the English "spoils"). It is notable that Reyes's particular act of transmutation—his resemanticization of steel—is not an act of violence but one of peacemaking or *making* peace. Such a practice has a history dating back to antiquity, when bronze weapons were melted down and recast as symbols of pacification. If Reyes's work may be seen as based in a will to "transform matter into a new shape," with this material shift modeling a concomitant "psychological change," then the stories these objects tell may be altogether different than their previous histories. They present a new it-narrative *fabricated* by the artist.

We might also link Reyes's shovels to Dieter Roelstraete's formulation of "the way of the shovel," referring to contemporary art's archaeological imaginary.[35] Reyes's shovel, however, isn't intended to dig up an artifact but to plant a tree; if anything, the artifact has become the shovel. The tool that becomes an object (in the case of the archaeological find) has reversed its trajectory—an object (a weapon taken out of circulation and unloaded, a *Ding* in the Heideggerian sense of the broken hammer) has now become a tool. Rather than finding something old in the earth (unearthing), Reyes opens up the earth to plant something new. In this regard, his project looks to the future, rather than to the past, breaking away from the politically regressive esotericism of "antiquarian history" (Nietzsche) that many other contemporary artists engaged with history could be accused of propagating.[36] Liquefaction and the rendering of the source-object as unrecognizable raw material for new making appear unproblematic and even desirable. Remaking, through processes of metallic transformation, emerges as a means of creating change within a "ready-made" world. The shifting *states of matter* could be understood as a means of modeling change in the operations of *the state*.

In a somewhat later yet related work, *Disarm* (2012), Reyes collected guns in Mexico's Ciudad Juárez and had them reconfigured, rather than melted down, into musical instruments, premised on the notion that music is a social good. Suggesting a religious dimension to the project, Reyes said he "wanted to liberate these objects from their demons . . . as if some sort of exorcism is performed on them" when they are played as musical instruments.[37] *Disarm* thus is centered on a misuse[38] of the weapons, reprogramming them as tools for a distinct agenda. In this regard, the project chimes with Finbarr Barry Flood's call, in a text about *spolia*, to question the idea that an object's "identity is not only singular, but also fixed at a valorized moment of creation that represents the Ur-moment of a work."[39] Reyes's retooling provides an alternative model to such reification.

This too raises the question of the site of manufacture for the guns that Reyes's *Palas por pistolas* collects, a question that is answered by some of Starling's projects that return us to the mine. As Reyes noted in an email:

> The first problem with the interpretation of my work that I encountered is that being exhibited around the world this piece was interpreted specific to the context of Mexico . . . . Quite the opposite, I'm interested in showing that a lot of these weapons that are made in

politically correct countries such as Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, Italy are distributed around the world and the blame only goes to whoever pulls the trigger. Never to the person who manufactures the weapons.[40]

Here Reyes clarifies the site of *making* as in need of elucidation, rendered central in a more recent series, begun in 2020, called *Return to Sender*. For this project, he orchestrated the creation of music boxes made from gun parts designed to play the work of famous composers hailing from the countries where the weapons had been initially manufactured, from Vivaldi to Mozart.[41] As such, these metal objects are global in their transformative fusion of intention, manufacture, use, and retooling.

3. The Conversion of Matter: Hiwa K's *The Bell Project*

Initially conceived in 2007, Hiwa K's *The Bell Project* was completed in 2015 as a contribution to *All the World's Futures*, that year's iteration of the Venice Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor. At the Biennale, a bronze bell was struck once an hour (fig. 4). For the reader, this bell might resonate with Reyes's *Disarm* project, in which guns were repurposed to produce a variety of percussive instruments. As detailed in the first of two videos, the raw materials (of a sort) for Hiwa K's bell were left behind in the wake of war and bombings in Iraq beginning with the Iran-Iraq War. While the scrapyard overseen by Nazhad includes the remains of military vehicles, rockets, bombs, and land mines, as Lawrence Abu Hamdan notes, "The only kind of weapon that is not present is a trace of Saddam Hussein's so-called weapons of mass destruction (WMDs),"[42] the unsubstantiated lynchpin of the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. While Nazhad, a "Kurdish entrepreneur," usually sells off the scrap metal to countries such as Iran and China,[43] in the case of Hiwa K's bell the metal was melted down into ingots. The ingots were then melted down again at a bell foundry in Italy, inspired by histories of Italian bells being transformed into cannons, as Weinryb and other scholars have chronicled. But here this process was reversed. In *The Bell Project*, weapons mass-produced within an industrial paradigm were liquefied and reformed to produce a single object through artisanal methods predating the Industrial Revolution. Here, new use values accrued to objects, such as the land mines gathered by Nazhad, whose intended function had been "deactivated."[44]

Just as Reyes's shovels, when exhibited as art, are accompanied by videos expanding on the processes of gun collection, gun melting, recasting, and reforestation, so too does Hiwa K present, alongside the bell, two videos that provide insight into the processes and sites constitutive of the object's fabrication. The videos, evocative of the epic final sequence of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* (1966) in which a massive bell is founded, are supplementary and, as such, raise questions concerning the degree to which an object can testify, the degree to which objects are "mute" (Kinney) or "talkative" (Starling), the degree to which an it-narrative requires elaboration outside the object it claims as its protagonist. In Reyes's

4 Hiwa K, *The Bell Project,* 2007–15. War metal waste, wood, 179 × 220 × 150 cm. Installation view at 56th Venice Biennial, Arsenale, 2015

and Hiwa K's parallel decisions to accompany transformed metal objects with documentary videos, they seek to locate the sculptural within a process of collecting and making revealed by the cinematic. In assigning a narrative function to moving images, sculpture is essentialized as an abstraction from labor.

The first of the two videos for *The Bell Project* begins with a military airplane flying overhead, as a twelve-year-old who works with Nazhad says off camera: "I wish I could shoot it down with an RPG and collect the parts, melt them down, and then send them to where it came from in order for them to make another aeroplane." Later in the video, Nazhad narrates: "Weapons from most of the countries come here. They all come back to me." Nazhad credits his knowledge of metals to "experience"—what anthropologists might call tacit knowledge. He possesses a relationship to these objects and their material properties more akin to that of a designer than to those who use them as weapons of war. However, Nazhad's practice is not one of reverse engineering, but one of "deactivation" ("I deactivate them myself") and melting down. His approach recalls art-historical connoisseurship, as he quickly notes the origin of particular objects ("Italian," "German," etc.) (fig. 5). If to some extent shots of scrapyard workers stoking the cauldron—a solitary laboring male body working a forge whose smoke casts him in relief—recall images of heavy industry associated with early twentieth-century photography, then the production at Nazhad's yard is markedly postindustrial, though metal ingots may in turn reenter circuits of industry at a later stage of this particular narrative. *The*

Subtitle in image: "Moreover there are more than 40 countries that sold weapons to Iraq and Iran."

5 Hiwa K, *Nazhad and The Bell Making*, 2007–15. Two channel video installation, SD & HD video, color, sound with English subtitles, videostill

Bell Project also raises the question of the relationship to preindustrial modes of making in its engagement with the bell foundry. What do we *make* from the ruins of war, Hiwa K's video seems to ask; his "finished" bell partially answers.

The metal remnants in the scrapyard appear as artifacts no longer of use. While "deactivated," they will attain new use value when sold off by Nazhad, attaining exchange value in the process ("the prices depend on their qualities") and new use value at a small scale when transformed into contemporary art, in the case of Hiwa K's bell. As such, they are readymades—found objects—of a kind, but in the process they are rendered utterly unrecognizable. The arid scrapyard presents a contrast to the molten, luminous ore into which various rusty, dusty objects are melted before being poured into ingot molds. The "cauldron" in which the objects are transmuted into ore is also metal ("German"), as are the ladles and kettles used around the yard. Eighteen minutes in and the twelve-year-old is twenty; time is fluid and fast. The first video shifts from dialogue at the scrapyard to wordless documentation of process.

The second video transports us to Crema, Italy, where we are introduced to another, if parallel, set of artisanal techniques. Bricks are assembled in a bell shape and then coated with clay by a new set of makers to form a mold; Nazhad is nowhere in sight. The video requires patience of its viewer, though of course, through editing, it substantially accelerates the process it documents. One worker in Crema unpacks the ingots ("This is the material from Nazhad"). Using the tin and copper collected and melted down into ingots at the

scrapyard, the bell-makers will create the bronze by remelting the ingots before solidifying the metal again into the form of the bell through a process of lost-wax casting. Speaking of the man from whom he learned his metalworking skills "whose ancestors worked for the military arsenal of Venice," another artisan recalls that "he taught me many things about the construction of cannons," suggesting a continuity between the medieval spoliations detailed by Weinryb—the transformations of bronze from bell to cannon—and the contemporary practices of bell-makers in Italy.

The two videos illuminate—render visible—the various, multisite labor constituent of the bell, narratives supplemental to this "it." The *work* that is perhaps least visible, in an inversion of the authorial logic that continues to govern property rights in the field of contemporary art, is Hiwa K's primarily intellectual labor as manager of the object's fabrication between Iraq and Italy, as well as what is presumably his choice of design for the bell's decoration (applied with cow's fat).[45] As Ben Fergusson notes: "In a final symbolic flourish, the bell's surface was adorned with a bas-relief depicting Mesopotamian artifacts that had either already been destroyed by Daesh in Iraq or were under threat of ruination."[46] If the videos are fairly meticulous in documenting the artisanal processes of fabrication at various stages, they are less transparent concerning the social interactions that established Hiwa K's connections with these artisans as well as the longer-term process, beginning officially in 2007, that preceded making in its most literal sense.

Like Starling's it-narratives, the videos accompanying Hiwa K's bell are looped; a visitor to an exhibition (I encountered *The Bell Project* in both New York and Tokyo subsequent to its presentation in Venice) will begin watching them at a random moment. The proportion of notoriously distracted visitors who watch them from beginning to end (or middle to middle, as the case may be) is uncertain. If Starling's *One Ton II* crystallizes the narrative, Hiwa K's videos present a fluid state in relation to the coagulated matter—the solidity—of his bell. The decision to create two discrete videos rather than a single, continuous one—the decision to isolate scrapyard from bell-makers—further decouples the bell from a linear narrative structure (my reference to the videos as "first" and "second" could be scrutinized for imposing this order), as opposed to a teleological progression from "raw" to "cooked," in Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous binary formulation. Of course, the weapons collected by Nazhad are far from "raw" materials.

Resonating with my interpretation of Reyes's shovels, according to Fergusson, Hiwa K "sees his work as a reverse archaeology: a digging upwards rather than a looking downwards from a dominant (Western) perspective."[47] The bell is buried by the artisans in Crema in an act embodying this metaphor of reverse archaeology; once it is underground, it is filled with molten ore to become its "final" form. The negative logic of bronze casting, too, materializes this logic of reversal.

Even more pointedly than Starling's and Reyes's works, Hiwa K's videos may be understood to adapt the age-old practice of spoliation for the twenty-first century, crafting a specific it-narrative of metal and its transformation across and between contexts. In the case of *The Bell Project*, the original meaning of *spolia* to refer to "'spoils' or anything 'stripped' from

someone or something" proves apposite.[48] Certainly, this etymology of *spolia* evokes the looting and destruction of Iraqi cultural heritage (as referenced by the bell's bas-relief) but strikes an ironic note when applied to the shrapnel and other detritus collected to make the bell. As with processes of cultural appropriation (broadly defined), syncretic and otherwise, symbolic power is transferred to the "new" object from the "old." It is not just precious material that attracts appropriation but also the symbolic power attributed to the "original" object that primes it for adaptation so as to bestow power on its new users and its new functions.[49] To treat shrapnel as "spoils" is to consecrate the remainder of warfare, to hallow that which has deconsecrated. In a text characterizing an ongoing project called *Raw Materiality*, whose inception coincided with that of *The Bell Project* in 2007, Hiwa K writes that the "metallurgic smelting process highlights the extent to which the geopolitical and internal realities of Iraq have been historically decided by external powers. Just as Nazhad uses raw materials to sell on, Iraq has long been seen as a 'raw material' for exploitation and upon which many other countries have become dependent."[50] Here petroleum is evoked but not explicitly mentioned. But as the artist notes, the weapons Nazhad collects, processes, and sells off are not local in their origins but rather "their materials and metals . . . read like a map of the various countries and forces that have staked an interest in Iraq."[51] This, too, is archaeology in reverse, wherein this material "from Iraq" is revealed to be foreign in origin, not unlike Reyes's *Return to Sender* series, which emphasizes the sites of weaponry's manufacture rather than the sites of bloodshed.

What did it signify to present (and hear) the bell in Venice in particular? For one thing, Venice was, beginning in the eighth century, a key site of trade between Christians and Muslims and, what's more, the Arsenale in particular, a venue for the Venice Biennale since the 1980s, was arguably "the largest industrial complex in Europe" by the sixteenth century, marked by the transfer of military discipline to the precise rationalization and exacting standards of industrial production.[52] The Arsenale as a place where weapons had been produced as far back as the fourteenth century proves resonant as a site for Hiwa K's material transformation. Recall the Crema bellmaker featured in the second video who traced his knowledge back to this very site.

At the Biennale, the bell was rung once an hour.[53] As with Reyes's *Disarm*, the sounding of objects intended for another purpose bears a dubious relationship to the intentions that triggered their initial manufacture. Engaging his bell in time-keeping, time-marking practices meant Hiwa K could keep recent history present, acoustically animated, echoing far beyond Iraq. Hamdan understands the bell as "a territorial agent, signaling as far as the ear can hear that we are under the jurisdiction of a particular parish" and conjuring the spatial politics of sound.[54]

Within a Christian context such as Italy, the process of spoliation could be understood as "conversion" (here Kinney cites Philippe Buc), whether it be "a pagan idol melted down to form a chalice or the wine from donated land used for the eucharist."[55] Hence, "conversion" could be interpreted simultaneously as a material transformation of metal, with one object

melted down to become another, and as a religious change that could extend metaphorically to include the reuse and refunctionalization of one thing to signify something altogether different (i.e., wine produced by non-Christians becomes the blood of Christ). Beyond changes in the appearance or ritual context of the thing, the *interpretatio christiana* involved processes of "renaming" and "unnaming" that could underwrite a shift in the ownership, function, and context of an object.[56] This proves relevant for thinking about the material and symbolic changes undergone by Nazhad's metal.

In the making of Hiwa K's bell, as documented in the second video, the Christian "conversion" of the metal was overseen by "a bishop" who "was invited" and who "recited phrases from the Bible as the molten metal was poured into the mould."[57] If Reyes characterized the reconfiguration of guns as musical instruments in *Disarm* as an "exorcism," in *The Bell Project* transmuted metal was consecrated by a member of the clergy. The relationship of this project, this Christianization, to older practices of spoliation is indicated by the artist's invocation of another project he created, *What the Barbarians Did Not Do, So Did the Barberini* (2012), which refers to the "Vatican melting down the bronze from the ceiling of the Pantheon."[58] Regarding that project, the artist wrote: "Bronze is a metal used for both art and war, therefore linking the fields of visual representation and the military execution of power."[59] The relationship between *spolia* and violence recurs in the narratological muteness of the bell, despite its sonic power, and the expository function of the videos to reveal the it-narrative that metal's transformational properties melts down and thus renders untraceable. If the collaborative nature of the project—at various stages in both Iraq and Italy—suggests a hybridity antithetical to Samuel Huntington's "clash of cultures" rhetoric, which circulated in the wake of September 11 and on the eve of the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, the liquidation of cultural specificity that metal's state-shifting permits shades *The Bell Project* in perpetual ambiguity.

4. Shifting States: Against "It"

Simon Starling, Pedro Reyes, and Hiwa K understand the object as at least a node, if not necessarily an endpoint, in a process of transformation. Accordingly, we might understand their works as entries in what cinema and media scholar Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky has termed "the process genre," emphasizing filmic sequences of process but also considering text-based narratives of making and other routines.[60] With these projects by Starling, Reyes, and Hiwa K we might add the object that is reflexive concerning its own lived history prior to its inconspicuous arrival in the place and time, and taking the form it currently does, in the space in which one encounters it (a museum, gallery, or other exhibition space). The artists suggest that these metal objects are not made meaningful purely in relationship to discourse, but that their very materiality may be seen as constitutive of the flux of which they are instances. The world-historical dimension of these projects with metal, attended to with varying degrees

of specificity by these three artists, certainly resonates with the conjunction of imperialism, extraction, and capitalism characterizing the project of modernity that each, in their way, argues is both historically embedded and alive in the present.

We might also consider these projects in their stark contrast to the metalwork made most iconic in the years immediately preceding their making. Take, for instance, Frank Gehry's behemoth, the Guggenheim Bilbao, completed in 1997, understood to transform the struggling Basque region, rusty with postindustrial decline, into a gleaming cultural destination rendered in titanium. Or consider, in the field of sculpture, Jeff Koons's stainless-steel *Balloon Dogs*, begun in the 1990s, as scaled-up funhouse mirrors of speculative capitalism. Or compare them to Anish Kapoor's crowd-pleasing stainless-steel sculpture *Cloud Gate* (2006), better known as "the Bean," in Chicago's Millennium Park, a surface attracting a multitude of selfies. Interpreting these metallic icons as "placemaking" magnets amid the global expansionism characterizing the turn of the millennium, and the digital design tools and aesthetics all three embody, casts in relief the particular ways in which Starling, Reyes, and Hiwa K engage with metal in their respective projects. If their work is reflexive, it is not *reflective*; indeed, even when polished to a sheen, their objects are opaque and dull in their self-revelation. It is the remoteness of their objects' histories, undetectable in their present state, that makes the it-narrative a corrective to the putative straightforwardness of the "it" with which we are presented but that we can't readily decipher. What emerges is that while Gehry's, Koons's, and Kapoor's works in metal repress the role of making in favor of surface effects, Starling, Reyes, and Hiwa K variably understand extraction, collaboration, and artisanal skill as crucial to the logic of their work. Nevertheless, they play with the ways in which metal can be variably "mute" and "talkative" to expose the fundamental contradictions both of it-narratives and of commodities more generally.

Perhaps this is part of what Hiwa K means by "archaeology in reverse": a burying of the present rather than an unearthing of the past. Indeed, nonlinear time is conjured by these artists' projects, which produce unpredictable wormholes between historical moments and practices usually kept far apart. Geospatial and cultural displacement is crucial to the obfuscation being performed, resonant with the alienating effects of a global division of labor and its relationship to the making of contemporary art. Recall Starling's comment in the interview with Rekade: "I'm really interested in what it means to make something in a culture in which our connections with making and manufacture are increasingly distant—we have become estranged from the things we use every day."[61] These it-narratives propose an understanding of "it" as constantly in flux and unintelligible outside of transformation. These objects are constantly in the process of being made, even as they are unmade and remade, liquid even when they seem most solid, motile even as they appear inert. Thus, the twenty-first-century object is understood as historically continuous with the past but also as unfixed for the future. These artists seem to suggest that the fugitive present, too, can be melted down and remade.

Notes

1   On "it-narratives," see Mark Blackwell, ed., *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2014).

2   Helenus Scott, *The Adventures of a Rupee* (London: J. Murray, 1783), pp. 6–7.

3   Karl Marx, *Capital,* vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 197.

4   Ibid., p. 206.

5   Ibid., p. 222. The connection between it-narratives and Marx's writing on money, coins, metal, circulation, and value appears frequently in twenty-first-century scholarship on this literary genre, including in contributions to Blackwell, *The Secret Life of Things*.

6   Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22. Blackwell and the other contributors to *The Secret Life of Things* also acknowledge the genealogy linking it-narratives and Brown's work on things.

7   Dale Kinney, "The Concept of Spolia: Addendum, 2019," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), p. 331.

8   Ibid.

9   Richard Brilliant, "Authenticity and Alienation," in *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, ed. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), p. 174.

10   Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 3.

11   Simon Starling and Francesco Manacorda, "Francesco Manacorda in Conversation with Simon Starling," in *Simon Starling*, ed. Dieter Roelstraete (London: Phaidon, 2012), pp. 11–13.

12   Daniel Birnbaum, "Transporting Visions: On the Art of Simon Starling," *Artforum* 42, no. 6 (February 2004): 106.

13   Simon Starling, "Replication: Some Thoughts, Some Works," *Tate Papers* 8 (Autumn 2007), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/08/replication-some-thoughts-some-works.

14   Simon Starling, email to the author, January 17, 2022. Thank you to Simon Starling for his generosity in answering my questions.

15   Ibid.

16   Birnbaum, "Transporting Visions," p. 105.

17   Simon Starling and Christiane Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," *Art History* 36, no. 3 (June 2013): 647. For more on "talking objects," see Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

18   Starling and Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," p. 648.

19   See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); for televisual "flow," see Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).

20   Christopher Steiner, "Rights of Passage: On the Liminal Identity of Art in the Border Zone," in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred Myers (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2001), p. 210.

21   Simon Starling, email to the author, January 17, 2022.

22 Mark Godfrey, "Prints, Particles, Palaces, and Planets," in *Metamorphology*, ed. Dieter Roelstraete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 115.

23 Starling and Manacorda, "Francesco Manacorda in Conversation with Simon Starling," p. 27.

24 Simon Starling, email to the author, January 17, 2022.

25 Ibid.

26 José Luis Falconi, "Ad Usum, Ad Hoc (Or How to Use This Book)," in *Pedro Reyes: Ad Usum/To Be Used*, ed. José Luis Falconi (Cambridge: Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University, 2017), p. viii.

27 "Palas por pistolas," in *Pedro Reyes: Ad Usum/To Be Used*, pp. 79–80.

28 Tyson E. Lewis, "'Move Around! There Is Something to See Here': The Biopolitics of the Perceptual Pedagogy of the Arts," *Studies in Art Education* 57, no. 1 (October 2015): 61.

29 Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 75.

30 Here I have benefitted from the Marxian interpretation of Duchamp's ready-mades in relation to labor and use value in John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007).

31 Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, p. 3.

32 Pedro Reyes in discussion with Robin Greeley, February 20, 2013, as quoted in Robin Greeley, "Modernism as a Toolbox," in *Pedro Reyes: Ad Usum/To Be Used*, p. 412.

33 Kinney, "Introduction," in *Reuse Value*, p. 4.

34 Starling and Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," p. 647.

35 Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art," *e-flux journal*, no. 4 (March 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/.

36 For analysis of the "antiquarian" strain of contemporary artists' engagements with history, see James Meyer, *The Art of Return: The Sixties & Contemporary Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

37 Pedro Reyes, quoted in José Esparza Chong Cuy, "Gun Politics," *Domus* 962 (October 2012): 109.

38 On the "misuse" of objects by contemporary artists, see Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

39 Finbarr Barry Flood, "Appropriation as Inscription: Making History in the First Friday Mosque of Delhi," in *Reuse Value*, p. 122.

40 Pedro Reyes, email to the author, February 21, 2022. Thank you to Isabella Tang and Sofía Canesco for their work in supporting this communication.

41 Reyes made the connection (between these earlier projects, their critical reception, and *Return to Sender*) explicit in ibid.

42 Lawrence Abu Hamdan, "Body Count," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet: The Works of Hiwa K*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: Koenig Books, 2017), p. 61.

43 "Raw Materiality," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet*, p. 233.

44 "The Bell Project," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet*, p. 211.

45 For the relationship between art, artisanal labor, reskilling and deskilling, and intellectual labor, see Roberts, *Intangibilities of Form*.

46 Ben Fergusson, "Digging Upwards," *Frieze* 187 (May 2017): 184.

47 Ibid.

48   Kinney, "The Concept of *Spolia*," p. 331.

49   For a related argument about bronze bells made of a melted-down statue, see Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, p. 4.

50   "Raw Materiality," p. 233.

51   Ibid.

52   Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve Editions, 2000), p. 83. Here DeLanda is drawing from Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 44.

53   Shama Khanna, "56th Venice Biennale," *Art Monthly* 387 (June 2015): 387.

54   Hamdan, "Body Count," p. 61.

55   Kinney, "Ancient Gems in the Middle Ages: Riches and Ready-Mades," in *Reuse Value*, p. 107.

56   Ibid., pp. 110–11.

57   "The Bell Project," p. 212.

58   Ibid.

59   "What the Barbarians Did Not Do, Did the Barberini," in *Don't Shrink Me to the Size of a Bullet*, p. 176.

60   Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

61   Starling and Rekade, "Clever Objects – Tell-Tale Objects," p. 648.

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III   THE OTHER AS ARTISAN

NADIA RADWAN

Sensitive Threads

A Claim against the Othering of Craft

"There is nothing inevitable about becoming skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself."[1] In these opening words of *The Craftsman*, the sociologist and cultural theorist Richard Sennett summed up our complex relationship to material culture and the multiple dimensions of skill and craftsmanship. Indeed, craft has always been a contested notion with shifting meanings and values over time, from ancient civilizations to the Industrial Revolution and the mechanization of labor. But despite the fluidity of the concept of craft and its multilayered significations and changing statuses across time and place, it has constantly referred to forms of doing and making that require the artisan's hand. In that regard, craft involves skillfulness, a form of know-how applied by what Hannah Arendt and Max Scheler articulated as the *Homo faber* to his/her direct environment. Craft, therefore, entails a form of control, of human mastery, which is inherently opposed to mechanical production. It can be considered, in Sennett's words, as "an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake,"[2] thus also involving a form of satisfaction and pleasure in the process.

This inevitable link to the corporeal essence of craft is implied in the term itself in several languages, as in the German word *Handwerk* or in the Arabic *shughl yadawi*, meaning literally "a work made by hand." Hence, the physical act of creating an object is interconnected with intellect and imagination, which are repeatedly guided by the material qualities of the object, its constraints, as well the "mistakes" that become an integral part of the aesthetic result. As once expressed by the weaver, printmaker, and writer Anni Albers about tapestry: "It is artwork, and, as in other plastic arts, it demands the most direct—that is, the least impeded—response of material and technique to the hand of the maker, the one who here transforms matter into meaning."[3] While the weaver's loom functions as an extension of the body, the craft calls upon both physical and intellectual capacities in response to technique and the structure of the material.

However, this bodily character of craft has played an important part in strengthening the hierarchies between mechanical reproduction and creative imagination in Western discourses of modernism, which have had an equivocal attitude toward the reconciliation of intellect with the physical character of craft. Indeed, modernism in the West has been more

inclined toward the radical erasing of the hand in favor of the mind and, subsequently, has valued deskilling, defined by Benjamin Buchloh as the "persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation."[4]

Thus, the inextricable interrelations between skill, technique, and art have forged Western art-historical narratives, while craft has paradoxically remained both at its center and its margins. "High" art, indeed, needed "low" art to define itself. In this sense, one could claim that craft acted as Western modernism's Other. But what does craft signify for artists working outside of the West? How does its legacy and reception differ in other contexts, and what does this mean for contemporary artistic production?

Scholarship has recently reconsidered the notion of craft in contemporary art and design. Many artists combine handwork (wood carving, glassblowing, textile weaving, ceramics, etc.) with conceptual approaches and embrace multiple forms of making related to knowledge. These include industrial arts, amateur activity, *bricolage*, digital arts, or "craftivism" and address questions of authorship, labor, and censorship. Interestingly, these approaches are often exhibited in connection with decolonial or feminist matters and address minority, race, and gender-related issues.[5] From this perspective, one is entitled to ask why craft should insistently speak for the Other or the oppressed.

While it is not my aim here to address the current revival of craft in Western contemporary art production, which is being widely debated,[6] I do intend to question the enduring relationship between craft and Primitivism as intersecting paradigms.[7] More specifically, I want to reflect on their interconnection in Western art discourses and their long-lasting effect on the exclusion of other stories of art. In this regard, I will begin by underlining the fact that this relationship has persisted far beyond its anthropologic origins, developed notably by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (The Savage Mind) through the figure of the *bricoleur*,[8] up to the recent historicizing of so-called global art. Then, I will examine the historical genealogies of the dialectic between craftsmanship and Primitivism, in order to underline one of its crucial consequences: the othering of craft. Indeed, I argue that the association between craft and the representation of otherness in past and present exhibition practices serves to maintain hegemonic discourses under the banner of the alleged inclusivity and diversity of global art. These frameworks, in reality, tend to minimize—or even erase—the artists' negotiation of the underlying and disputed politics of craft and lead to what bell hooks has termed the "commodification of otherness."[9] Finally, I will look at the historical genealogies of craft in the Middle East and listen to the voices of contemporary artists from the region and its diaspora who engage with both craft and conceptualism. Through these examinations, I wish to highlight craft's powerful potential to refute its association with otherness and to reconcile itself with its historical and political roots, as well as with its emotional dimension outside of the West.

1. The Skilled Other

Craft and Primitivism have been two highly disputed concepts. Their central commonality is their attempt to navigate the boundaries between so-called "high" and "low" or "modern" and "premodern" art. While craft embraces multiple forms of making related to skill, materiality, and knowledge, the notion of Primitivism is intimately linked to artisanal activity and its colonial past. However, these two paradigms have mostly been analyzed separately rather than in their intersectionality: craft, as an activity or trade involving skill and experience in making things by hand, and Primitivism, as an art term that refers to the fascination of the early European avant-garde with so-called "primitive art" and, consequently, to the collection of objects mostly acquired or stolen in colonial contexts. My aim here is not so much to offer a critical viewpoint on Primitivism but rather to claim that craft has constituted its backbone and that their interconnection may still function as an essentializing criterion in the reception and exhibition of contemporary art production from the non-West. Indeed, though modern artists from outside the West have reclaimed their own narrative of the "primitive" since the early twentieth century, its canonic definition appears to remain profoundly entrenched in current contemporary art criticism and curatorial practices.

Already in 1928, the poet, novelist, and leading figure of Brazilian modernism Oswald de Andrade, in his famous "Manifesto Antropófago" (Anthropophagic Manifesto) published in the *Revista de Antropofagia* and illustrated with a work by his wife, the painter Tarsila do Amaral, had called for the end of Western rationalism in favor of the creative power of the "primitive" or the "prelogical." In this decolonial celebration of the nonobjective and communion with nature, which makes use of the subversive strategy of playful Dadaist and Surrealist writing, de Andrade refers directly to the theories of the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl about the "primitive mind":

> It was because we never had grammars, nor collections of old plants. And we never knew what urban, suburban, frontier and continental were. Lazy in the *mapamundi* of Brazil. A participatory consciousness, a religious rhythmics. Down with all the importers of canned consciousness. The palpable existence of life. And the pre-logical mentality of Mr. Lévy Bruhl to study.[10]

De Andrade's strategy of anthropophagy refers to the ritualistic practice of eating one's enemy and ingesting his/her virtues, and therefore serves to deconstruct the colonial discourse of Primitivism by outlining artistic creation as an act of endless transfiguration and hybridization.

More than half a century after de Andrade signed his "Anthropophagic Manifesto," artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña presented their performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* in several cities in the United States and Europe. Conceived as a satirical comment about the Western desire for othering the "primitive" and exhibitions of human beings in colonial "world fairs," the artists presented themselves in a golden cage as undiscovered

Amerindians from a fictional island in the Gulf of Mexico called Guatinau. In her account of the reception of this performance, Fusco recalls that a large part of the audience unexpectedly believed that the artists' fictional identities were real. Consequently, the moral implications, critical approach, and historical references of the performance were substituted by a part of the audience's literal interpretation, and the debate shifted toward the ethical issues related to exhibiting two persons from elsewhere in a cage.[11] According to Fusco, another part of the audience criticized the inauthenticity of the two protagonists with regard to their clothing, attributes (which included computers and sunglasses), and dances. In that sense, the work did not respond to the West's desire for "cultural differences that only a 'pure' non-West can offer."[12] Thus, the crucial implication of the literal reception of this performance is that it was misunderstood.

Milestone exhibitions from the mid-1980s up to the late 1990s have similarly strengthened the otherness of craft, notably by relating it with Primitivism but also by emphasizing the discrepancy between two notions that emerged quasi-simultaneously: the "global" and the "digital." Although transnational art and new media culture have been widely debated separately, again, their interdependence in exhibition histories has not yet received the attention it deserves. It nevertheless owes much to the persistent distinction between the global South, associated with craft and Primitivism, and the First World, connected to conceptualism and technology.

The coexistence of Edouard Glissant's idea of *mondialité* and Peter Weibel's "wired world" was reflected in two exhibitions—*Les Immatériaux* (The Immaterial Ones, 1985) and *Magiciens de la terre* (Magicians of the Earth, 1989)—that laid the groundwork of the cohabitation of globalization and technologization. While both exhibits represented a crucial shift toward connecting transnational art and immaterial/digital culture, they were linked to similar ideals of diversification, democratization, and connectivity. However, despite these common aspirations, these shows have stressed the enduring partition between the idea of the hand-crafted South and the technological West.[13]

This distinction had already been emphasized with the notion of "affinity" formulated by the curators of the exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* held at the MoMA in New York (1984–85),[14] which aimed to underline what the curators defined as the "basic shared characteristics" or "common denominators" between the "modern" and the "tribal," another word for the "primitive." Avant-garde Western paintings and sculptures, created mainly in Paris from 1905 onward by a rather small group of male artists including Picasso, Giacometti, Brancusi, and others, were displayed in juxtaposition with objects (masks, totems, and other cultural objects) from Africa, South America, or Polynesia. This comparison of crafted objects, long considered ethnographic specimens, with the *greatness* of Western modernists who rediscovered them in an invented kinship, was formulated through the problematic and universalizing term of "affinity."[15]

In an attempt to address—or rather to avoid—the polemical notion of "affinity" between the modern West and the crafted South of the *"Primitivism"* show and its hegemonic

perspective, the curator Jean-Hubert Martin conceived *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in 1989. The choice was to abandon some key modernist terminologies primarily by replacing the word "artist" with the word "magician."[16] The show thus claimed to consider all artists as agents on an equal level in the exhibition display. However, the reframing of the idea of the "artist" as the "magician," while it was supposed to—again—give the act of creation a universal value distinct from cultural and historical indexes, recalled the fascination for magical and ritual power attributed by the European avant-garde to colonial objects.

In fact, many contemporary artists from the non-West had been excluded from the exhibition specifically because their work was not dealing with traditional craft and therefore did not comply with the show's expectations from artists coming from the global South. In other words, the Other was expected to be skilled and was denied the right to deskilling. Thus, despite its aim to be the first worldwide exhibition of contemporary art, difference, rather than similarities, became the focus of the show. Several artists from the global margins, including from the Middle East and Turkey, had expressed their disapproval and claimed their right to brand themselves as conceptual artists rather than craftsmen/women.[17] Hence, this association of craft with otherness forged by the global art discourse not only posited the definition of what non-Western artist should produce, but also omitted entire stories of the historical and political roots of craft in the geographic contexts from which these artists came from.

2. Woven Resilience

To grasp the reconciliation of craft and conceptualism in the works of contemporary artists from the Middle East, and to understand in what terms it contests and breaks away from the abovementioned association between craft and otherness, it seems important to adumbrate certain historical aspects of artisanal practices in the region. Because the hierarchization between craft and fine arts was defined both by colonial presence and as a part of movements for independence, artists' relationship to craft took a different path than in the West. Artisanal production played an instrumental role in legitimizing European presence in the region, with the preservation of craft and "authentic" traditions being an integral part of the colonial political agenda. Art historian Jessica Gerschultz has shown how in Tunisia, under the protectorate, "both the 'indigenous' populations and their artistic practices were feminized and infantilized, regarded as craftwork in need of European salvage and protection."[18] In that context, the endeavor to revive artisanal practices also led to the strengthening of the canonic hierarchization between craft and the fine arts.

However, during the mid-twentieth century, the revival of crafts found itself at the center of decolonial movements and nation-building in the region, where the refusal to consider practices of weaving, pottery, ceramics, and woodwork, as a part of an ensemble of so-called "minor" arts, was not only a reaction to colonial occupation but a reaction to the

1 Ramses Wissa Wassef, Art Centre, Harrania, Egypt, 1952–74. Wool yarns colored with natural vegetable dyes

European training in newly established schools and art institutions. As shown by art historian Nadine Atallah, in modern art discourses, the Western criteria of "greatness" was substituted by the notion of "authenticity" (*asala*),[19] and therefore, avant-garde groups were often involved in the revival of craftsmanship.

Among the projects for the revitalization of artisanal creation was the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre, conceived by the Egyptian architect and pedagogue Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911–1974), who established a weaving and pottery school in the early 1950s in a small rural village called Harrania located south of Cairo. Inspired by local constructive methods and traditional architecture, he conceived what one may call today an "eco-project" built with mud bricks to host the workshops (fig. 1).[20] The school trained young villagers in the traditional techniques of weaving and pottery, designated as "artistic craft"—*fann al-zakhrafa* in Arabic and *artisanat d'art* in French.[21] The endeavor of the school was to elevate both the status of craftsmanship and the social conditions of the artisan. As Wissa Wassef stated in an article entitled "Protégeons l'artisanat" (Let's Protect Crafts), published in 1945:

> Egypt needs a new spirit, regenerated through the contact with Western culture but fundamentally attached to its soil, its traditions and searching for its own solutions. . . . The artisan can only evolve in healthy social conditions and can therefore not be consistent with the state of indigence and poverty in which the vast majority of the nation finds itself.[22]
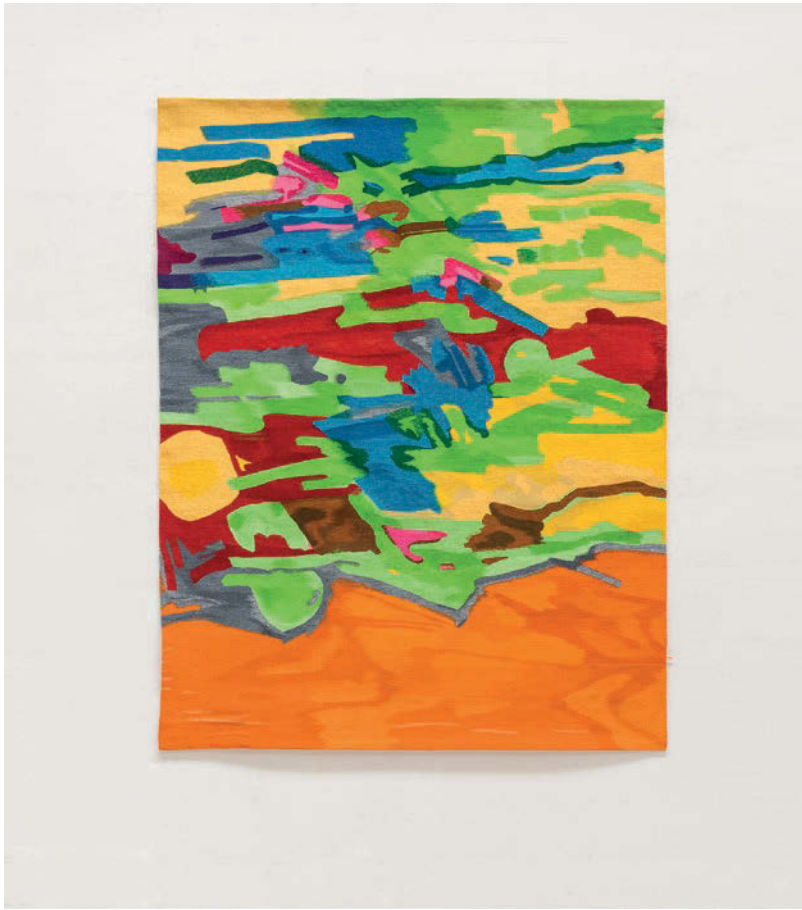
2 Etel Adnan, *Marée basse*, 1967–73/2015. Low warp tapestry, wool, 200 × 160 cm

While this excerpt illustrates the social ground on which the revival of crafts was conceived, Wissa Wassef also had a specific pedagogical approach, infused by the ideas of British art education, and in particular Herbert Read's theories,[23] that the tapestries should be produced without preparatory models, "no external aesthetic influences," "no criticism or interference from adults," and only by using natural material and dying techniques.[24]

In his account of the establishment of the Harrania artisanal project, Wissa Wassef explained: "I had this vague conviction that every human being was born an artist. But that his gifts could be brought out only if artistic creation were encouraged by the practicing of a craft from early childhood."[25] Besides the pedagogic endeavor of such projects, their underlying politics played a major part in defining other spaces of creation and counternarratives to colonial art institutions and by positing that artistry and craftsmanship were part of the same activity and on the same level.

Artisanal projects like the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre have had a significant effect on contemporary artists, such as, for instance, the Lebanese-American abstract artist, poet, and essayist Etel Adnan (1925–2021). She had visited the Centre in 1966 and had been touched by Wissa Wassef's approach to weaving. Most renowned for her written and painted oeuvre, she also produced a number of tapestries, which used bright and vibrant colors in abstract compositions (fig. 2). She designed many of these tapestries between the end of the 1960s and the 1970s, but most of them were handwoven almost half a century later, in collaboration with the Manufacture Pinton in France, a project which she appreciated for its collaborative aspect and in which the persons who wove the tapestries chose their titles.[26] Speaking of the importance of craft in her artistic approach, she explained:

> Because tapestry is handmade, it is not considered as high art but even a painting is done by hand. I love tapestries because they bring a road, they are more domestic art, more ancient art, but that doesn't mean they are not fully art, they are another branch of art. They used to be made by women weavers and therefore were considered less important than other traditional arts made by men. The loom is inviting, I draw special tapestries for the loom. It's another feeling than painting, it's soft.[27]

While Adnan underlines the gendered aspect of craft, she also effects a distancing from the traditional aesthetics of Western abstraction. As the weaving imitates brushstrokes, it references the act of painting. It thereby moves away from the Greenbergian doctrine of painting's self-referentiality and transfers it into another space, that of artistic craft. In this regard, Adnan's tapestries call for a broadening and rethinking of both the definitions of craft and abstraction.

Many abstract artists from the Middle East repeatedly refer to the ornament in Islamic art and architecture in their practice. However, there is a deep—though not initially discernible—connection between the ornament and craft as disputed heritages that are being renegotiated. Indeed, while Western discourses of the Islamic ornament have participated in its homogenization and taxonomy since the nineteenth century, notably through the circulation of ornamental grammars, contemporary artists have reactivated its potential to convey agential counternarratives to this dominant discourse of abstraction.[28]

This is the case, for instance, with the Palestinian New York–based artist Samia Halaby (b. 1936), who refers to craft and ornament in her practice, even though this may not necessarily be apparent in her works.[29] She started to experiment with computer art and the possibilities of this new medium in the late 1980s by programming an Amiga 2000 to create animated images accompanied by sound directly from program commands in the keyboard.[30] This took the form of performances, with Halaby using the keyboard as an "abstract piano," producing kinetic images projected onto a cinema screen. These performances were often accompanied by the musicians Kevin Nathaniel and Hassan Bakr, with whom Halaby formed the Kinetic Painting Group (figs. 3a, 3b).[31] Halaby's computer art reflects the reconciliation

3a Samia Halaby, Studio kinetic performance for Bill Winters, 2018
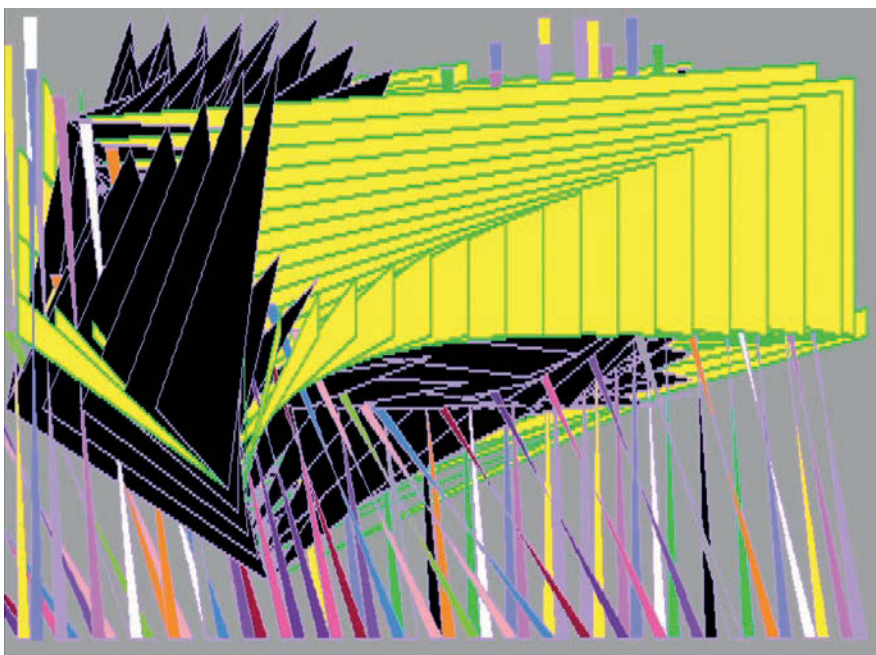
3b Samia Halaby, *Bird Dog*, 1988. Still from kinetic computer art produced on Amiga 2000
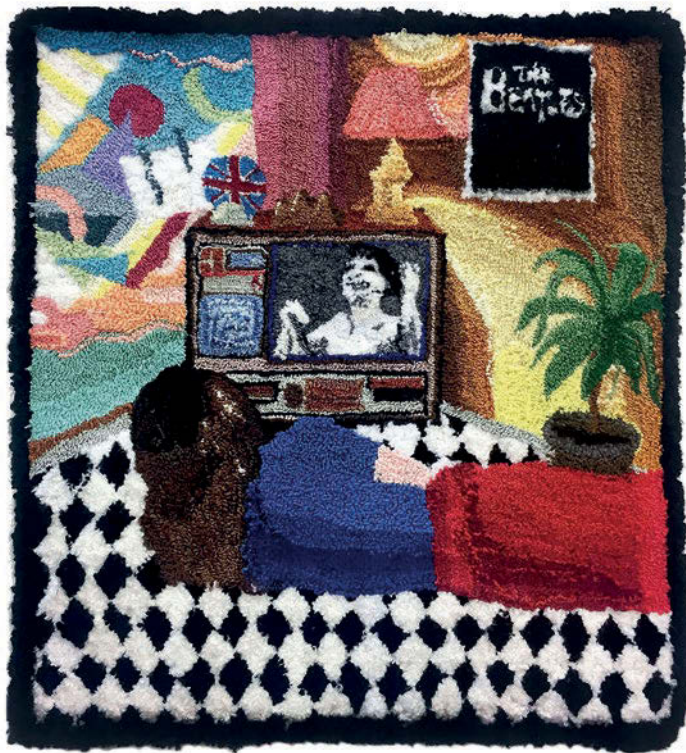
4 Nada Elkalaawy, *A Foot in Both Camps*, 2018. Hand-embroidered tapestry, 41 × 45 cm

between conceptual art and craft in its experimental dimension, with the prominence of the artist's hand behind the computer keyboard. This aspect goes beyond her kinetic work, as she usually wore traditional Palestinian embroidered dresses for these performances. These have a particular signification for the diaspora as a traditional craft sustained by women after their displacement; indeed, it is considered a powerful symbol of belonging. Halaby referred to these embroidered dresses when describing the importance of craft in her practice:

> In general, I try to wipe away the idea of fine art. There are pictures. And the picture could be embroidered on a dress. Embroidery to me is so beautiful and such a fine art, it is the product of a collective mind. Every village is a little different and some differences are huge. Every village has developed its embroidery over centuries and many young women guided by elder women contributed to this beauty. They all use the same pattern, but they all compete to make it beautiful. It arrives to such an attractive collective expression that I, as a painter, could never attain in my life. I never saw any item that is as special as a collective art. I don't call it craft.[32]

5 Majd Abdel Hamid, *Tadmur*, 2019. Embroidery

The dialectic between craft and digital media also characterizes the work of the Egyptian London-based artist Nada Elkalaawy (b. 1995).[33] Her tapestry *A Foot in Both Camps* (2018) (fig. 4) depicts a woman turning her back to the viewer and lying down in an interior setting that displays symbols of belonging, such as the pyramids or the Union Flag. She is watching a live performance by the iconic Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum on a 1960s television that mirrors a hanging poster of the Beatles. While Elkalaawy blends the materiality of traditional weaving processes with digital images in her works, she understands tapestry, carpets, and woven textiles as closely linked to Egyptian visual culture and as part of the domestic environment. Her work is informed by her personal history; she explains:

> I am interested in tapestries, carpets and woven textiles, as for an Egyptian they represent culture and tradition. I grew up seeing them in the interiors of houses whether being displayed on walls or in the Aubusson of chairs and furniture. I am attracted to the materiality and the complexity of the medium, particularly in a new age where the generation of the image and often the output too is digital. . . . It becomes through its own manufacture, an embodiment of time itself, whether the accelerated speed of industrial production or the deliberate pace of the handmade.[34]
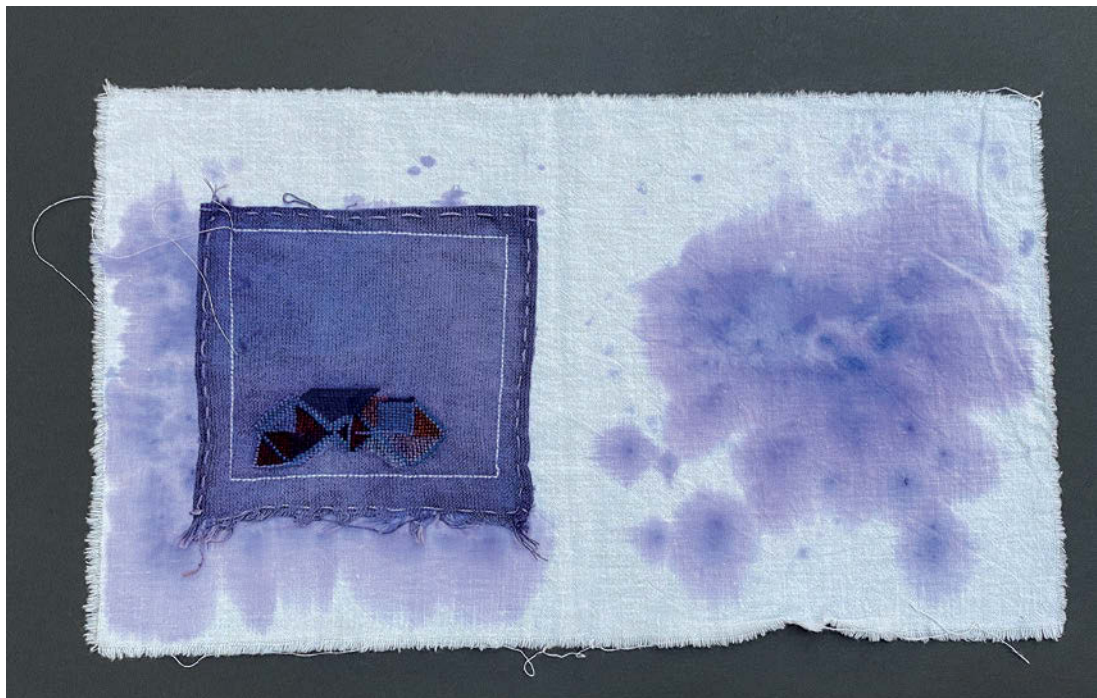
6 Majd Abdel Hamid, *Muscle Memory*, 2022. Embroidery

7 Majd Abdel Hamid, *Muscle Memory*, 2022. Video still

Elkalaawy's remark on the slower pace of handmade objects underlines another crucial aspect of craft, which is time. Indeed, the resilience of making an object by hand, which sometimes entails repetitive technical gestures over time, can also be paralleled to forms of resilience. For instance, the embroideries of the visual artist Majd Abdel Hamid (b. 1988) may be interpreted as a means to overcome the trauma of loss in daily life:

> It has become an essential part of my daily habits, providing me with a safe space, like being in a state of light trance, where you can withdraw from the blackmail of images, news, statements, withdraw but without retreating to a sense of denial, a self-care ritual with a compulsive eagerness to be relevant. How can we distract ourselves while maintaining healthy proximity to society?[35]

The Palestinian artist, born in Damascus and currently working between Beirut and Ramallah, uses embroidery as his main medium. As the craft has become part of his routine, the performative act of embroidering also has a deep-rooted signification of the diaspora as a sign of belonging.[36] His small-scale artisanal stitches embody forms of resilience, not only through the process of making, but also through the time devoted to this process. His abstract compositions often address the reality of conflict and war, such as in his *Tadmur* series (2019) (fig. 5), in which he embroidered the architectural plan of the Assad regime's prison. His embroideries from the series *Muscle Memory* (figs. 6, 7) were created in reaction to the explosion of large store of ammonium nitrate in Beirut's port district on August 4, 2020. The practice of needlework and delicately dyeing the cloth becomes a necessary process for recording the loss and the memory of the city:

> This work is an attempt at reclaiming a practice. I want to reconcile a relationship with a city and claim a small repair space: not as a reaction to disasters but as a continuum of interaction, openness, and reflection.[37]

While Abdel Hamid's work is inspired by the Palestinian tradition of embroidery produced by women, he subverts this gendered practice as a means for resistance.

3. Common Grids

The work of multidisciplinary artist Susan Hefuna embodies the intertwinement of conceptual art and craft. Interested by the interconnectivity of things, the German-Egyptian artist, who grew up in Egypt before studying at Frankfurt am Main's Städelschule, and now works between Cairo, Düsseldorf, and New York, draws links in her work between DNA molecules, traditional palm wood crates, pieces of embroidery, or architectural city plans. The common notion underlying her drawings, installations, videos, and performances are connected

8 Susan Hefuna, *Cityscape*, 2019. Ink, thread, cut-outs on layered paper

structures within a grid. Hefuna constantly seeks out the crucial moment when lines intersect, whether in urban crossroads featured in her video art or handmade crafts evoked in her paintings and installations. Drawing as a medium is central to her approach, which she considers as "the best and the most direct way between thought, mind and hand. There is no filter, no intervention of intellect, it is the most direct way of thinking and making thoughts visible."[38] Her drawings are often layered and superimposed with embroidered stitches or felt patches (fig. 8), thus complementing the act of sewing with drawing. About her use of embroidery in her artworks, she says:

> I use strings (embroidery) in the drawings and works with felt since approximately 2007. For me it is not a "craft." Not in the Western sense. If I use strings in layers of tracing paper it is to stitch to bring sheets together. I do no presketch; I stitch words directly into paper or felt. Due to the resistance of the material the letters or patterns get their shape and form. It is like talking or handwriting through a resistance of material . . . . It is not perfect. Sometimes I can't write a correct letter, etc. . . . I cannot control the outcome.[39]
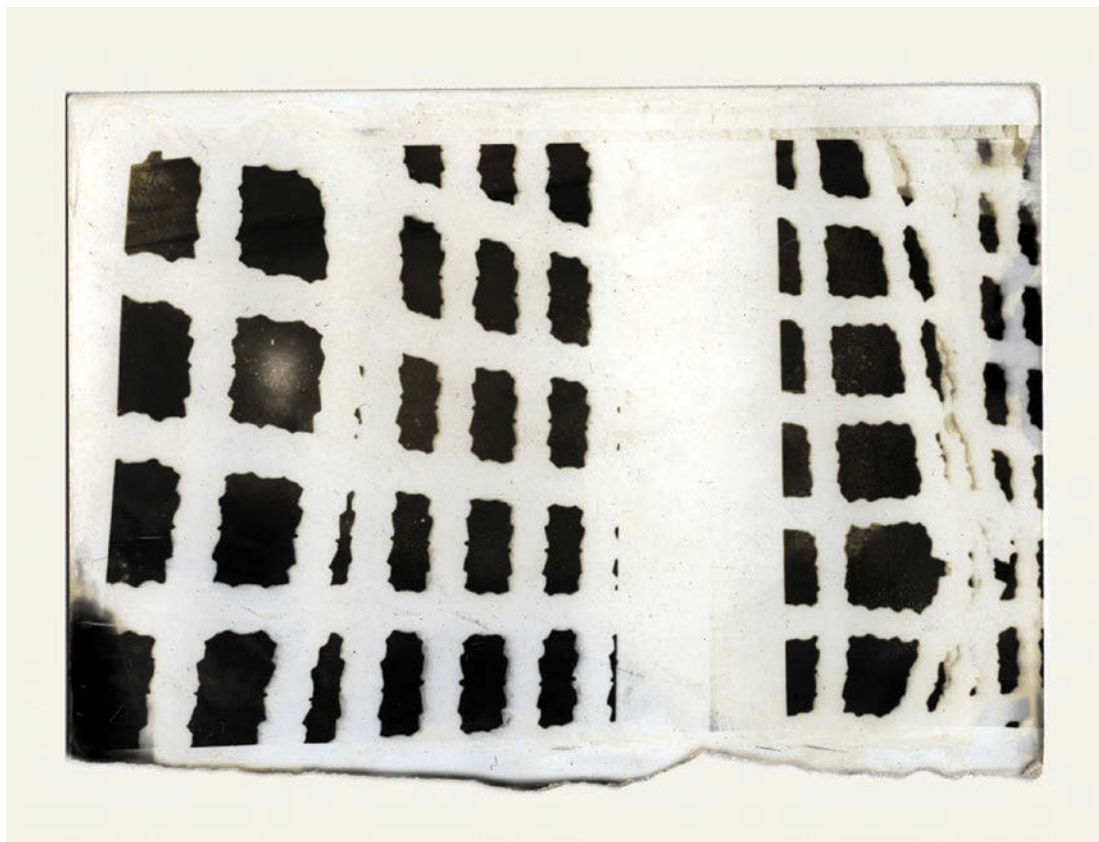
9 Susan Hefuna, *Cityscape Cairo*, 2000. C-print mounted behind plexiglas, 140 × 200 cm

Another crafted object central to Hefuna's work is the *mashrabiya*, a traditional wooden latticework screen, used as a window curtain in the traditional Islamic house (fig. 9).[40] Hefuna explains how these woodwork architectural elements had a long-lasting effect on her and how she "became increasingly absorbed with them on an abstract level."[41] A salient feature of traditional Middle Eastern domestic architecture, the *mashrabiya* allows a subdued light to penetrate the interior of the house through the wooden claustra of the screen and also makes it possible to see outside without being seen. In other words, it is a finely ornate screen that enacts a separation between public space and the intimacy of the family home.

And because the *mashrabiya* creates an imagined and physical screen between the gaze of the outsider and the interior of the household, it has long fueled the Orientalist imaginary and its visual representations in European nineteenth-century painting. It is thus also related to gender and the allegedly forbidden space of the fantasized and sexualized harem interior. As a transitional object between inside and outside, the intimate and the public, between the self and the other, the *mashrabiya* becomes a metaphor of the cultural projections that the artist seeks to question and deconstruct:

10 Susan Hefuna, *Another Place* (Afaz Drawing Palmwood), 2014. Installation view at *Susan Hefuna: Another Place*, Bait Al Serkal, Sharjah

> In my experience, most human beings are not able to see the world without a screen of so-cial and cultural projections. The *mashrabiya* became for me a symbol that operates in two directions with the possibility for dialogue, rather than closure. Instead of seeing the world as either an *insider* or an *outsider*, I consider things in terms of connected and mutually interacting structures.[42]

The interplay between the material structure of the crafted object and the artist's concept also fluctuates depending on the audiences and the spaces in which she exhibits her art. The artist recalls that when she held her first solo show in Cairo in the early 1990s, one of her digital photographs of a *mashrabiya* was instantly perceived by the local audience as a familiar object, while other audiences had received it as abstract art executed in the Western tradition.[43] An interesting feature in her work is the resemblance between the grid of the handcrafted object and a city plan. In that sense, it navigates the familiar and the unfamiliar and points to the sociocultural constriction of these objects and their connected histories and geographies.

Hefuna also incorporated traditional crates (*afaz*) made of palmwood in her work. These are part of the urban and rural environment in Egypt and are used for many different purposes by street vendors to transport or display goods. The decontextualization of these crafted palm

structures from the streets of Cairo to the Sharjah Biennale in 2014 and their piling up so as to recall the high-rise buildings of the United Arab Emirates enact an estrangement of the familiar (fig. 10). The structure of the grid remains present whether in the *mashrabiyya* or in the *afaz*, to the extent that they suggest a different take on the notion of the grid, central to discourses of Western modernism. Indeed, while Rosalind Krauss has affirmed, in her seminal article about grids published in 1979, that for Western art history, the grid announces "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse,"[44] one may consider that it may have taken another stance through the usage of craft, by reconciling the grid with narrative content.

During a three-month residency in Stein am Rhein in Switzerland, Hefuna immersed herself in the urban pattern and social structures of this picturesque and highly touristic town, located in the canton of Schaffhausen. For her project *Mapping Stein*, she studied the façades of the typical Swiss timber-framed houses. The carpentry elements, which emphasize the light on the wooden textures, is reminiscent, in a sense, of the *mashrabiya* structure. Through her black-and-white photographs of the timber frames, she transformed these structures familiar to the European tourist into something unknown and exotic. In that context, the grid serves to exoticize a local craft and reverses the standpoints of the notions of craft and Primitivism. This inversion brings to the fore the subjectivity and agency of craft, and its potential to subvert and suggest new narratives.

The abovementioned artists challenge the distinction between the art, craft and conceptualism that has been salient in Western art discourses. While the engagement with craft and its practices is linked to its specific legacies and underlying politics, it has too often been associated simply to otherness, an attitude that echoes the historical construct of the interrelationship between craft and the global South, rooted in colonialism, and the denial by the West of its contemporaneity.

Notes

1   Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 9.
2   Ibid.
3   Anni Albers, *On Weaving: New Expanded Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 48.
4   Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Deskilling," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster et al., 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p. 607. On the notions of skill and deskilling in modernism, see also John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Ready-Made* (London: Verso, 2007).
5   For instance, the exhibitions *What Is So Terrible about Craft?* by Andrea Büttner, Kunstverein München 2019 or *Criminal Ornamentation* curated by Yinka Shonibare in 2018 for the Arts Council Collection that toured the United Kingdom. See the catalogue Yinka Shonibare et al., *Criminal Ornamentation*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2018).

6   Maria Elena Buszek, ed., *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2013); Tanya Harrod, ed., *Craft*: *Documents of Contemporary Art Series* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Burcu Dogramaci and Kerstin Pinther, eds., *Design Dispersed: Forms of Migration and Flight* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019).

7   This reflection was initiated by a course taught at the Institute of Art History at the University of Bern in Spring 2020 together with my colleague Peter Schneemann, whom I thank here for the stimulating exchange on this topic.

8   Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), pp. 28–33.

9   bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 21.

10 Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropófago," trans. Leslie Barry, *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (July–December 1991): 39. Here, de Andrade refers to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La mentalité primitive* (The Primitive Mentality), published in 1922, which would have a durable influence on anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers. In this text, Lévy-Bruhl posited his theory about the two basic mindsets of mankind divided between the "primitive" mind, which did not differentiate the supernatural from reality, and the "modern" mind, which used reflection and logic. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, "Introduction," *La mentalité primitive* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925).

11 Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR: The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 143–67.

12 Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray, "Responding from the Margins," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 357.

13 This reflection about the "global" and the "digital" in exhibition history is indebted to my colleague Yvonne Schweizer and the numerous stimulating discussions we had on this topic.

14 The show was curated by William Rubin, who was then the director of the painting and sculpture department at the MoMA, and Kirk Varnedoe, art historian and professor at Princeton and NYU, who would later become the head of that same department. For a critical appraisal of the show, see James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (1985): 45–70.

15 Among the vehement critics of the show was the critic and writer Thomas McEvilley who claimed that through the notion of "affinity," the curators had confused the modern artists' perspective with the perspective of those who made the objects. Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: 'Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art' at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (November 1984): 54–61.

16 About the critical reception of the "Magiciens" show, see Lucy Steeds et al., *Making Art Global (Part 2), "Magiciens de la terre" 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013); Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la terre : retour sur une exposition légendaire*, *1989–2014* (Paris: Xavier Barral, 2014).

17 Among these artists was the Turkish conceptual artist Bedri Baykam (b. 1957) who started what he calls a "cultural guerrilla," which consisted in distributing a manifesto entitled "Les Saluts de la Turquie" in front of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris over the course of a month. The manifesto was published in a newspaper called *Cameleon Diabolicus* and signed by a group of Turkish artists who were part of the board of directors of the Turkish Plastic Arts Association. According to Baykam, none of them had been selected to partake in the show, although they had invited Jean-Hubert Martin during his tour in Turkey in search of potential participants. Martin stated that

the curators of *Magiciens* were not in search of artists who followed Western aesthetics but rather for artists who clearly expressed their work's non-Western origins. See Bedri Baykam, *Monkeys' Right to Paint: The Fight of a Cultural Guerrilla for the Rights of Non-Western Artists and the Empty World of the Neo-Ready-Mades* (Istanbul: Literatür, 1994), pp. 49–56.

18   Jessica Gerschultz, "Women's Tapestry and the Poetics of Renewal: Threading Mid-Century Practices," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 13, no. 1 (2020): 39. See also Jessica Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). On the preservation of crafts in Morocco under the French protectorate, see Margaret S. Graves, "The Double Bind of Craft Fidelity: Moroccan Ceramics on the Eve of the French Protectorate," in *Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean,* ed. Margaret S. Graves and Alex Dika Seggerman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022).

19   Nadine Atallah, "Have There Really Been No Great Women Artists? Writing a Feminist Art History of Modern Egypt," in *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*, ed. Ceren Özpınar and Mary Kelly (Oxford: The British Academy; Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 14–15. About the concept of *asala* as a criterion of modern art, see Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 46–47.

20   About Ramses Wissa Wassef's architectural and educative projects, see Nadia Radwan, "The Arts and Craftsmanship," in Hassan Fathy: An Architectural Life, ed. Leïla el-Wakil (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018).

21   Gerschultz, "Women's Tapestry and the Poetics of Renewal," p. 39.

22   Ramses Wissa Wassef, "Protégeons l'artisanat," *Images*, no. 844 (November 11, 1945): 10. Translation by the author.

23   This was the case, notably of the educator and artist Habib Gorgi (1892–1965), Wissa Wassef's father-in-law, who had been trained in England and had established a sculpture and modelling school in the neighborhood of Qubbah in Cairo, based on Carl Jung's ideas of spontaneous and innate creativity. See Nadia Radwan, *Les modernes d'Égypte : Une renaissance transnationale des Beaux-Arts et des Arts appliqués* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 126–33.

24   Ramses Wissa Wassef, *Woven by Hand* (Prague: Artia, 1972), p. 13. The Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre is still in activity today and is run by Susanne Wissa Wassef and her husband Ikram Nosshi. The Harrania tapestries are renowned and have been exhibited worldwide.

25   Wissa Wassef, *Woven by Hand*, p. 5.

26   Adnan compiled her thoughts about weaving in a book: Etel Adnan, *La vie est un tissage* (Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2016).

27   Nadia Radwan, conversation with Etel Adnan, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, September 27, 2018.

28   I have more extensively addressed the question of the agency of the ornament in contemporary art from the Middle East in my habilitation thesis: Nadia Radwan, "Concealed Visibilities: Sensing the Aesthetics of Resilience in Global Modernism" (currently under review for publication), University of Bern, 2022. On this topic, see: Nadia Radwan, "Abstraction and the Concealed Rhetoric(s) of Resistance," in *NO Rhetoric(s). Versions and Subversions of Resistance in Contemporary Global Art*," ed. Sara Alonso Gómez, Isabel Piniella Grillet, Nadia Radwan, and Elena Rosauro (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2023).

29   Two retrospectives have recently been dedicated to Samia Halaby, one at the Sharjah Art Museum opened on 20 September 2023 and the other at the Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University. The latter was, however, abruptly canceled by Indiana University, which is also the artist's alma

mater, because she has been outspoken in her support of Palestinians during the Israel-Gaza war. *Lasting Impressions: Samia Halaby*, exh. cat. (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum, 2023).

30   These can be seen on the artist's website: http://samiahalaby.com/computer-art.html.

31   The Kinetic Painting Group reunited and performed on September 1, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and was performed via zoom at the Afro Roots Tuesdays of Goddard Riverside in New York.

32   Nadia Radwan, conversation with Samia Halaby, online, May 20, 2022.

33   See the artist's website: https://nadaelkalaawy.com/.

34   Nadia Radwan, conversation with Nada Elkalaawy, online, September 20, 2021.

35   See the artist's website: https://majdabdelhamid.com/.

36   Majd Abdel Hamid, "'I Have an Itch, I Have a Stitch': Embroidery Is a Necessity," *Jeu de Paume*, January 2021, https://jeudepaume.org/en/palm/i-have-an-itch-i-have-a-stitch/

37   On the *Muscle Memory* series, see the artist's website: https://majdabdelhamid.com/2023/02/04/muscle-memory-2022/

38   Nadia Radwan, conversation with Susan Hefuna, online, May 12, 2022.

39   Ibid.

40   On Hefuna's installations, including the *mashrabiyas*, see Hans Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Susan Hefuna: Pars Pro Toto* (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2008).

41   Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interview with Susan Hefuna* (Cairo: Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2007), n. p.

42   Nadia Radwan, conversation with Susan Hefuna, online, July 5, 2020.

43   Rose Issa, "In Conversation with Susan Hefuna," in *Xcultural Codes: Susan Hefuna*, ed. Hans Gercke and Ernest W. Utheman (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2000), p. 41.

44   Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 50.

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CHONJA LEE

The Defiance of the Artisanal and the Unmaking of Wax-Print Textiles in Contemporary Art

Wax print textiles are an important point of reference for a growing number of contemporary artists. Some of them are world stars like Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962), while others are less well known, like Hassan Hajjaj (b. 1961), Lili Reynaud-Dewar (b. 1975), Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977), Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983), or only emerging like Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga (b. 1991). This article aims to look at African wax print cloth through the prism of the artists' understanding of the material. How do they incorporate the strongly patterned fabrics, with their long and complex histories, into their works? What conceptions of identity does their usage of this peculiar material manifest? And, lastly, how do the artists position themselves between the conceptual and artisanal by incorporating fabrics and their aesthetic into their work? These questions will evolve around the concept of the artisanal and along the four notions of making, identities, ready-mades, and remediations. This essay will build up to the hypothesis that the artist's use of the wax prints disappoints expectations of the artisanal on a technical and cultural level. Furthermore, the incorporation of African print textiles as a ready-made commodity into artworks and the remediation of the cloths in painting, photography, or performance challenge ideas of textility and accentuate the ontological tension of the fabrics between images and textiles.

1. Makings

None of the contemporary artists analyzed hereafter produce wax print textiles. This observation seems surprising only initially; but when one looks closely into the medium of wax print itself, the artists' use of it reflects well the fact that the wax prints are nonartisanal, but machine-made, in obscure production conditions in geographically and cultural far-away realms. Wax prints are intercultural chameleons, mimicking another textile technique, namely batik, an Indonesian technique of wax-resist dyeing.

To understand the contemporary artist's reference to wax prints, it is key to reflect on the very nature of this material from the world of design and everyday cloth with its multilayered

"history of production and use."[1] What is wax print? Where between the conceptual and arti-sanal could we place its making? And what does this fabric stand for symbolically? A post-humanist conception of matter as enlivened, as exhibiting agency, and as reengaged with both the material realities of everyday life and its broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures has become seminal in a theory of things of the last decade.[2] Already in the 1990s, anthropologist Alfred Gell coined the concept of the material as agent, inherently dictating to the artist the form it is to assume.[3] When we apply this inversional scheme, we might ask: What do the wax prints do to the artists? It is a fruitful mind game to think of the wax print as a material with inherent agency, meaning, and iconography in the vein of Monika Wagner's material studies. The art historian framed the concept of "material iconography," following the idea that artistic materials themselves bear a specific meaning and history: material, in this case wax print, is not just "a technical given," but should also be understood and evaluated "as an aesthetic category."[4]

When looking at African wax prints one can almost sense the printer's hand in the mis-alignment of colors and woodblock outlines; fine irregular cracks seem to have resulted from imperfect tying and wrinkling; white bubbles indicate persistent wax before the dye baths. Yet, all this ado is a trick to simulate a handcrafted textile. Wax prints are produced through a mechanized resist-dyeing process that employs a resin mixture—rather than wax—for printing a foundational resist pattern simultaneously on both sides of a cloth (historically cotton, but nowadays increasingly synthetic fibers) using a duplex-roller system of engraved metal rollers.[5] However, nowadays the term wax print is often used as a generic term for African print tex-tiles, including the so-called fancy prints that are printed without any resin-resist and dye-bath process. One could claim that the wax prints are not the artisanal product they evoke, but a craft without a hand. The artisan is nevertheless present, embedded in the design following a deceitful aesthetic of imperfection: African wax prints are executed in a style copying the labor-intensive practice of batik textiles and are thus intercultural and intertextual. Despite the mechanic printing process in the making of this peculiar fabric, the designer's hand becomes tangible in its colorful and often geometric designs, which are "classic" patterns and motifs from the nineteenth century. It is also apparent in new designs that refer to recent trends and, in the case of the commemorative prints,[6] from the 1920s onward,[7] showcase counterfeits of political leaders and historical events.[8] Meaning is embedded in visualizations of proverbs, and wearers can use their attire as a means of expression of their taste and social and polit-ical standing. The wax prints are often given specific names; together with the designs they sometimes bear puns and can, for instance, articulate the love or desire of a person or the state of mind of a woman who knows her husband is cheating on her.[9] In recent decades, the waxes have become globally popular in fashion and fine arts. As a specific textile medium, the wax print calls for a different historiography and mode of storytelling than other textile media within the framework of the textile turn in contemporary art and theory. It is a material heavily loaded with diverse pictures and symbolic meaning.

2. Identities

When the former president of the United States Barack Obama had to pick an artist to paint his official portrait for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, his choice fell on Kehinde Wiley (fig. 1). In his "representation of urban, black and brown men," Wiley merges vibrant street style with a synthetic baroque. He positions himself confidently within art history's portrait-painting tradition "as a contemporary descendent of a long line of portraitists, including Reynolds, Gainsborough, Titian, Ingres, among others."[10] Indeed, he shares with these canonical artists the visual rhetoric of the heroic, powerful, majestic, and the sublime,[11] which is much appreciated by his other famous sitters from the hip-hop world, such as the Notorious B.I.G., LL Cool J, Big Daddy Kane, Ice T, Grandmaster Flash, and the Furious Five, among others.[12]

Instead of choosing yet another template from art history's "former bosses of the Old World,"[13] Wiley opted for a contemporary, rather casual pose of Obama sitting with arms folded on his knees amid various climbing and flowering plants.[14] The floral backdrop is connotated as a feminine aesthetic, whereas the former First Lady Michelle Obama was portrayed by Amy Sherald with an emphasis on the geometric forms on her gown, the official portraits thus reverse gender stereotypes within art history. The flowers in Obamas portrait form a dense web and fill the picture frame entirely, growing partially over the president and conjuring the aesthetic of the African wax-print fabrics. We can find ornamental backgrounds throughout Wiley's large-format oil paintings. Dressing up to impress is an important trope for the artist, and by embedding his protagonists in a web of textile print designs, he is yet adding another layer of dress. Hence, his painterly practice distinguishes itself by a reinforced transmediality with photography as the base of his portraits and a transformation of the whole picture into a fabric pattern. Interestingly, Wiley translates some of his textile-inspired art back to contemporary streetwear and sells printed hoodies, pajamas, t-shirts, and scarves in his online shop—it is like a mise en abyme of his consistent switching between fashion and art, street and royalty, as well as present and long-past times.[15]

The choice of the first Black president of the United States to have his official portrait painted in an aesthetic reminiscent of African wax prints underlines and confirms the strong political symbolism of this fabric for Africans and people of African descent.[16] In the wake of the Afrocentrism of the 1980s, African Americans and Black British people embraced shirts, robes, headscarves, and caftans made of the intensely patterned wax-print fabrics as a symbol of African culture and solidarity. Curator Okwui Enwezor has also commented on this phenomenon: "In Brixton, African fabric is worn with pride amongst radical or cool youth. It manifests itself as a fashion accessory with Black British Women in the head wrap form and it can also be found worn by Africans away from the home country. It becomes an aesthetic of defiance, of reassurance, a way of holding on to one's identity in a culture perceived as foreign or different."[17] Or, as Yinka Shonibare has put it in a nutshell: "The fabrics are signifiers, if you like, of 'Africanness' insofar as when people first view the fabric, they think of Africa."[18] Yet, the cultural roots of the textiles are much more complex.

1 Kehinde Wiley, *Barack Obama*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 213.7 × 147 × 3.2 cm

Shonibare has repeatedly described how, as a young artist in London, he was confronted with the narrow-minded and stereotypical expectation to reflect "authentic African art" in his works. It was like an epiphany of what he wanted to work with when he visited Brixton Market and stumbled upon African textiles, only to find out about their entangled history spanning across three continents and various cultures. Shonibare grew up believing the colorful fabrics were genuinely African; in reality, the fabrics were produced by the Dutch and English. Hence the textiles became for the young artist a reflection of his own personal "post-colonial hybrid"[19] identity. The textiles functioned as "the ideal metaphor for" the "kind of global contemporary citizen"[20] that he embodied as a London-born son to Nigerian anglophile parents who were raised mostly in Nigeria and attending art school in bustling London.

The wax print's beginnings lay in colonial Indonesia, where the British and later the Dutch seized upon the potential trade value of generating machine-made imitation wax-batik cloth to avoid the painstaking Indonesian dye process, carried out entirely by hand.[21] However, the earliest attempts in the 1810s to emulate wax prints were not successful, and it was

only in the 1860s, after technological improvements, that fabric sales rose to a record level in Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the Asian market experienced a decline after 1867, because the Indonesians preferred handmade batiks, now more cheaply available due to new, more economical handcraft techniques. Moreover, new markets had to be found for the wax prints. Around 1890, the Scottish merchant Ebenezer Brown Fleming successfully introduced wax prints of the factory Haarlemsche Katoen Maatschappij to parts of British-controlled West Africa. He was the first to adapt the Indonesian designs to the tastes of the people on the Gold Coast and neighboring territories, who had a long-standing appreciation of high-quality cloth and were no longer satisfied with cheaply printed Manchester cottons. Wax prints are today not only worn as an everyday gown within the continent but are thriving in fashion and appear on catwalks in Lagos, Nairobi, Paris, London, and New York.[22]

African print textiles are nowadays manufactured worldwide. But, despite the fact that printing companies were inaugurated within Africa after nations gained independence, most wax-print textiles are manufactured in Asia and shipped elsewhere. Also, in a postcolonial world, the global market dynamics make sure that, ironically, only a meager percentage of African wax prints is produced in Africa. The fabrics might be made after African taste, but only a few are designed with direct African participation, unless one counts the market power of consumers and the communication of consumer preferences through sales agents. Hence, it is important to Shonibare not to buy the fabrics in Africa, because by obtaining them from the company Vlisco,[23] which was founded in 1844 and is the most widely known supplier of quality fabrics, known as "Dutch Wax" or "Wax Hollandais,"[24] he shows that "all this African hullabaloo is nothing but a fallacy."[25] The designers at Vlisco were and are overwhelmingly Dutch or Dutch-trained and of non-African origin, which has been reproached as an example of cultural imperialism and the legacy of colonial domination.[26] The company, however, has stressed that their design production is not primarily focused on the Africanness of the consumers, but should be seen as a service to the African consumers, who are the final arbiters of the designs. Thus, the entanglement of the fabrics could also be analyzed under the premise of a complicity and shared interest in "good design," considering meaning-making practices as appropriation by West-African consumers.[27] And yet, this is not only about the generation of cultural value, but monetary profit, that flows predominantly into European pockets.

The machine-made hybrid wax-print fabrics prove any artisanal quality wrong. Wax prints are neither the result of a craft conjured through their image language nor are they representative of a locally and artisanally produced indigenous cultural authenticity, as often imagined regarding textiles. Intriguingly, the textiles bear a material iconography that is hybrid and stands nowadays for Africa and at the same time its complex colonial history, cultural adaptation, and a long-standing artistic paternalism and African identification. On these grounds, and in the wake of discussions surrounding cultural appropriation, it has recently been asked who is entitled to wear them.

Accordingly, the question arises who can incorporate the material into their artworks. Performance artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar, for instance, deployed African wax-print fabrics and

2 Lili Reynaud-Dewar, *Some Objects Blackened and a Body Too*, 2011. Installation: video, sculptures, textiles

insignia of African American culture like grills (*Machines Future Society*, 2016), the Afrofuturist musician Sun Ra (*Interpretation*, 2010), and also refered to maroons and Rastafarians (*The Center and the Eyes*, 2006) in a variety of her works.[28] She has pointed out that rather than focusing on the question of "who" can address issues of racialized relationships of domination, we should be asking ourselves "how" one does this, with what means, what artistic gestures and strategies, and to what effect.[29] However, Reynaud-Dewar's own artistic answers sometimes generate controversy. In *Some Objects Blackened and a Body Too* (2011) the artist builds with her black-colored skin on the performances of Bruce Nauman, who applied white, pink, green, and black paint to his chest and face (fig. 2).[30] Two years prior to this work, Reynaud-Dewar, having painted her body in many different colors for various performances, described her thoughts on the act of blackening: "I didn't at first see the racial connotations of this black 'mask'; I used it more as an abstract sign, a play on polarities that was almost mathematical. The stereotypical and caricatural form of blackface was absent from these performances, but the act of blackfacing oneself up was still there."[31] In the video *Some Objects Blackened and a Body Too* (2011), shot in her studio, she is covering not only her white body, but also white objects, like plaster casts, a pad of paper, a small sink, and a polystyrene bust, in black paint. The artist describes this operation as follows: "By painting these objects black,

I'm also trying to make them less neutral. It's still, however, an intellectual exercise, which doesn't do anything to change existing power relations."[32] Viewed from a contemporary perspective of critical *whiteness*, it is of course highly controversial to set *white* as a neutral color. The artist stated that she thereby contemplated her own privileged position, trying to show vulnerability and enforce discourse.[33] In the exhibition installation, the video is accompanied by the partly blackened body parts on pedestals and wax-print sheets hanging somewhat uselessly from the wall, juxtaposed with the artist's nudity. The print design "Don't get married empty-handed" with the black-and-white drawings of isolated hands holding coins and rows of individual fingers pairs well with the artist's painted limbs. The fabric might also symbolize the urge of earning money through body work and speaks to a constructed cultural identity, because the art installation is intended as a homage to Josephine Baker's performance of the 1920s, her withstanding and simultaneous construction and owning of exoticized stereotypes.[34] In retrospect and in the course of the discussions on cultural appropriation, the artist distanced herself from this work in 2023: "I made a mistake, I think it's important to admit it. I have learned a lot from criticism of these early works. I don't believe they should be destroyed, or that it is even possible to completely discard a work of art, however, I discourage their public display."[35]

3. Ready-mades

Yinka Shonibare embraces the material iconography of the African print textiles that have become the trademark of his art when he first introduced them in 1994 to his mannequin installations after historical events and canonical scenes in art history. Museum director Thorsten Sadowsky has summarized it: "The objective of Shonibare's playful visual grammar is to show hybridity, while at the same time consistently frustrating any desire for authenticity in the sense of a longing for immediacy, originality, genuineness and purity."[36] Shonibare acts like a trickster when unfolding a hitherto unseen narrative of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his *Scramble for Africa* (2003), a restaged Congo Conference (1884–95), men discuss the partitioning of Africa wearing Victorian-style costumes made of wax prints (fig. 3). Especially in this era, cloth was a way of showing distinction and conveying class, gender, and descent. Shonibare breaks this multisectionality and unambiguousness of cloth in his theatrical installations of figures, whom he typically depicts with missing heads and an allegedly uniform light-brown skin tone. Redressing means, in this context, Africanizing as well, and inviting the viewer to question the Eurocentrism of art, history, and image and knowledge production in general. The appropriation of canonical works of art, especially through photography, was an artistic strategy employed by various contemporary artists of the time, such as Yasumasa Morimura and Cindy Sherman.[37]

What role does the artisanal play in the practice of the physically handicapped artist Shonibare? During his first year at art school, Shonibare contracted a viral infection that

3 Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Scramble for Africa*, 2003. 14 life-size mannequins, 14 chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, 132 × 488 × 280 cm

lead to a severe neurological disorder, due to which the left side of his body has remained impaired. His bodily condition has affected his method of art making: "I've become very good at delegating and have a number of people who facilitate my priorities."[38] Shonibare's life-size pieces are a material battle. The *Last Supper (after Leonardo)* (2013), for instance, consists of thirteen life-size mannequins, Dutch wax-printed cotton, a table and chairs, silver cutlery and vases, antique and reproduction glassware and tableware, fiberglass, and resin food. All of it is executed in precise detail: no unruly seams or loose strings disturb the perfection of the slick appearance. The artist's hand becomes invisible in the professional work of specialists in and outside his workshop. In any case, the vast range of media with which he works—installation, painting, photography, sculpture, textiles, photography, video, and performance—makes teaming up with specialists a necessity. Like many other contemporary artists, Shonibare generally delegates the material execution of his works. In this vein, the making itself becomes absent in the literature on the artist, instead revolving around the concepts and ideas in his works. Nevertheless, sympathizing with the "craftivist" do-it-yourself movement, he has recently trod new paths with his series *Creatures of the Mappa Mundi* (2018) by working with various local groups of marginalized people to produce textile pictures of pieced-together fabrics.[39] This has resulted in eye-catching traces of making, such as loose threads, visible seams of the appliqué, patchwork, etc.

The textile medium and the notion of the artisanal are closely intertwined. Woven or stitched textiles are archetypes of artisanal mastery. Social anthropologist Tim Ingold built

his concept of textility on the textile as a prime example of a thing whose processual making is comprehensible in the thing itself.[40] For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the tissue even accounts for as a model of technique.[41] Implicitly, they bring to mind the etymology of "textile" (woven thing, gauze, web), which goes back to the Latin "*texere*" on which the Greek word "*téchnē*" (technique) is based, by which we understand skill, craft, and artistry.[42] Intriguingly, none of the contemporary artists analyzed in this article could be described as textile artists in the sense that they have an artistic interest in the specific "textile" qualities of fabric, as Ingold described. The artist's focus lies not on the undulating materiality nor on the texture of the wax prints, their structure, and the tactility of their surface, such as the striated grain formed out of various threads rhythmically woven into a fabric.[43] It is—besides the wax print's complex history and identity—rather the color or image adhering to the textiles in which they are interested; it is in the first place the designs to which they are referring, and not the textile image carrier.

Shonibare is, despite his heavy use of textiles, not a textile artist; he is not preoccupied with an artisanal approach or interest in the making of the textile as a binding of fibrous material, or its related techniques of sawing, sticking, and weaving. Shonibare cites the commodity wax print as a marker of hybridity given its strong material iconography. His hyperrealistic figures and everyday objects rub shoulders with the Duchampian ready-made, Neo-Dadaism, the environments of the 1950s, Duane Hanson's hyperrealism, as well as Pop Art in general. The artist deems his art conceptional, but has always had a great interest in material and materiality. Starting off as a painter, he cherished the "tactile aspect to it and the use of materials."[44] His early paintings featured wax-print designs, and the artist mentioned minimalism and neo-geometric conceptualism as sources of inspiration, while the artist's later rich installations are far from the minimalist language of conceptual art.[45] His installations mix the different categories of decorative art and costume with painting and sculpture, the medias from which his image quotations are drawn.[46] Neither Shonibare's art nor the wax prints are textile in the sense of having a traceable making. Wax print, with its strong designs applied to cotton carriers, somehow dwell in-between textile and graphic reproduction.

4. Remediations

The print's ornaments have subsequently become itinerant in Shonibare's works, as if the patterns were detached from the cotton carrier. The artist transposed them to the gigantic metal *Wind Sculptures* (2018) and even to his own skin, as in the series *Self-Portrait (after Warhol)* (2013). Due to his recurrent use of the fabrics, the material iconography of the wax prints within contemporary art have come to stand in for Shonibare himself, an artist surfing the wave of success in the art world with his easily recognizable token. In his *Alien Flag Drawings* (2011), Shonibare not only projected the wax print's design to his artworks but also mimicked the style of the prints in a different medium. Together with his collaborators, he fabricated

4 Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Alien Flag Drawings 4*, 2011. Paper, ink, Dutch wax printed cotton, found paper, 22-carat gold leaf, 76.5 × 95 cm

collages of floral patterns from paper shavings found in magazines and newspapers as well as fabric pieces. The looks as well as the mixture of design and political news are reminiscent of wax-print textiles (fig. 4).

Other contemporary artists are working in a mode of wax print by adapting properties of the designs to their artworks. Kamuanga Ilunga, for instance, depicts on the one hand splendid, almost photorealistic wax-print cloths in oil on canvas. On the other hand, he takes the all-over aesthetic of the wax print and expands it to other parts of the image space (fig. 5). Scribbled patterns, derived from traditional Mangbetu garments, span from one side of the paintings to the other in the otherwise empty background. The ornament unfolds also partly over the figures and adds a textile appeal to the paintings. Kamuanga Ilunga replaces the skin of the figures with black circuit boards—a reference to the metallic ore coltan, an important component in modern electronic devices and arduously mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), from where the conflict-laden mineral is exported to the world. It is also due to this specifically ornamented skin, which evokes robotics, stellar constellations, and body painting, linear tattoos, and scarifications, that his figures appear like ornaments: isolated, silhouetted, and reminiscent of wax-print motifs floating on a finely patterned backdrop.

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5 Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, *Fragile 6*, 2018. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 180 × 196 cm

Njideka Akunyili Crosby, in turn, creates multilayered, large-format works on paper. Her precisely composed vintage-style spatial arrangements incorporate architecture, interior design elements, and everyday objects and echo architecture magazines of the 1970s. Plain, sleek architectural surfaces contrast with realistically rendered objects, people, and furniture. Objects as well as the recurring architecture are, for her, carriers of meaning and socioeconomic status, a specific time and place, forming identity as part of a "banal nationalism,"[47] as described by social scientist Michael Billig. Using a mixed technique, consisting of acrylic paint, colored pencil, photo transfers, charcoal, pastel, and partially collaged image material,[48] she produces superimposed layers forming a "lucid mosaic,"[49] a "sociocultural, political, and historical portrait of Nigeria,"[50] or, as the artist herself puts it, "background noise."[51] These assemblages mimic, aesthetically as well as thematically, African wax prints. The repetition of the motifs is related to the repeating textile patterns and mixed themes—from politics to objects of everyday life—that are reminiscent of the wax print's universal topics. In *Home: As You See Me* (2017), the reference to wax prints is particularly strong (fig. 6): the artist's mother, Dora Akunyili's, portrait appears in a painted print-fabric wall covering. The genuine fabric she has had printed for her political election campaign for becoming director general of Nigeria's National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control.[52] Crosby describes

6 Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Home: As You See Me*, 2017. Acrylic, transfers, colored pencil, charcoal, collage, and commemorative fabric on paper, 213 × 211 cm

these essential parts of her art as "providing a sort of tissue of memory,"[53] because "thinking of an immigrant's experience, you bring the place here you are from with you no matter where you are."[54] For her, the cultural hybridity of the Dutch wax prints symbolizes that tradition is always evolving, that places and people always have been in contact and exchange, and that this exchange has always created hybrid cultures.[55] Namely, she interprets the wax-print structures in her art as "a texture which constitutes hybrid identity."[56]

Stylistically, Crosby's paintings bear similarities to French-Nabis artist Édouard Vuillard's contained, closed spaces, created at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which tissues und figures, background and motifs become interrelated in a dense web of psychologized interior. In Vuillard's as well as Crosby's works, carpets, wallpapers, and textile patterns seem to be identical with the surface of the painting—contrary to their actual, figural meaning.[57] At the same time, the stillness of Crosby's protagonists—the lack of movement, flattened surfaces, and the universe of everyday objects—are reminiscent of Tom Wesselmann's Pop Art. Flatness
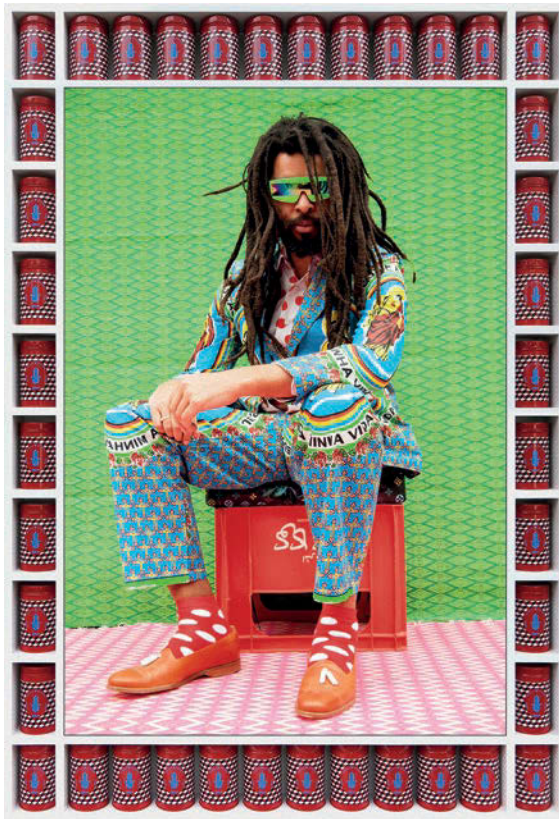
7 Hassan Hajjaj, *Marc Hare*, 2013. Metallic lambda on 3mm dibond in a poplar sprayed-white frame with red HH tall tea boxes with blue fatma hand, 141.6 × 97.3 × 8.3 cm. Edition of 5 + 2AP, 2013/1434

is not only a stylistic property in Crosby's paintings. It is also a way of conflating different worlds and identities together: "But just thinking of the correlation of what is happening formally with the work, with content. . . . Someone like me is someone who is one person but actually has these multiples that flatten into who I am, that complicate the story."[58]

The contemporary artists evoked in this article are not making wax prints, nor are they interfering with the textiles or their specific patterns directly. The artists are not merely depicting the wax cloths as motifs; rather they encompass a style in their work. Regardless of the uncountable different motifs of the wax prints, they all share a genuine aesthetic of visually strong patterns, repeated ornaments, and often bold, sometimes contrasting colors spanning over a mostly ornamented background. These artists internalize this aesthetic conception and transpose it into other mediums, like painting, where the fabric's aesthetic invades the picture plane. Hassan Hajjaj uses the same mode in photography for his exuberant portraits of people wearing wax prints, often posing in front of boldly patterned studio textile backdrops (fig. 7),

as in the 1950s studio pictures of Malinese photographer Seydou Keïta (1921–2001). By framing his photographs with staked packed goods, like tuna or tea tins, Hajjaj adds another layer of pattern repetition and commodity consumer culture with an obvious reference to Andy Warhol's screen-printed series of *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962). In addition, just like Crosby, Hajjaj mixes different media and objects from the everyday world. All of the abovementioned artists borrow strategies of wax-print designs and operate in the mode of wax prints. By transferring properties of the fabrics to the world of painting or photography, they simultaneously remediate the waxes and contextualize their artworks in the rich cultural heritage of the African print fabrics. Despite this stylistic transfer, they draft their patterns individually from scratch and thus create individual design universes. They not only introduce wax-print style to the world of fine arts but also own the prints as African authors—a gesture of empowerment, given the centuries-long history of European companies' cultural paternalism, enacted through designing for African clients.

5. Deconstructions

Resuming the initially raised question about the agency of African wax prints, we ask once again what they do to the artists and their art making. The fabrics appear as ready-mades within contemporary art and evoke issues of hybridity through their complex history, which ties three continents together, conveys African identity, and attests to colonialism. The waxes spread their aesthetic, pictorial form, as well as their content and motifs, to various other media. Especially painting seems susceptible to being "waxified" by this textile art, which distinguishes itself through enthralling designs unrooted within the textile web, but independent dye applications.

The batik-copying images already make the wax prints a one-of-a-kind category of textile, while the industrial fabrication process adds another special property to the cloth. Hence the African cloth's defiance of the artisanal is twofold: they are neither artisanally made nor meet expectations of local indigenousness. Instead, they are aesthetically as well as culturally entangled things. Their appearance in contemporary art and discourses reflects this material iconography strongly. On these grounds, this article was less about investigating fluid borders between design, craft, and art or different articulations of art making, like deskilling, reskilling, etc. Similarly, few critics realized first, when Shonibare started to contaminate the pure space of modernism with nonart—i.e., "ethnic" fabrics—that this gesture was not a way of naive folklorist expression, but a conceptual choice and critical tool.[59]

These artists, all circling around wax prints, are not making fabrics; rather, they are unmaking them in that they transform them into other media, unravel their aesthetics, colors, iconography, and symbolic load, and weave them into their works. As they are unmaking the tissue, they are also deconstructing ideas of the cultural purity and African identity of wax prints. Or, as Shonibare himself asked under the spell of Jacques Derrida's notion of decon-

struction: "How do you make non-Western contemporary art, or how do you challenge the Western canon?"[60] Looking at African wax prints in contemporary art challenges our own conceptions of authenticity, African art, and the interplay of textiles and fine arts in general. In all of the analyzed artistic positions, the colorful fabrics become utensils of destruction of the canon of art history, aiding to alter stereotypical imagery. Artists are turning the wax prints into markers of playful post- and decolonial criticism of the Eurocentric gaze and biased cultural production. Hence, the colorful fabrics as well as their artworks are not just adorned with hybrid ornaments, but become bearers of political patterns, ways of seeing the world and art making.

Notes

I would like to thank Ileana Parvu, Gabrielle Schaad, Julia Ann Stüssi, Etienne Wismer, and Katarzyna Włoszczyńska and the peer reviewer for their attentive lecture and critic of this article.

1   Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001), p. 14.

2   See Ruth Chambers and Mireille Perron, "Re-Negotiating Materiality: Craft Knowledge and Contemporary Art," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 42, no. 1 (2017): 23, https://doi.org/10.7202/1040837ar.

3   See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), pp. 28–31.

4   Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst*, p. 12.

5   For a comprehensive terminology of African print cloth with its variants fancy prints, Java prints, Imi-wax, and commemorative or occasional prints, see Suzanne Gott and Kristyne S. Loughran, "Introducing African-Print Fashion," in *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, ed. Suzanne Gott et al., exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2017), p. 32.

6   On commemorative or occasional print textiles and her understanding of them as operators of "political technology at the scale of the human body," see Catherine P. Bishop, "African Occasional Textiles: Vernacular Landscapes of Development," *African Arts* 47, no. 4 (2014): 74.

7   See John Picton, "Über uns selbst lachen," in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch*, ed. Gerald Matt, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: NAI; Museum Bojmans Van Beuningen; Kunsthalle Wien, 2004), p. 53.

8   See Jean Allman, *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004) and Jacqueline Atkins, *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

9   For different names and meanings of various fabrics, see Vlisco, "Fabric Stories," undated, https://www.vlisco.com/world-of-vlisco/design/fabric-stories/.

10 See Wiley's homepage: http://kehindewiley.com/.

11 Ibid.

12 See Sonaiya Kelley, "Kehinde Wiley Will Paint Obama's Official Presidential Portrait," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-entertainment-news-updates-october-2017-htmlstory.html#kehinde-wiley-will-paint-obamas-official-presidential-portrait.

13 See Wiley's Homepage: http://kehindewiley.com/.

14   See Vinson Cunningham, "The Shifting Perspective in Kehinde Wiley's Portrait of Barack Obama," *The New Yorker*, February 13, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-appearances/the-shifting-perspective-in-kehinde-wileys-portrait-of-barack-obama.

15   See Wiley's shop: https://kehindewileyshop.com/.

16   Various commemorative wax-print cloths adorned with Obama's likeness were printed in Kenya in honor of the president. See Gott, "African Prints Made in Africa," in *African-Print Fashion Now!*, p. 98.

17   Okwui Enwezor, "Tricking the Mind. The Work of Yinka Shonibare," in *Yinka Shonibare. Dressing Down*, exh. cat. (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1999), p. 8.

18   Yinka Shonibare, "Setting the Stage. Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, ed. Rachel Kent (Munich: Prestel, 2014), p. 43.

19   Hugo Bongers and Gerald Matt, "Vorwort," in *Yinka Shonibare. Double Dutch*, p. 8.

20   Yinka Shonibare, "Paul Gilroy in Conversation with Yinka Shonibare CBE," in *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, exh. cat., ed. Thorsten Sadowsky (Munich: Hirmer, 2021), pp. 65–66.

21   For the resumed history of wax prints in this paragraph I referred heavily on the expert Helen Elands' basic research on this topic. See Helen Elands, "Dutch Wax Classics: The Designs Introduced by Ebenezer Brown Flemming circa 1890–1912 and Their Legacy," in *African-Print Fashion Now!*, pp. 53–61.

22   See Hansi Momodu-Gordon, "In the Making: African-Print Fashion and Contemporary Art," in *African-Print Fashion Now!*, pp. 263–64.

23   It was estimated that, in 2006, 75 % of all wax fabrics sold in Africa were adorned with designs originating at Vlisco. Notably, their patterns are also widely reproduced illegally by numerous Asian and African companies. See Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, p. 33.

24   Sadowsky, *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, p. 18.

25   Yinka Shonibare, "Unterhalten und provozieren: Westliche Einflüsse im Werk Yinka Shonibares: Jaap Guldemond und Gabriele Mackert im Gespräch mit Yinka Shonibare," in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch*, p. 41.

26   See M. Amah Edoh, "Redrawing Power? Dutch Wax Cloth and the Politics of 'Good Design,'" *A Source: Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016): 258–59.

27   See ibid., pp. 267–70.

28   Textiles as a bearer of text, part of installations, and costumes are essential to Reynaud-Dewar's work; namely, wax-print fabrics are a recurring phenomenon in *Black Mariah* (2009), *Antiteater* (2010), *Interpretation* (2010), and *Interpretation Recalling* (2013).

29   Lili Reynaud-Dewar, "Interview: Élisabeth Lebovici in conversation with Lili Reynaud-Dewar," in *Lili Reynaud-Dewar*, ed. Élisabeth Lebovici, Diedrich Diedrichsen, and Monika Szewczynk (London: Phaidon, 2019), p. 31.

30   Ibid., p. 13.

31   Ibid.

32   Ibid., p. 20.

33   Ibid., pp. 20–21: "Indeed I do it from my own privileged position. It does not disrupt these power relations. . . . I do like it when the exhibition, or museum, or art center is a place for discussion. . . . I'm trying to show vulnerability—my own vulnerability or that of art."

34   See ibid., p. 14: When mixing blackness with Baker's movements, the artist was aware of the highly problematic convergence of blacked-up body and nudity and that it could connote racist

conceptions of the body, for instance as a "naked savage." Despite this risk, she chose to proceed with the work: "But I was keen not to avoid the racialized body of Josephine Baker, and to acknowledge her ability to turn racism on its head and use it as a tool of her own autonomy."

35 Lili Reynaud-Dewar, quoted in Wilson Tarbox, "Artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar: 'I think we attribute too much power to art,'" *Financial Times*, October 13, 2023, https://www.ft.com/content/a4487be0-5adc-4b30-80c9-cd4eb2034199.

36 Sadowsky, *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, p. 19.

37 See Courtney Tanner Wilder, "Staging Display in the Sculptural Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE," master's thesis (University of California, Riverside, 2011), pp. 33–36, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1nh5w2rt.

38 Yinka Shonibare, quoted in Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," p. 29.

39 See Sadowsky, *Yinka Shonibare CBE: End of Empire*, p. 25.

40 See Tim Ingold, "The Textility of Making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34 (2010): 92.

41 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), p. 593.

42 See Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert, "Editorial," *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 6, no. 1 (2015): 5.

43 See T'ai Smith, "Texture," in *Textile Terms: A Glossary*, ed. Anika Reineke et al. (Emsdetten and Berlin: Edition Imorde, 2017), p. 273. For the adaption of texture to poetics, see Pamela McCallum, "Texture," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Stephen Cushman and Clare Cavanagh, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 1430.

44 Shonibare, "Setting the Stage," p. 46.

45 See ibid., p. 47, and Shonibare, "Yinka Shonibare: Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnivalesque and Power: A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, ed. Laurie Ann Farrell, exh. cat. (Gent: Snoeck Publishers; New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), p. 164.

46 See Wilder, *Staging Display in the Sculptural Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE*, p. 43.

47 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Thousand Oaks, 2004 [1995]).

48 See Anna Schneider, "Interiorities: The Cosmos in a Room," in *Interiorities: Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Leonor Antunes, Henrike Naumann, Adriana Varejão*, ed. Anna Schneider, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel; Haus der Kunst, 2020), p. 15.

49 Ibid., p. 14.

50 Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, "Home and Away: Njideka Akunyili Crosby's Space of Familiarity," in *Interiorities*, p. 29.

51 Njideka Akunyili Crosby, quoted in ibid.

52 See Schneider, *Interiorities*, p. 16.

53 Njideka Akunyili Crosby, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby in Conversation with Anna Schneider," in *Interiorities*, p. 38.

54 Ibid., p. 39.

55 See ibid., p. 40.

56 Ibid., p. 38.

57 See Regine Prange, "Flatness," in *Textile Terms*, p. 103.

58 Crosby, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby in Conversation with Anna Schneider," p. 42.

59 See Shonibare, "Yinka Shonibare. Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnivalesque and Power," p. 164.

60 Shonibare, "Paul Gilroy in Conversation with Yinka Shonibare CBE," p. 66.

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IV   THE MAKING OF CONCEPTUAL ART

KIM CHARNLEY

Carpenter of the Predicate

Ian Burn, Conceptual Art, and Making

One of the earliest critical accounts of conceptualism, the 1968 essay "The Dematerialization of Art," staked out what the authors named "ultra-conceptual" art in opposition to making. As the authors Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler put it: "The artist as thinker, subject to none of the limitations of the artist as maker, can project a visionary and utopian art that is no less art than concrete works."[1] The reception of conceptual art has often reproduced this idea of a break with the "limitations" of making, along with the motif of "dematerialization." Conceptual art is normally said to have decentered the purely visual and to be concerned with ideas, at the expense of the production of artifacts. If conceptual artworks have a material form, it is supposed to be incidental, because they appeal primarily to the intellect, rather than to the senses. By contrast, "making" normally connotes the working of material. Making is nondiscursive, though now often envisaged as a kind of "thinking": that is, as a form of cognition that depends on tacit skill, embodied knowledge and sensuous engagement with matter.[2] The kind of cognitive experience that conceptual art produces, on the other hand, is normally understood to be communicable in verbal language. Of course, these generalizations about conceptual art are not entirely without foundation; artists associated with the movement did often reject the idea that the artist's role is to make artifacts primarily for visual consumption. Even so, the distinction between conceptual art and making is often drawn far too sharply and obscures important features of the movement and its legacies.

To illustrate this point, it is interesting to consider the international group of artists associated with the collective Art & Language, normally said to be the most rigorously theoretical tendency in conceptual art.[3] Along with Joseph Kosuth, whose two-part essay "Art after Philosophy" was published in *Studio International* in 1969, members of Art & Language secured a reputation as strict advocates for the idea that art need have no relationship to artifacts, and therefore making. The work of Art & Language involved a polemic against formalist painting that seemed to set them entirely against the remnants of the artisanal dimension of art practice.[4] The introductory essay to the first issue of *Art-Language*, the collective's journal, famously asked whether "an attempt to evince some outlines as to what 'conceptual art' is" (that is, the matter of the introductory essay itself), might be considered an artwork.[5] This

"hypothesis," or provocation, appeared to dispense entirely with the art object and to identify art practice with theoretical enquiry. Even so, at least some members and former members of the collective would come to assert the *importance* of skill and making, a fact that has received relatively little sustained critical attention. This chapter explores how questions concerned with making might have played an important and understudied role in theoretical conceptual art in the late 1960s.

Although Art & Language has a secure place in the conceptual art canon, the group has often been misrepresented by influential art-historical texts. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh, for example, in a well-known account of conceptual art, characterized the activities of Art & Language as "authoritarian quests for orthodoxy."[6] This comment suggests that the group existed to enforce a single polemical line, but an ambition of this kind is not in evidence in its output. From 1969 until 1976, Art & Language made public a dialogue among group members that first explored the role of language in art, before opening up to explore questions of a political character. This dialogue always contained disagreements, and differences of perspectives also exist in the histories written by those associated with Art & Language.[7] Even so, the misconception that Art & Language held to a single programmatic position on conceptual art is a persistent one.[8] This essay argues that art-historical study of Art & Language should take into account its members' divergent views.[9] Some members of the group saw making as a redundant or regressive feature of art practice, whereas others took a more nuanced position on this question. Understanding the diversity of positions taken by members of Art & Language sheds light on the kind of theoretical enquiry this group undertook.

This essay focuses on Ian Burn, an Australian artist who began to make conceptual art in the late 1960s, before he joined Art & Language between 1971 and 1976. On leaving the collective, Burn gave up his artistic career to focus on political activism, union journalism, and occasional curatorial work for around a decade. In the late 1980s, he returned to art making, developing themes that were present in his work of the late 1960s, before his early death in 1993. Burn's work has been extensively studied by art historians in Australia, but it has received little attention in recent scholarship exploring conceptual art as a materialist, rather than a "dematerialized" tendency.[10] This is strange because, at an early date, Burn used conceptual art to explore skill, deskilling, and, therefore, making. This study is based on a close reading of works that Burn made before he formally joined Art & Language, alongside arguments about artistic skill and deskilling that he made in the early 1980s in essays that reflected on the significance of the historical moment of conceptual art. Burn's practice demonstrates that the theoretical debate in Art & Language was never an orthodoxy, as Buchloh argues. Kosuth and Burn understood conceptual art quite differently and, indeed, Kosuth's views were often in tension with the positions taken by the majority of members of the collective. In addition, the nature of Burn's practice demonstrates that Art & Language, from early on, included members whose work addressed questions to do with materiality and making.

1. The *Xerox Book*

The second issue of *Art-Language* begins with a short essay by Kosuth, entitled "Introductory Note by the American Editor," which characterizes making in dismissive terms:

> In terms of art then this work (the painting or the sculpture) is merely the "dumb" sub-ject-matter (or cue) to critical discourse. The artist's role is not unlike the valet's assistance to his marksman master: pitching into the air of clay plates for targets. This follows in that aesthetics deals with considerations of opinions on perception, and since experience is immediate art becomes merely a human ordered base for perceptual kicks, thus parallel-ing (and "competing" with) natural sources of visual (and other) experiences. The artist is omitted from the "art activity" in that he is merely the carpenter of the predicate, and does not take part in the conceptual engagement (such as the critic functions in his traditional role) of the "construction" of the art proposition.[11]

The painter is a "carpenter of the predicate" because paintings are "dumb": they wait for critics to come along and attach discursive meaning to them. Conceptual artists, by contrast, make explicit the conceptual content of their work. For Kosuth, the conceptual artwork is an "analytic" proposition: art is understood *as* language.[12] Sometimes, Kosuth is assumed to have spoken for Art & Language in his writings of the late 1960s but, in fact, there were important differences between his ideas and the positions articulated in the first issue of *Art-Language* and in the journal thereafter by other members of the collective. The editors of *Art-Language* proposed an investigation of art via "the language use of the art-society," that drew upon the resources of analytic philosophy but did not exclude questions concerned with making in quite the definitive way that Kosuth proposed.[13] For other members of Art & Language an artisanal identity would become important as a vantage and reference point from which to critique the art world, a trajectory that is very clear in the work of Burn.[14]

Burn moved to New York from London, where he had been living since arriving from Australia in 1965, in July 1967. His earliest conceptual art works date from around this time. They include text-based works made on or using mirrors combined with sheets of glass and, also, a sequence of works made on Xerox machines between 1968 and 1969. I will focus on these latter works because they neatly problematize what is meant by the term "concept" in conceptual art. This question has historical significance because in the late 1960s, the term "concept" had not taken on the exclusive identification with language that it would later develop (most obviously in Kosuth's work). Used interchangeably with linked terms like "idea" or "premise," the term "concept" might refer to a plan, a process, or an object. In his "Para-graphs on Conceptual Art" of 1967, Sol LeWitt wrote, for example: "The conceptual artist would want to ameliorate . . . emphasis on materiality as much as possible or to use it in a paradoxical way. (To convert it into an idea.)"[15] A material object might potentially qualify as an "idea" according to this definition.

LeWitt also wrote in 1966 that the artist should be a "clerk cataloguing the results of his premise" in a famous text that set out principles of what he then called "serial art."[16] Burn used the same term more than once at around the same time when titling works (though he used the alternative spelling, "premiss"). For example, the work *Yellow Premiss*, painted in 1965, comprised six identical paintings, featuring yellow stripes on a white background, displayed alongside one another. In a message back to his parents, on the occasion of the work being exhibited in Australia in 1966, Burn defined the term "premiss" as "a proposition put forward upon which later suppositions are based."[17]According to Ann Stephen, whose monograph on Burn provides the most extensive enquiry into his work, it was the uncomprehending reaction to *Yellow Premiss*, when it was sent to Australia for exhibition, that prompted Burn to begin writing about his practice. He would develop his enquiry into the relationship between art and serial repetition in his first *Xerox Book.*

These kinds of works are sometimes termed "proto-conceptual" because they broach issues around seriality, the problem of originality, and so on, but via artifacts. In paintings produced between 1965–67, such as the *Yellow Premiss* and *Reflex* series, Burn worked through the implications of the work of Frank Stella, Piet Mondrian, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings*, while simultaneously developing collaborative work with his friend Mel Ramsden, such as the work *Soft Tape* of 1966, which explored the relationship between sound and environment.[18] When Burn stopped painting, and making any individual works, whether using mirrors, glass, or Xerox machine, his art practice became entirely collaborative and theoretical: first in the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses with Mel Ramsden and Roger Cutforth between 1969–71 and subsequently in Art & Language. The copy machine that Burn used in 1968 and 1969 seems to have provided space to work through questions to do with the relationship between language art, and artifactuality, because it problematized the value judgements that attach to artisanal expertise, which conceptual artists invariably saw as screening the cognitive content of the work. Burn used the copy machine to make artifacts, primarily books, but the "concept" of the *Xerox Book* is not communicated exclusively in language. Instead, these works dramatize a problem to do with making that, I will argue here, plays a significant and understudied role in conceptual art of the period.

Burn explored various ideas on the Xerox machine, in the process of analyzing what it means to make an art object. For example, a work entitled *Systematically Altered Photographs* (fig. 1) problematizes the relationship between language and seeing. Burn used as the subject matter for this work images taken from an Australian government publication called *Australian Panorama.* Images selected from the book were each juxtaposed with a copy, produced by passing them repeatedly through a copy machine until their tonal organization degraded entirely. The resulting image is still discernible as the same scene, though it is reduced to swarms of dots and frail lines on the facsimile. In an essay accompanying the book, written by Burn and Ramsden, these images are proposed as demonstrations of the way that language is so embedded in seeing that it sometimes "screens what we see," even to the extent that the language we use to construe an image may be "confused with brute facts."[19]
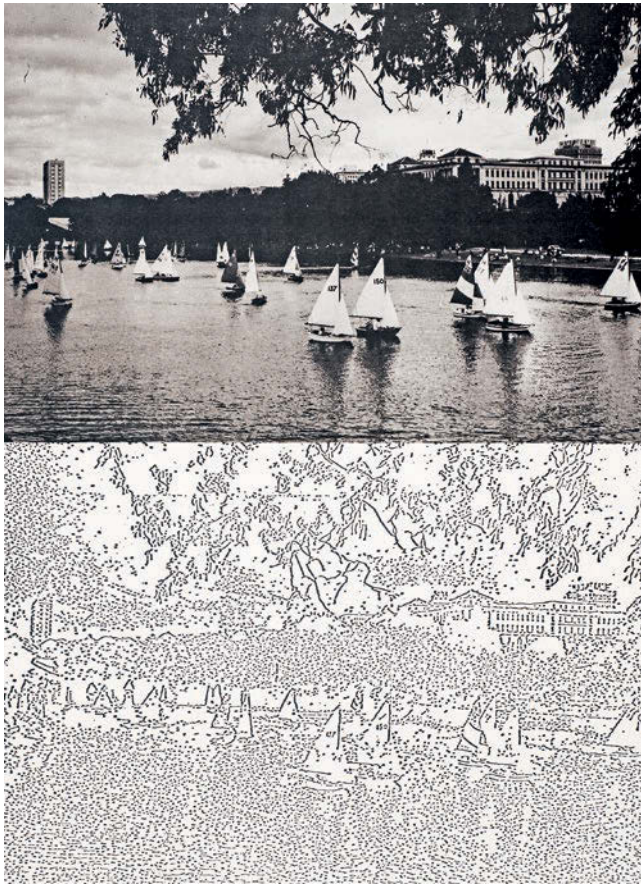
1 Ian Burn, *Systematically Altered Photographs* (detail), 1968. 3 black and white photographs (reproduction from "Australian Panorama," Australian News and Information Bureau, ca. 1967) and photocopy on paper, 1 black and white photograph, dimensions variable

Close attention to language is necessary because it shapes perception and, indeed, stands in the way of it. This investigation of vision would become a recurrent preoccupation of Burn's work, but the copy machine also made it possible for him to analyze the relationship between language and a making process.

Created around the same time as *Systematically Altered Photographs*, Burn's *Xerox Book* explored an alternate premise using the same technology. A series of similar works were made at this time, some of which used alternative titles such as *Structure* or *One Structure*, but I will describe here *Xerox Book #1* (fig. 2). This work is interesting because it developed an afterlife, as I will show, as Burn began to explore the possibility that an artwork might be entirely language-based. The production process for this work is described in a typewritten text on the inside cover of the book:
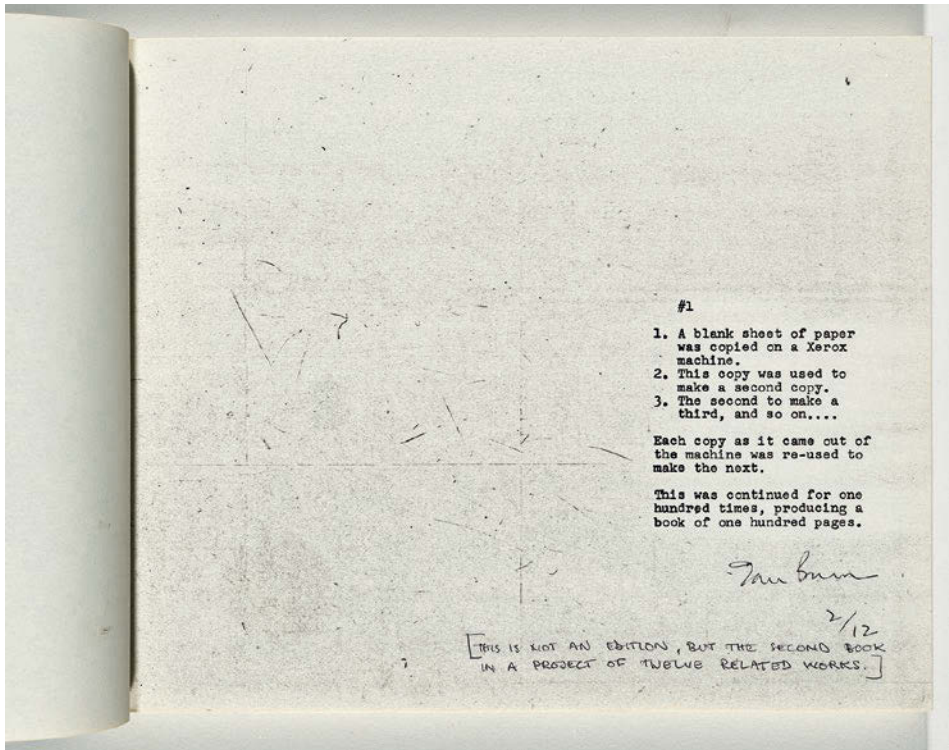
2 Ian Burn, *Xerox Book # 1*, 1968. Inside cover, 21.2 × 27.6 cm (book closed)

  1. A blank sheet of paper was copied on a Xerox machine.
  2. This copy was used to make a second copy.
  3. The second to make a third, and so on. . . .

Each copy as it came out of the machine was re-used to make the next.

This was continued for one hundred times, producing a book of one hundred pages.

Although this work uses a copy machine to remove any possibility that it should be understood as dependent on the hand of the artist, Burn signs the work and even includes a handwritten note: "This is not an edition but the second book in a project of twelve related works." There is no explanatory essay, unlike with *Systematically Altered Photographs*, but the book does contain exactly one hundred pages, including the cover and inside cover on which the written description is typed.[20] Rather than the degradation of an image, the pages of the book record the accretion of visual "noise" produced by the copying process. Instead of the subtraction of visual information, which is essential to the logic of *Systematically Altered Photographs*, *Xerox Book #1* foregrounds the contingent materiality that is part of the imperfect process of copying. Although "the blank sheet of paper" is described as part of the concept of the work,
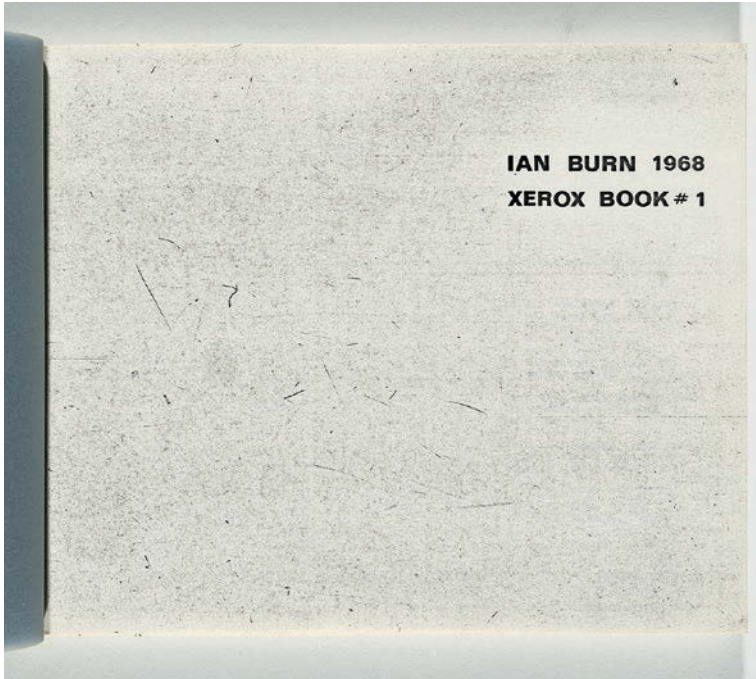
3 Ian Burn, *Xerox Book # 1*, 1968. Cover, 21.2 × 27.6 cm (book closed)

it is interesting to note that it is not part of the book. This is evident because the title page of the book is a copy, featuring scratches transferred from the platen glass of the copier (fig. 3).

According to a widely held view of conceptual art, the linguistic statement included in the Burn's *Xerox Book* ought to be sufficient to communicate the concept. This is what we might expect, for example, if it is the case that conceptual art "deemphasizes material aspects," as Lucy R. Lippard argues in her 1973 book *The Dematerialization of the Art Object*.[21] This does not, however, seem to hold for *Xerox Book #1* because, although the making is automated, the relation between statement and artifact remains significant. The written statement includes information that is not in the book (it refers to "the blank sheet of paper"); the book contains information that is not included in the statement: namely, the accumulated visual noise that derives from the copier repeatedly translating imperfections from one facsimile to the next.

A second version of this work appeared in the mimeographed magazine *Art Press*, a publication that was produced by the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses in 1969. In this version, the specification for the work appeared on the left-hand page; on the right, there is a single sample sheet showing the last of the hundred copies. This work, which is titled *Xerox Piece*, has a slightly altered text. Burn indicates here that "[t]he original work exists as

the idea in specification and/or the one hundred sheets."[22] Stephen observes that this addition "left it to the viewer to determine whether to see the art in the idea or the one hundred sheets."[23] This is also a specification that seems to recall the well-known "Statement of Intent" of Lawrence Weiner, probably composed in 1968:

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 artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership

The point of comparison here has to do with the idea that a work, "a piece," might exist either as a material artifact, or intervention, or as language. At this time, Weiner consistently argued that his work dealt with materiality, although each work was realized as a linguistic "statement," typically one that indicated a physical or material intervention. Weiner's work would have been available as a point of reference for Burn's project, which also explored tensions between language and materiality. (Weiner published "Statement of Intent" in the catalogue to the group show *January, 5–31, 1969*, organized by Seth Siegelaub. *Art Press* came out in July of 1969.)[24] As art historian Sabeth Buchman notes, Weiner's work is generally recognized as "a prime example of a materialistic notion of Conceptual art."[25] Interestingly, Buchman makes a point of contrasting Weiner's approach to the "text and theory work forms of the group Art & Language."[26] This statement reflects a common view that Art & Language was somehow not interested in materiality, because they privileged theoretical work. Yet, Burn would become a member of Art & Language and, as I will show, often reflected on the artifact and on making in a way that bears comparison to Weiner's work.

A third version of *Xerox Book* was included in an early anthology on *Conceptual Art* published in 1972 and authored by Ursula Meyer (fig. 4).[27] Burn was employed as a consultant on this work, so it seems reasonable to assume that he was content that any works included were representative of his practice.[28] This version of the *Xerox Book* uses the same wording as is in *Xerox Piece* except that the statement "The original work exists as the idea in specification and/or the one hundred sheets" is now removed. The text is supplemented by a photograph of the book, lying open so that one page is visible. The text reads:

A blank sheet of clean white paper was copied in a Xerox 720 machine. This copy was then used to make a second copy, the second to make a third, the third to make a fourth, and so on. Each copy as it came out the machine was reused to make the next: this was continued for one-hundred times, producing a work of one-hundred sheets. The machine was used under normal conditions and was not interfered with in any way.

IAN BURN
"Xerox" Book, 1968

A blank sheet of clean white paper was copied in a Xerox 720 machine. This copy was then used to make a second copy, the second to make a third, the third to make a fourth, and so on. Each copy as it came out of the machine was reused to make the next: this was continued for one-hundred times, producing a work of one-hundred sheets. The machine was used under normal conditions and was not interfered with in any way.
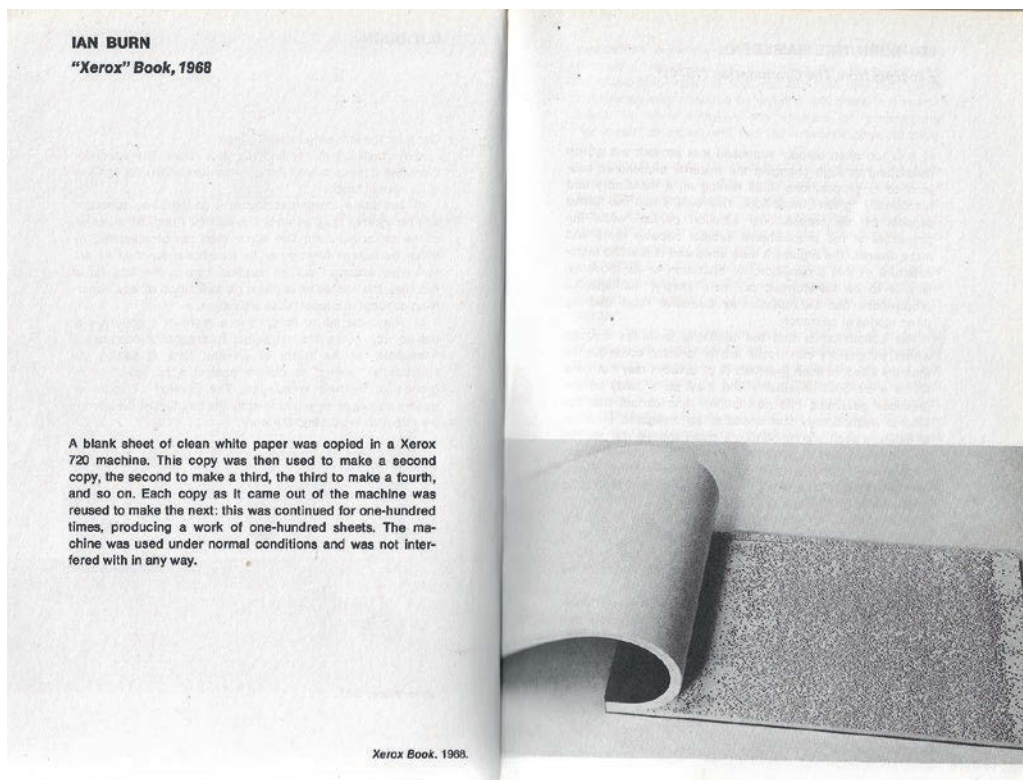
Xerox Book. 1968.

4 Ian Burn, "*Xerox Book*," 1968. Version included in Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art,* New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972

In this later version of *Xerox Book*, the numerical ordering is removed from the statement and the model of Xerox machine is named. (There exists an alternative version where the address of the copy shop where the book was made is also included in the work.) This version of the text includes the statement "The machine was used under normal conditions and was not interfered with in any way" seemingly to guard against a possible misconception, which could arise because the statement is separated from the accrual of "noise" that a viewer might examine across pages of the book. When looked at in sequence, features like scratches are reproduced across successive pages in a way that provides evidence of the process described in the printed description of the work. Seen only as a photograph (or a single reproduced page in *Xerox Piece*) a viewer might infer that the machine had been tampered with to induce these effects.

It is possible that Burn's decision to include this qualification was prompted by other circumstances, of course. The historical situation of the Xerox machine was complex. An invention of the 1940s, it was funded in part because the United States military wanted to develop a photographic process that would work close to nuclear test sites. It entered the office in the

early 1960s and was connected both to deskilled forms of administrative work and also to technophilic fantasies of liberation caused by the nascent revolution in information technology.[29] It was considered by Marshall McLuhan to signal a new kind of democratic access to information where everyone could be "both author and publisher."[30] However, copiers were also interesting because they achieved "bland, shitty reproduction," in the words of Seth Siegelaub, the conceptual art impresario who created an entirely different work named *Xerox Book* in 1968.[31] That is, for conceptual artists, the Xerox machine was appealing because it reduced opportunities to read art aesthetically. Even so, by 1970, forms of copier art had emerged, such as Sonia Sheridan's work included in the exhibition *Software* in the Jewish Museum, using sophisticated and experimental copier technology as a form of interactive art where "objects change as rapidly as thinking allows."[32] At the time, "intervention" in the technology might have been taken to imply a technologically adapted version of creativity that pointed in the direction of affirmative humanism. By contrast, Burn seems to want the copier to operate in the spirit of LeWitt's account of conceptual art where "the idea becomes a machine that makes the work."[33] The copy machine is supposed to negate the artist's subjective references and problematize romantic ideologies associated with making.

It is noteworthy that Burn's choice of wording ("The machine was used under normal conditions") makes explicit the difference between Burn's approach to conceptual art and Lawrence Weiner's "Statements." Although Burn seems to use the copy machine because it deflates any ideology of making, it is still important to the work that the book has been *made.* Weiner's statements were always phrased in such a way that they may or may not record an actual occurrence, such as, for example:

One sheet of plywood secured to the floor or wall.

Burn establishes a quite different framework for understanding the work, by using the past tense to indicate that that *Xerox Book* was made at a definite point, on a specified machine, presumably by the artist. Having said that, the *Xerox Book* certainly does not aggrandize this authorial position. Anyone could make a similar artifact, but the concept is not presented as generalizable: it matters when and where it was produced, even when the artifact is no longer present. In fact, the handwritten note in *Xerox Book #1* thematizes each iteration of the work as irreducibly unique, as a condition of apparent repetition: the versions of the work are "not an edition" [i.e., not facsimiles of an original—author note] but "a project made of 12 related works."

Burn's work maintains a kind of residual commitment to artisanal making then, because it refers to a made object as linked to a specific material process and spatial and temporal coordinates. Ann Stephen notes that Burn's early experiments with the Xerox machine would involve him repeatedly copying the same sheet of paper in a copy shop, when the machines were not in use by other customers. This activity seems to have interested Burn on an experiential level, and he noted in a letter to his friend Ramsden, who was still in London at this time, his interest in the quality of boredom produced by watching Andy Warhol's films:

Went to another Warhol film, *I, a Man*, it was very interesting I was bored the whole way through. I like the way he gradually destroys everything you might be able to grasp—dialog, story, form, technique—all become just meaningless, and you are left with nothing, but it isn't nothing because you have been there.[34]

It is not difficult to see a kind of analogous experience in what must have been the repetitive labor required to make *Xerox Book*. Evidently, *Xerox Book* does not require skilled work, but instead thematizes the experience of unskilled, repetitive labor. Although the work is conceptual, the concept involves an experience of making that has some kind of relationship to contingent materiality. This is the case, even in the later versions of the work that is communicated in text alongside a photographic image.

2. *Read Premiss*

It has already been noted that some influential histories of conceptual art treat Kosuth as if he were the American spokesman for Art & Language in 1969, the year in which "Art after Philosophy" appeared in *Studio International*, and the same year in which the first issue of *Art-Language* was published. The views of Burn and Ramsden, the other New York-based artists who would go on to join the collective, have tended to receive less attention. This is perhaps because Kosuth, though he joined Art & Language before Burn and Ramsden, never subsumed his individual practice entirely into the collective. He was careful to maintain a distinct artistic identity and, in "Art after Philosophy," supplied strident claims that lend themselves to being quoted, even if they are not entirely coherent. Having established some of the problems explored in Burn's series of Xerox books, it will be helpful to sketch how they sit in relation to Kosuth's work, and in relation to histories of conceptual art.

For Kosuth, the conceptual artwork is tautological. Described by analogy to analytic definitions in the linguistic philosophy of A. J. Ayer, the concept makes a claim about the character of art, which renders information from outside of art entirely irrelevant. As Kosuth puts it, works of conceptual art "provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact."[35] In Kosuth's work of the period, known as "The Second Investigation," categories lifted from *Roget's Thesaurus* were distributed in press advertisements, on billboards, and using handbills in fifteen exhibitions that took place in Europe, North and South America, and in Australia. One of Kosuth's basic principles was that the mode of delivery of the artwork was contingent: the concept was inviolate and removed from any material instantiation of it, which meant it could be communicated simultaneously in disparate media.

Drawing primarily from Kosuth's work to characterize conceptual art, Buchloh goes so far as to characterize conceptual art as a "cult of tautology," which he represents as a resurgence of the symbolist ideal of an entirely self-sufficient and self-referential art, and as symptomatic of the middle class in postwar capitalism. As Buchloh puts it:

> [A] newly established middle class . . . could identify comfortably with the late Modernist model of the tautology and its accompanying aesthetic of administration. This aesthetic of administration is structured exactly in analogy to this class's social identity, since its tasks are to administer labor and to organize and supervise the distribution of commodities, rather than to actually engage in material production.[36]

Needless to say, this attempt to reduce conceptual art into a product of a class formation that was complicit with consumerism is a controversial one, based on a sweeping generalization. Perhaps the most important point to note is that some products of conceptual artists did have a relationship to material production, which was derived from their use of technology associated with administrative work. The Xerox machine is the obvious example of such technology, one that Buchloh does not consider despite his reference to an "aesthetics of administration."

Art historian Tamara Trodd argues that the Xerox machine provided an opportunity for artists to disrupt the shibboleth of medium-specificity by applying a self-reflexive procedure outside the domain of painting. Trodd develops this argument through an analysis of the 1966 exhibition *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to Be Viewed as Art*, at the School of Visual Arts in New York, which was curated by Mel Bochner. Bochner displayed the drawings and ephemera that formed the show in four binders, all of them xeroxed in a show that is often said to have been the first conceptual art exhibition.[37] On the first page of each binder Bochner included a xeroxed plan of the gallery space and, on the final page, a copy from the Xerox user manual showing a plan of the copy machine mechanism. Trodd describes this as a "parodic performance of medium-specificity . . . as if in hysteric travesty of the medium's terms at the time."[38] This "tautological self-reference" employed modernist principles in order to subvert them.

Trodd does not seem to be aware of Burn's works, though the *Xerox Book* clearly resonates with her argument.[39] Having said this, Burn's self-reflexive use of the copy machine has a distinct emphasis. Bochner's exhibition employed diagrams and drawings and used the mechanically deadening effect created by the copy machine to form a visually unified context in which to encounter disparate material. By contrast, Burn focuses on the relationship between the linguistic description of a making process and the made artifact. As I have already noted, the language component of the book is given in the past tense, describing the process that results in the book itself. Indeed, the facture of the pages indicates that the statement might have been typed onto one of the sheets after it was copied, or perhaps typed first and then copied. The *Xerox Book* is made using a technology that seemed to reenforce the split between conception and execution, but the reflexiveness of the work puts the priority of conception in doubt. Does the description of the operation precede and dictate the work that makes *Xerox Book #1*, or does it follow after and inadequately describe the process?

The curator and art historian Helen Molesworth notes of art of the 1960s that "much of the most important and challenging art of the period staged the problem of labor's transformation, its new divisions, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure."[40]

In this respect, the use of a Xerox machine itself is readable as a response to what Molesworth terms "societal anxieties around the shifting terrain and definitions of work."[41] This is suggestive because, as I will shortly discuss, Burn would write about conceptual art in the early 1980s, situating it within the crisis initiated by the changing technological form of the labor process, which has come to be known as "deskilling." Though Burn could not have encountered theoretical debates about deskilling until the mid- to late 1970s, it is clear that he was preoccupied with problems concerning making much earlier, in works he created in 1968.[42] If the copy machine appealed to many conceptual artists as a means to subvert a romantic ideology of the artist that persisted in abstract painting, it was also for Burn a means to ask to what extent art as "concept" could be thought to overcome the material conditions of an artist's activity and its situatedness in time and place.

Work that explores making is sometimes understood to connote a conservative attachment to a proto-artisanal ideal of the artist. I do not think Burn's work falls into this category. It tends to challenge conventional expectations about authorship, while also problematizing the extent to which a concept can be detached from the embeddedness in a concrete context that is associated with making. Burn's production of conceptual artworks involved collaboration that would culminate in a commitment to a collective art practice, as a member of Art & Language. *Read Premiss*, a work that Burn made between 1968–69, shows how questions to do with making formed a conscious point of reflection in a collaborative work. *Read Premiss* takes the form of an essay, which describes Ramsden's artwork *Six Negatives* (fig. 5). It is therefore, in simple terms, an essay whose function approaches something like art criticism's; however, Burn designates *Read Premiss* as a self-reflexive conceptual artwork that attempts to describe accurately Ramsden's *Six Negatives*. Burn's description of it provides an opportunity to ask questions about the difference between a concept communicated in a discursive essay, and one communicated using a "ready-made" strategy. (*Six Negatives* comprises lists of synonyms and antonyms from *Roget's Thesaurus* where the entire list of "positive" terms is crossed out.) In this respect, it shares something with the approximately contemporaneous "Introduction" to the first issue of *Art-Language* discussed above.

A distinction between the not-made and the made figures prominently in the argument of *Read Premiss*. Burn notes that *Six Negatives* is "ready-made" and thus not-made: i.e., it is not readable in the same way as an artifact is.[43] Given that it is not-made, Burn asks whether *Six Negatives* is adequately communicated by his description of it. If an artwork is conceptual, might it be simply described, or explained, in order for it to exist for its audience? Burn rejects this argument: "To say that an experience of an object is the same as that of a statement of information is of course absurd, they are obviously different kinds of experience."[44] Having argued this point, however, Burn seems to change his mind. He also wants to claim that artists' decisions are more legible when they are *not* realized as works, because any artifact provides information that distracts from the concept. *Six Negatives* raises some of these questions because the "negation" of one side of the synonym/antonym relation sourced from the *Roget's Thesaurus* poses questions for the viewer about how the remaining elements of the

5 Mel Ramsden and Ian Burn, *Six negatives*, 1968–69. Bound book: 14 leaves, 13 photo lithographs, 28 × 21.5 cm (each leaf); 28 × 21.9 × 0.3 cm (book closed)

categorization ought to be read. Burn's *Read Premiss* is self-reflexive, but it is not self-enclosed and tautological because it responds to the problem set by Ramsden's work. Burn closes with the statement:

> But the point at which the viewer contacts the idea and its form is in each the same [*i.e., it is the same in the "experience of an object" as it is in a "statement of information," seemingly contradicting the statement quoted above*—author note] and beyond any initial perceiving of the work. The work exists simply within a conceptual basis rather than a visual framework, and the conceptual basis requires that the language form be arrived at in one way or another.[45]

The interesting thing here is that Burn had not settled on a single conception of the way that art interacts with language. Between 1968 and 1969, the moment when analytic conceptual art developed a distinctive identity, he was working through alternative hypotheses in response to this problem. In the essay accompanying *Systematically-Altered Photographs*, language is said to "screen" experience, stand in the way of it. In *Xerox Book* a linguistic statement describes how an artifact was made, but this statement has an uncertain status, in part because it does not account for all of the information the artifact provides. In *Read Premiss*, Burn seems to concede that a material object is different from a linguistic description, before shifting tack to argue that all art is ultimately accessed via language, however it may be realized. Taken together, these various positions constitute an unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, inquiry into the relationship between language, art, and making. Arguably, this unresolved quality is a virtue.

Kosuth advocated a program for conceptual art, complete with definitions as to the character of artistic concepts. By contrast, Burn kept in play alternative hypotheses on the relationship between art and language across works and writings of that time. Ultimately, in 1969, these different ideas fed into an argument that presented conceptual art as a dialogue. Burn writes: "Participating in a dialogue gives the viewer a new significance; rather than listening, he becomes involved in reproducing and inventing part of that dialogue."[46] Whereas Kosuth modeled conceptual art on tautological definition, Burn aligned it with the social and pragmatic dimensions of language. In this respect, Burn was obviously reflecting on the work he was then undertaking with Ramsden, and also exploring the implications of the work of Art & Language, the group that they both would join. The defining feature of the dialogic practice of this group is that it was an open-ended research program, rather than a "quest for orthodoxy."[47]

The open-ended enquiry pursued by Art & Language would develop a definitively political character by the mid-1970s. Around 1976, the dialogue between members in New York, and between the New York- and United Kingdom-based wings of Art & Language, became overwhelmed by contradictions, in part because the collective began to examine the political situation of its practice more explicitly. Although wildly dysfunctional, the breakup of Art & Language (and the journal *The Fox*, which was then the focus for the New York wing) also produced a searching reflection on the limitations of political agency within art. In the next section I will explore how Burn viewed conceptual art from the vantage point of the 1980s, after he had seemingly abandoned his career as an artist, while working as a journalist and advocate for cultural programs aligned with the Australian trade union moment. Burn's reflections on conceptual art from this period revolved around "deskilling," a term he introduced into the lexicon of contemporary art theory. They are in some respects in tension with, and in others continuous with, the ideas explored here in the *Xerox Book* and *Read Premiss*.

3. Skill and Deskilling

In the early 1980s, Burn "wrestled" with the idea of reinventing his art practice after a number of years focused on his work with Union Media Services.[48] In a notebook from this period, he reflected: "I don't see myself as a rebel, a romantic hero, or a bohemian. I spent five years working as a carpenter, another ten working in picture-framing factories."[49] This artisanal identity is not the "key" to Burn's conceptual art practice, but it is reasonable to suggest that his familiarity with skilled artisanal work made him thoughtful about the material conditions in which he operated. A respect for the material conditions that shape discourse is an often-overlooked feature of Art & Language debate that recurs throughout their output. In Burn's case, it is evident in various essays of the mid-1970s, where he began to reflect on the relationship between art and the market, for example. Burn was prescient in his attention to the emergence of an investment market for contemporary art that would transform the character of the freedoms won by conceptualism.[50] Certainly, Burn's career as a skilled maker goes some way toward explaining his reflections on deskilling.

The term "deskilling" does not originate in an art context. Rather it derives from the "labor process debate" that was inspired by Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*, first published in 1974.[51] In this work Braverman analyzes what he terms "the destruction of craftsmanship" that accompanied the expansion of monopoly capitalism throughout the twentieth century.[52] ("Deskilling" later came into common usage to describe the process Braverman analyzes, though Braverman does not use the term himself.) Braverman's central thesis is that capitalism involves a "secular trend toward the incessant lowering of the working class as a whole below its previous conditions of skill and labor."[53] He demonstrates this point through an analysis of "scientific management," better known as Taylorism, after its key proponent Frederick Winslow Taylor. Braverman shows that Taylorism had the effect of stripping workers of their decision-making power in the labor process, while concentrating skills and knowledge in the domain of management. As a result, the political power of workers declined, as they were forced into low-skilled "detail labor," made increasingly interchangeable and disposable.

Braverman's argument challenged the prevailing view in postwar sociology, which was that technological progress would inevitably create an increasingly skilled workforce.[54] He argued that the average level of skill in the production process could increase, and the majority of work could simultaneously become deskilled, because high-skilled occupations became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands as workers tended to become divested of any control over decision-making in their work. This tendency affected both manufacturing and administrative labor, since all kinds of work are susceptible to being divided between the conception and execution of tasks. So-called "scientific management" of the labor process was employed in manufacturing, but also in the rapidly expanding clerical and service work of the postwar period.

Braverman notes that monopoly capitalism, because of the way it divided up an increasingly complex production process, demanded the increased specialization of clerical

and administrative activities: including banking, law offices, advertising agencies, and publishers. Notably, workers in many of these industries had formerly enjoyed a professionalized status. As the sheer volume of clerical work, and paper, increased, however, clerical labor became proletarianized for most clerical workers, at a time when the workforce became gradually feminized. The median wages of clerical workers were lower than those of workers in traditional production industries in the 1960s. In the United States in 1960 around two-thirds of clerical workers were women; by 1970 the proportion reached three-quarters. This analysis underlines that the "administrative aesthetic" of conceptual art is more complex than a rehearsal of a "white-collar" class position, as Christian Berger has noted.[55] In the 1960s, the status of white-collar occupations was increasingly ambiguous, because of the rapid changes in the character of work. The Xerox machine was a technology that played an important part in this transformation: much of the early advertising for the machine-made sexist claims about the ease with which secretaries would be able to use it.

In art theory, "deskilling" is often identified with art historian Benjamin Buchloh. Buchloh first used the term in 1988 in the essay "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason" where he defines deskilling in art as rejection of "aesthetic autonomy . . . the traditional procedures of artistic production (and, by implication, of course, the concepts embedded in them)."[56] He goes on to argue that this work "demands new skills, which [develop] a different form of historical knowledge, and [address] a different social group and modes of experience."[57] He has since gone on to propose a number of different interpretations of deskilling as a tendency in twentieth-century art though, fundamentally, his version of "deskilling" involves the idea that artists made a transition from handicraft to intellectual skills, following the example set by Marcel Duchamp.[58] In these writings on deskilling, Buchloh's position tends to suggest that skilled artisanal labor contains no integral intellectual horizon. Painting is not a method of enquiry, it is a carrier for certain limiting "embedded" and historically superannuated concepts, which artists overcame by engaging with other fields of intellectual enquiry, such as journalism in the case of Haacke.

Buchloh acknowledges that it was Burn who brought the term "deskilling" into art discourse in an essay published in the Australian journal *Art & Text* in 1981, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath: Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist."[59] The essay contains a thoughtful attempt to work through Braverman's categories via a reflection on the milieu of conceptual art.[60] For Burn, deskilling in art of the 1960s was one feature of a profound, cultural, and political crisis. He saw deskilling at work in all of the major styles of the early 1960s, including Pop Art, color field, and minimalism. Burn suggests that artists may have come to identify with management, as they began to occupy a "supervisory" role in the production of work. It is likely that he had in mind Donald Judd, whose work was outsourced to fabricators. Burn and Karl Beveridge had excoriated Judd's work in the mid-1970s for its incorporation into capitalist ideology.[61] It is notable then that Burn does not view "deskilling" as an expansive strategy as Buchloh does, but as problem afflicting all the art that considered itself "advanced" in the 1960s.

An important feature of "Crisis and Aftermath" is that Burn writes about skill in a way that seems at odds with his earlier adherence to "deskilled" conceptual art. He writes:

> While arguments can be made in favor of discarding "anachronistic" practices in the face of "space-age" technologies, what is so often overlooked is that skills are not merely manual dexterity but forms of knowledge. The acquisition of particular skills implies an access to a body of accumulated knowledge. This deskilling means a rupture with an historical body of knowledge—a de-historicization of the practice of art.[62]

Buchloh's commentary in this passage wryly suggests that it might provide "a rationale for the new cultural conservatism."[63] For Buchloh, the political and artistic significance of conceptual art depends on its movement away from painting; consequently, any mention of skill within contemporary art looks to him to be a regression. Burn was not advocating a return to traditional art practice, however. On the contrary, in "Crisis and Aftermath," Burn celebrates the diverse politicized art that he sees as having been overlooked by art criticism of the 1970s: "The community-oriented art and cultural activities, the work of numerous women's groups, the street murals and theatre, the activities of artists working within trade union contexts and with social and political activist groups."[64] This milieu represented, at the time, a vibrant space for cultural activism and engaged art of the kind that Burn himself practiced after leaving Art & Language. Indeed, many former associates of the collective would operate in this ambiguous space between art and politics, though Burn made work that was more easily identifiable as conceptual, or postconceptual, on his return to art making in the late 1980s.[65] Rather than advocating for a univocal tradition, Burn was opposing what he viewed as an avant-garde ideology that permeated modernism and its self-appointed successors.

Burn's focus on skill is best understood through his idea that deskilling is a "rupture with a body of historical knowledge." Implicit in this statement, is the idea that learning skills involves developing a socially embedded, or "lived," connection to a history. The effect of deskilling, Burn suggests, is that avant-garde artists in the 1960s came under pressure to "produce history," because they were alienated from the kinds of nondiscursive knowledge that was found in a skills-based tradition. He goes on:

> This was not a broad and culturally diverse sense of history, but a particular history conceived as a narrow lineage of styles, in relation to which it was the artist's task to invent the next (formally) "logical" step. By conceiving of work as "instant art history," one necessarily conceives of oneself as merely an object of that history—not a thinking, acting subject.[66]

Burn sees the avant-garde developments of the 1960s as part of this competition to create "instant art history." His point is that the perceptual skills provided by traditional artistic training might provide some defense against the alienating effects of art history and art criticism. It is derived from recognition, which had been fundamental to conceptual art, that discourse

has the power to shape and define the practice of artists. For Burn, as for other members of Art & Language, art criticism and art history were managerial discourses. Although conceptual art sometimes has the reputation of being hyperintellectualized, for these artists theoretical work was undertaken so as to resist the separation of intellectual and manual labor, expressed in formalist modernism via the division of labor between art criticism and art practice. Though the two artists evidently understood the practice of conceptual art in very different ways, Kosuth and Burn agreed that the subordination of artistic practice to the judgments and interpretations of art critics had invidious effects.

Burn's writings on art from the 1980s consistently identify artists as producing a kind of knowledge that is distinct from the interpretation provided by art history and art criticism. By this point, he was skeptical of the idea that art was always reducible to propositional thought. In the essay "Is Art History of Any Use to Artists?," first published in 1985, Burn writes:

> Pictures embody an historical understanding and practice which links them to particular artistic and cultural traditions, classes and societies. That understanding is largely built up by the way an artist notices and looks at art; its values and significance evolve in relation to the acquisition of skills, techniques and knowledge which are all part of an artist's practice. The historical understanding vested in a picture doesn't simply illustrate an historical point of view; it can't be adequately accounted for by biographical details (even with "psychological" insights) or by social history or sociological readings of the art. It isn't explained by evolutionist or avant-gardist "logic," or even by what the artist says is his or her historical interest or understanding. History isn't just "background," or a set of occasional references, but is infused in the creative process.[67]

This statement shows that in the 1980s Burn continued to address questions that were present in his work of the 1960s, if with a different emphasis. Whereas once the interrogation of language was central to conceptual art, now painting is defended as a process of making, where art is embedded in nondiscursive practices: skills and forms of "noticing." But perhaps things are not so clear-cut in Burn's early work, as I have already discussed. Even in the 1969 essay "Dialogue," Burn wrote that language could bring "into use new material, areas for ideas and processes beyond previous perceiving," but he tended to stop short of reducing art to a linguistic identity. He also affirmed that "language and the product [*in context, this seems to refer to the art object*—author note] are separate and independent."[68] Rather than a volte-face, Burn's later writings show a return to an unresolved problem regarding the relationship between language and made artifact. As Adrian Piper has noted of Burn's early and later work, the "consistency" between them is striking.[69] Here, consistency does not mean inflexible adherence to one position, but rather willingness to revisit a persistent problem.

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Kosuth's reference to a "carpenter of the predicate," though intended as a casual jibe at painting, contained an intractable dilemma concerning the relationship between nondiscursive and discursive investigation in art making. Burn, a carpenter by profession ironically enough, explored this problem throughout his artistic career. It is worth noting that Michael Baldwin and Ramsden, who have worked under the name Art & Language since 1976, continue to take a position on skill that is in dialogue with the one that Burn expressed in the 1980s. In an essay published in 2011, written with collaborator Charles Harrison, these former first-generation conceptual artists write:

> The de-skilling of the painter was supposed by many to invite the re-skilling of the artist as intellectual. But this de-re-skilling has not entrained an unambiguous or total transformation. The most obvious shift was not from craft-skill to no-skill, but from self-production to an overwhelming dependence on the craft-skill of others.[70]

Artists who were supposedly the most extreme exponents of a purely conceptual art here express the view that the abandonment of artisanal skill after painting has resulted in a relationship of dependency, or even of exploitation, between artists and skilled makers. Is this evidence of a drift from progressive to reactionary aesthetic views? This is what Buchloh hints at, of course, in his allusion to "cultural conservatism" in relation to Burn's account of deskilling. To characterize the views of Burn, or Art & Language, in this way is inadequate because it fails to recognize the continuity between the earliest hypotheses that contributed to the group's dialogue, as demonstrated by Burn's works analyzed here, and these more recent reflections on skill by Baldwin, Ramsden and Harrison. Buchloh tends to identify the politically progressive legacy of conceptual art with abandonment of artisanal skills, but this was never the position advocated by Art & Language, though it may have been Kosuth's view. Although members of Art & Language did criticize modernist painting, their primary target was the division of labor between modernist artist and art criticism, which had become rigidified by the 1960s, when formalist critics like Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried had assumed a kind of supervisory role with regard to the artistic problems that they deemed to be the most "advanced."

The work of Burn suggests a consistent research project, as I have argued. The project points to the inadequacy of a widely adopted caricature of conceptual art, where it is written off as hopelessly detached from "making." Rather than abandoning technique, Burn, along with other members of Art & Language, problematized a field—late modernist painting— that was already deskilled, because painters operated in a context where legitimate problems came to be defined by art critics. Under those conditions, it made sense to use language to explore the authority that accrues to language in art's social milieu. Conceptual artists associated with Art & Language did not reduce art to theory, but instead used language as material, medium, or even a tool that allowed them to problematize the institutional authority that was secured by art criticism, theory, and art history. This position was never programmatic, but it is recoverable as a method that was used in the practice of key contributors to Art &

Language. As it developed (and came to respond to the sanctification of conceptual art) this method tended to become an explicit defense of the kinds of nondiscursive cognition that are associated with making.

Conceptual art, during the 1960s and early 1970s, was extremely heterogenous and, for the most part, intended to be resistant to definition. Hence, the clean-cut account of conceptual art that Kosuth supplied in "Art after Philosophy" is attractive to anyone trying to pin-down a movement that challenges the generalizations that often underpin narrative art history. Kosuth supplies a readily summarized account of the aims of what became known as "analytic conceptual art," which has been understood as though it were the platform for Art & Language. But the method employed by Art & Language ran counter to celebration of abstract tautology that was present in Kosuth's early work. Although members of the group frequently had recourse to self-reflexive motifs, the collective endeavor of Art & Language dramatized theoretical enquiry through its group dialogue. Even during the early 1970s, when Art & Language was seemingly at its most theoretical and abstract, this dialogue was obsessively focused on the social situation of abstract theorizing and the conditions under which ideas are made.

Notes

I would like to thank Ann Stephen and Paul Wood, who generously gave their time and provided helpful corrections to an earlier draft of this essay.

1   Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 270.

2   "What then is the relation between thinking and making? To this the theorist and the craftsman would give different answers. It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that one *makes through thinking* and the other *thinks through making*." Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 6.

3   Art & Language was founded in Coventry, United Kingdom, by Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harrold Hurrell. Joseph Kosuth became the American editor of *Art-Language* in 1969, and Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden joined formally in 1971, having contributed to the journal from the second issue.

4   Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, I and II," in *Idea Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), pp. 70–101.

5   Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harold Hurrell, "Introduction," *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 (May 1969): 1.

6   Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," in *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth Century Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), p. 412.

7   A number of noted art historians and art theorists were members of or otherwise associated with Art & Language. Charles Harrison wrote extensively from the perspective of the United Kingdom wing: Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Charles

Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA MIT Press, 2001). Paul Wood was associated with Art & Language in the 1970s and has written about the group regularly since the 1980s. See, for example, Paul Wood, "About the Avant Garde: a Fragment for Art & Language," in *Art & Language in Practice*, ed. Charles Harrison (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1999). The art theorist John Roberts was associated with Art & Language in the 1980s and 1990s and writes often about their work. For a recent example: John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015). Michael Corris, a member of Art & Language, New York has written from the perspective of the United States wing of the organisation. See Michael Corris, "Inside a New York Art Gang: Selected Documents of Art & Language, New York," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Michael Corris, ed., *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

8   This is largely due to the influence of Buchloh's essay "Conceptual Art 1962–1969." Recent examination and revisions of conceptual art tend to note the limitations with Buchloh's framing by pointing to the changes that emerged in the position taken by Art & Language over time. However, the position is still typically understood as a single perspective that changed, rather than a dialogue involving different views. See Christian Berger, "Wholly Obsolete or Always a Possibility? Past and Present Trajectories of a 'Dematerialization' of Art," in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, ed. Christian Berger (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 21–23.

9   New York-based members always formed a subgroup in the wider organization. Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden merged an existing collaboration into Art & Language, which continued under the Art & Language name until 1976. See Ann Stephen, "*Soft Talk / Soft Tape*: The Early Collaborations of Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice.* On Art & Language in New York, see Robert Bailey, *Art & Language International: Conceptual Art Between Art Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). On the political trajectory of Art & Language in New York, see Nizan Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 113–24; Kim Charnley, *Sociopolitical Aesthetics: Art, Crisis and Neoliberalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 21–86.

10   This essay draws extensively on the research of Ann Stephen, who is the key authority on Burn's work. In particular, see Ann Stephen, *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2006). For recent texts dealing with conceptual art and materialism, see Berger, ed., *Conceptualism and Materiality*; Dominic Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism: Art in New York in the Late 1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

11   Joseph Kosuth, "Introductory Note from the American Editor," *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (February 1970): 1.

12   Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, I and II."

13   Atkinson et al., "Introduction," p. 10.

14   Christian Berger adds nuance to Buchloh's argument, suggesting that Art & Language was originally "anti-materialist," but then acknowledges that their position changed after they engaged with Marxism in the early 1970s. The problem with this claim is that it does not explain Burn's work very well, as I argue here. See Berger, "Wholly Obsolete or Always a Possibility?," pp. 22–23.

15   Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 15.

16   Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1," *Aspen,* nos. 5/6, item 17 (1966), https://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/serialProject.html.

17   Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 93.

18   Stephen, "*Soft Talk / Soft Tape*."

19   Ian Burn, *Systematically Altered Photographs*, 1968, https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artworks/1997.74D//; Ann Stephen notes that this essay was actually a collaboration between Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden. See Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 72.

20   As this text was completed during intermittent lockdown, I was not able to visit the National Gallery of Australia to look at *Xerox Book #1* in person. I am indebted to Imogen Dixon-Smith of the National Gallery of Art for answering questions about the work.

21   Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 5.

22   It reads in its entirety: "The original work exists in the idea in specification and/or the one hundred sheets. No single sheet can comprise the work. The sheet facing this sheet is a copy of the one hundredth sheet." Reproduced in Ann Stephen, *1969: The Black Box of Conceptual Art* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2013), p. 66.

23   Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 129.

24   On the "Statement of Intent," see Dominic Rahtz, *Metaphorical Materialism: Art in New York in the Late 1960s* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 152. For a detailed discussion of *Art Press*, see Ann Stephen, *1969*, pp. 29–31.

25   Sabeth Buchman, "Language Is a Change in Material: On Lawrence Weiner's Ellipses," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, p. 164.

26   Ibid.

27   Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), pp. 94–95.

28   Burn cited in Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 146.

29   On the complex historical situation of the Xerox machine, see Kate Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2016).

30   Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2001), p. 123.

31   Seth Siegelaub cited in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 135.

32   Jack Burnham and Judith Benjamin-Burnham, eds., *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970), p. 24.

33   LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," p. 12.

34   Burn cited in Stephen, *On Looking at Looking*, p. 71.

35   Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy, I and II," p. 83.

36   Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969," p. 442.

37   Ibid., p. 413.

38   Tamara Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction: Technology and Aesthetics from Duchamp to the Digital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 153.

39   Trodd writes: "Bochner was relatively unusual in using a photocopier to make this work." She notes that Seth Siegelaub's *Xerox Book* was actually printed using offset lithography. Trodd assumes that this was because the copy machine itself was, at the time, too expensive "without the benefit of a free staff photocopy card, as Bochner enjoyed." Trodd, *The Art of Mechanical Reproduction*, p. 145. This is all based on a misunderstanding. The Siegelaub *Xerox Book* was printed using offset lithography because this made *binding* cheaper for the run of 1,000 copies. Copying was inexpensive in public copy shops at the time, but the cost of assembling and binding the sheets was prohibitive.

See this interview with Jack Wendler, Siegelaub's business partner: Jack Wendler, "Jack Wendler Speaks about the XEROX BOOK," KADIST, June 25, 2013, video, 7:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85wsUOaqCN8.

40 Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 38.

41 Ibid., p. 25.

42 See, for example, Benison Kilby, "Deskilling and Post-Fordist Forms of Work in Ian Burn's *Systematically Altered Photographs*," benisonkilby.com, undated, https://benisonkilby.com/Deskilling-and-Post-Fordist-forms-of-Work-in-Ian-Burn-s-Systematically#:~:text=In%20his%201981%20essay%2C%20%27The,and%20execution%20in%20their%20work.

43 This work can be viewed in its entirety on the website of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Burn subtitled *Read Premiss* as *The Holding System for Six Negatives*: "Six Negatives 1968–1969," art-gallerynsw.gov.au, undated, https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/9.1974.a-n/

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Burn, "Dialogue," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 111. This text was originally published in 1969 in *Art Press* and then reprinted in *Art-Language* 1, no. 2 (the issue to which Kosuth provided an "introductory note.")

47 For discussion of the open-ended enquiry of Art & Language, see John Roberts, "Conceptual Art and Imageless Truth," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth and Practice*, ed. Michael Corris (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 305–25.

48 Stephen, *On Looking at Looking,* p. 48.

49 Ibid.

50 Ian Burn, "The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation," *Artforum* 13, no. 8 (April 1975): 34–37; Ian Burn, "Pricing Works of Art," *The Fox* 1, no. 1 (1975): 53–59.

51 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

52 Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, p. 94.

53 Ibid*.,* p. 89.

54 Ibid., p. 3.

55 Christian Berger, "Introduction," in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, p. 10.

56 Benjamin Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason (1988)," in *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 211.

57 Ibid., p. 210. Note that John Roberts subsequently developed a much more far-reaching investigation of deskilling in art than Buchloh's, which, because of lack of space, I am unable to discuss here. See John Roberts, *Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2006).

58 Buchloh discusses deskilling most extensively in Benjamin Buchloh, "Introduction," *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), pp. xv–xli.

59 Ian Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath (Or, the Memoirs of an Ex-Conceptual Artist)," *Art & Text* 1 (Autumn 1981): 49–65.

60 Burn does not actually cite Braverman in the text, but his account of skill as history and tradition seems clearly to draw on Braverman's work. He probably encountered Braverman's ideas in the

context of art in the work of Bruce Kaiper, a Californian documentary activist who produced a slide show called "We Are Not Happy Robots," which he shared in lectures with workers in the late 1970s. "We Are Not Happy Robots" explicitly works with Braverman's arguments, though the emphasis is different to Burn's references to "deskilling." Burn himself developed activist work using slide shows when he returned to Australia. Kaiper seems to have been the first to have explored the implications of Braverman's ideas in the context of art. Ann Stephen, person communication email, March 27, 2022. For early citation of Braverman in Kaiper's work, see Bruce Kaiper, "The Human Object and Its Capitalist Image," *Left Curve* 5 (Fall–Winter 1975): 40–60.

61   Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn, "Don Judd," *The Fox* 1, no. 2 (1975): 129–42.

62   Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," p. 53.

63   Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason," p. 210.

64   Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," p. 49.

65   Many former members of Art & Language operated in this milieu after leaving the group. Michael Corris, Carole Condé, and Karl Beveridge did so with the journal *Red-Herring* between 1977 and 1978, and their involvement in the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union. Condé and Beveridge continue to make dialogic artworks with union members in Canada. Paul Wood and David Rushton, who were closely associated with Art & Language in the United Kingdom, developed a critique of art education from the mid-1970s through to the mid-1980s. Wood has described these various practices, including Burn's, as an "Art & Language diaspora." Paul Wood, "Conceptual Art and Politics in the UK c.1970–1985," paper delivered in the panel "Collectives, Art and Neoliberalism," Association for Art History Conference, April 7, 2022. Unpublished paper. See also: Paul Wood, ed., *Biting the Hand: Traces of Resistance in the Art & Language Diaspora* (Helsinki: Rab-Rab press, 2024).

66   Burn, "The 'Sixties: Crisis and Aftermath," pp. 54–55.

67   Ian Burn, "Is Art History Any Use to Artists? (1985)," in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 4.

68   Burn, "Dialogue," (1999 [1969]), p. 110.

69   Adrian Piper, "Ian Burn's Conceptualism," in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, p. 342.

70   Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden, and Charles Harrison, "Feeling Good: The Aesthetics of Corporate Art," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg, 2011), p. 170.

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JEAN-MARIE BOLAY AND BÉNÉDICTE LE PIMPEC

Collaborators and Fabricators

The Delegation Process at Hand in John M Armleder's Work

In his study of John M Armleder's oeuvre, written on the occasion of a major exhibition of the artist's work in 1987, the art historian Maurice Besset emphasized Armleder's close connection to the Fluxus movement. Citing Robert Filliou's famous principle of equivalence, which equates "well made/badly made/not made,"[1] Besset then proposed an Armlederian extension: "Made by someone else."[2] This addendum to Filliou's principle, that is, the artist delegating the production of a work, was the starting point of the research we carried out at Geneva University of Art and Design under the direction of Ileana Parvu between 2018 and 2020. Although delegation is not in itself a new phenomenon in the history of art—one need only recall the way artists' studios were organized in the modern period—certain procedures that motivated this approach, the expanded principle of equivalence being a telling example, are specific to a way of making art that appeared in the second half of the twentieth century. These processes explicitly posit delegation as part of the work, rather than as something engaged for practical reasons that range from saving time to borrowing the skills and contexts of production that the artist does not have.[3]

The idea of delegating the fabrication of a work as part of the artistic process is historically linked to the emergence of art that brings together the idea and the work, its physical or, in the case of performance, event-based realization remaining secondary. This way of making without making appeared at the end of the 1950s, at the crossroads of the Fluxus movement and what was grouped together as conceptual art.[4] Language thus became conceptual art's preferred material.[5] An artwork could thus be reduced to a series of instructions to be carried out by someone other than the artist. On the one hand, it was analogous to a musical score interpreted within the framework determined by its composer, as in Sol LeWitt's work.[6] On the other, the primacy of the idea meant that the physical work was referred to as a model. As Joseph Kosuth wrote in 1966 about his Photostats, "The actual works of art are ideas. Rather than 'ideals' the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind."[7] In both conceptual art and Fluxus, there existed intermediate positions, represented by such artists as Lawrence Weiner or George Brecht, for whom the question of the material fabrication or interpretation of a work was of no consequence.[8] This double question—of

the freedom to interpret the artist's production instructions in creating the work and of the nonnecessity of the hand—took up part of our research. Armleder, to whom we dedicated an important chapter in the book *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain*,[9] plays an interesting role in this history, in that he occupies a kind of middle position between the moment in the 1960s when these questions crystallized and current practices. His work incorporates certain questions raised by Fluxus and, perhaps less frontally, some of the issues at stake in conceptual art in a unique manner.

An important figure in the Geneva art world, Armleder was born in 1948 into a family of hoteliers in his native city. As a teenager, he had two encounters that could be described as decisive: first, with John Cage at a music festival; second, with his drawing teacher, who inspired in Armleder and some classmates and rowing friends to found an artists' group named after him, the Group Luc Bois. They established a collective practice of artistic experimentation that included happenings. Making art that welcomes chance, the idea of unpredictability and the Cageian influence were introduced in a subgroup, the Max Bolli group, started by Armleder and his rowing mates in reference to a driving-school shop window filled with photographs of accidents.[10] From these different entities, the Écart group (in French, *écart* means gap or deviation) emerged in 1969, on the occasion of an eponymous exhibition in a form that deviated from their usual activities. In Écart, Armleder assumed various roles in addition to that of artist: event planner, exhibition curator, gallery owner, bookseller, and performance artist. He also established a way of working characteristic of his practice: "Since the Écart period, I have very often worked with people, but their expertise does not interest me. It is perhaps rather the dissolution of the author, the sharing that attracts me. This has always been my thing."[11] His liking for obscuring the notion of authorship, the beginnings of which could be seen in the collective exhibition *Linéaments*, inaugurated in 1967 in Geneva, was reaffirmed in such works as *3 à 4 pièces*, dated 1968, 1973, and 1976, signed by him but produced collectively. Another example is the suite of drawings titled *3×(2×1),* produced in 1977 with Patrick Lucchini and Claude Rychner, cofounders with Armleder of Écart, which involved copying, borrowing, delegation, and the interchangeability of artists.[12] Écart ceased its activities in 1982, and from then on Armleder pursued an individual career with increasing success but never moved away from his earlier approach.

A glimpse of the artists with whom Armleder spent time during this period sheds light on his knowledge of the theoretical concepts that underlie his practice. During the Écart years and later, he met and exhibited Sol LeWitt, Andy Warhol, Lawrence Weiner, George Brecht, and John Cage, among others—in short, figures who were deeply involved in questioning notions of authorship, the ready-made, delegation, and the collective, including the two movements already evoked: Fluxus and conceptual art.

Although since then, he has never belonged to any group, a sense of the collective continued to permeate Armleder's work, particularly in his numerous collaborations with artist Sylvie Fleury, for whom he himself even executed pieces. Armleder became widely known for his *Furniture Sculptures*: sculptural and pictorial works combining furniture and references

1 John M Armleder, view of the *Ne dites pas non !* exhibition, Mamco, Geneva, 1997

to the history of modern painting, and in particular to Constructivism (fig. 1). These works marked the beginning of an increasingly assertive process of delegation, with Armleder leaving the choice of furniture to be painted to his exhibition assistants, museum staff, or his son.[13] The artist came to think of himself, in a now-famous phrase, as "collateral damage."[14] From then on, he called into question the necessity of his own presence in his work.

The issues of delegation and authorship are frequently mentioned both in the artist's statements and in texts written about him. Our primary focus here, however, is to explore other points of view of his practice. Since Armleder's relationship to delegation and authorship has always been clear and agreed upon, we also needed to look at the other actors in the delegation process: assistants, curators, and others involved in this practice in different capacities. This text proposes to examine the artist's rhetoric, bearing in mind the anthropological approach defined by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: considering the interview as an "invisible negotiation," systematically doubting the spoken word, and applying the principle of triangulation—which is to say, cross-referencing ideas from various sources.[15]

This cross-referencing is all the more necessary in that Armleder seems to be aware of the possible effect of his words, as evoked by Friederike Nymphius, who in her book on the artist[16] recounts a studio visit by a journalist in 1988, during which he responded to her "with malicious self-deprecation." This is also supported by a remark by Christian Bernard, who was the director of Mamco (Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Genève) from 1994 to 2016,

about Armleder's status as an *homme de cour,* surrounded by the court.[17] We can therefore understand that Armleder's viewpoint is not only insufficient to understand delegation, but that his importance on the art scene makes his collaborators (occasional or not) wary of expressing themselves in this respect.

Our reflection is informed by a series of interviews conducted as part of our research. Armleder's position was examined from two perspectives: those of the Lausanne-based artist Stéphane Kropf, who was his assistant for some ten years, and those of curators. Our interview with Christian Bernard offers a general view of Armleder's way of working with an institution over the long term. Our joint interview with artist Pierre-Olivier Arnaud and art critic Julie Portier describes the ups and downs they experienced in their collaboration with Armleder while putting up an exhibition of his work in the space they codirect. The artist's views and those of his assistant and the curators were then compared with one another and with those from other sources to determine which elements may activate delegation, including questions of context, the function of chance, the role of collaborators, and issues of authorship. Above all, what we seek to achieve here is to know if, paradoxically, and despite everything, in the delegation process, the hand still keeps a place in Armleder's practice by invoking notions of control and pleasure.

1. Delegating Artistic Production

The artist Stéphane Kropf, who is currently in charge of the bachelor's of fine arts course at the École cantonale d'art de Lausanne (ECAL), was a student of Armleder's there before becoming his assistant from 2006 to 2017. According to Kropf, Armleder did not pass on to him any particular skills as his professor; his teaching took the form of informal conversations, during which they established a friendly relationship. Kropf acquired important technical knowledge on his own, however, and had been hired as chief project manager at the Mamco, where he worked on the major Armleder retrospective presented in 2006. It was on this occasion, in a somewhat fortuitous way, as he explains in his interview, that he became Armleder's assistant. During the installation of the Mamco retrospective, Armleder was discussing a future exhibition to be held at the Kunstverein in Hanover and then at the Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University in Massachusetts; the curator at the latter was expressing concern about who would install the show there. Kropf, who by chance was walking by, was hired by Armleder on the spot. He thus unexpectedly found himself in the role of assistant, having to manage exhibitions in large institutions without the presence of the artist. This position led him to have to make decisions on the other side of the world, sometimes without being able to consult Armleder due to time constraints, even if those decisions remained essentially technical:

> Before I was the one who made choices with, in opposition to, or instead of John, I was above all, the one who made the mural paintings, which meant having specific technical expertise. But onsite, especially in Seoul, the directors very quickly expected me to make decisions, which never bothered me. I don't think John did either, it was part of the game . . . . Little by little, after certain exhibitions, I happened to make a lot of decisions.[18]

Before hiring Kropf, Armleder generally made arrangements in the context of exhibitions, borrowing from local and available manpower to whom he gave only minimal instructions, as he explained to Nymphius in 1999.[19] According to Christian Bernard, delegation in the framework of hanging an exhibition was for Armleder a question of opportunity, of convenience, a pragmatic decision.[20] Hiring someone on a permanent basis thus called into question his opportunistic, impersonal way of doing things; it also redefined the role of assistant, which primarily became that of an intermediary, as Kropf pointed out:

> He thought it was strange to have an assistant, a studio manager. For my part, I didn't even think about what title I might have. He's the one who gave me that role, he gave me a kind of endorsement. So I became his assistant, the person who would also be his interlocutor for galleries, museums and others, which he had never had before.[21]

For Armleder, having an assistant came down to unburdening himself of the work of executing his own pieces. It was less a matter of delegating the work than of "work" in itself: in the 1970s, saying that an artist "worked" was frowned upon. Since the artist did not produce anything, he had no need for assistants or employees, and the fact of having them brought him into a capitalist relationship to his work.[22]

This stance probably explains why Armleder had not thought earlier of hiring an assistant. But in 2006, he was surely at a point in his career when success was making it difficult both to manage his studio work and organize exhibitions, even if the latter was in part delegated to the manpower found onsite. Having an assistant thus made him "question his real relationship to delegation."[23] When Armleder was to be present during the installation of an exhibition, Kropf's role was also to prepare the groundwork for him: "I had to create the right circumstances: playing surfaces he would enjoy, good conditions, good restaurants, good hotels; and then he could produce nonstop."[24]

Delegation also took place in the studio, where it was not just a matter of technical skill. Even if, Bernard explained, when Armleder

> worked with Stéphane Kropf, Stéphane took his time making things, which he did very well, by the way—historians will be able to easily see that the pieces made by Kropf are better made than the ones John made himself, or those they made together. Kropf has skill and a taste for craftsmanship that John never had, and he had a very good feeling for what John wanted.[25]

But according to Kropf, "John knows technique. He has a knowledge of craft due in large part, I think, to the fact that he grew up in the hotel business . . . . He never delegated technique entirely, or if he did, only by accepting that the result would be an Armleder thanks to a final little twist."[26]

Therefore, there was neither a lack of knowledge of technique nor a refusal of it, which Armleder was keen to point out to Nymphius, saying, "I am convinced that my technique is pictorial, it's just that my drip paintings are not 'paintbrush paintings.' I've often found pleasure painting in the traditional manner, but unfortunately, it's something I don't do anymore."[27] On the contrary, although technique was not invoked, and although it was not a criterion for work that, in the absence of skill, would also motivate the process of delegation, it did reappear in that little Armlederian twist that Kropf mentioned: "I've always been fascinated by the way in which John was able to reappropriate his work. He added that famous 'Armlederian' touch at the end."[28] This "great little thing," the "twist" resonates with the "virtuosity" that Lionel Bovier, director of the Mamco since 2016, talked about in relation to Armleder's way of selecting elements from his environment that made up his *Furniture Sculptures*.[29] This virtuoso ability to take hold of an opportunity, which implies a kind of discreet, modest expertise, took advantage from the context or perhaps accidents. According to Kropf, the element of chance constituted "the very pretext of the work . . . which is always sublime when it comes to [Armleder]."[30]

This was accompanied by a palpable pleasure in making things; Armleder loves to paint and makes no secret of it (fig. 2).[31] "John has always produced a lot of paintings," Kropf explains. "When I worked for him, I mostly worked alongside him. I did the paintings that required climbing a ladder, he did the ones on the floor."[32] Armleder also made certain works almost exclusively by himself, such as the drip paintings he mentioned in an interview with Nymphius on his relationship to technique.

Although he finds pleasure in painting, Armleder does not give importance to an artist's personal expression. "In all the paintings I make," as he explained to Parvu, "there is also a pre-established composition that I imagine. Then comes the fabrication, which I love doing. But I don't give it any kind of expressive value."[33] Whether he or someone else actually makes the work is irrelevant to him.[34] On the one hand, Armleder is conceptual because he has what the art historian Moira Roth has called "the aesthetic of indifference," inherited from Cage, which led Armleder to describe an artist as "collateral damage."[35] On the other hand, also like John Cage, he takes an ambivalent position regarding the idea of a system: for him, making a preestablished plan can only exist if it includes the possibility of amending it, even abandoning it completely.[36]

Herein lies a kind of paradox, which is emphasized by the assistant's presence. Armleder places a great deal of importance on the conceptualization of the work. The work—or creation—thus takes place before the work is fabricated, but without everything being thought out in advance; and the technique imagined for its fabrication is not part of the concept and has no particular meaning.[37] Still, fabrication is necessary; without it, the work would not

2 John M Armleder in his studio, August 31, 2018, Satigny

exist.[38] But as Kropf explained, "John has always had the fantasy that someone would show him a piece of his that he would have no recollection of making, that he would never have thought of making, or even that he would never have made."[39] This implies that there is a desire in Armleder—which remains a just that—to abolish the act of creation as well as its author, so that only the work would remain.

Armleder says he does not believe in the notion of authorship,[40] which for him is completed by the Duchampian viewer.[41] In fact, he gives more importance to the viewer's gaze than to what he himself might wish to convey in his work. The burden is therefore on the viewer to interpret the work, which is devoid of any authorial intent.

However, if we cross-reference our interviews, this interpretation contradicts the artist's inimitable twist, his personal touch, "that great little thing that would give his exhibitions a little Armlederian boost, which we [Kropf and Armleder] could not have decided on together."[42] As Kropf puts it:

> At the last moment, [Armleder] would say: "I'm going to add a green plant. I'm going to put a couple of things in this corner, and it will be perfect." That is where it's not about technique on one side and the idea on the other. I've never been the one making the pieces and John the one thinking about them, because it's always intermingled.[43]

Is it really a question of technical virtuosity, in the sense of a mastery of artistic practice that invariably leads to confirming the position of author? Or, on the contrary, could one speak in Armleder's case about a consummate sense of form? This ambiguous relationship to concept and to authorship is, in fact, fully assumed by the artist:

> Yes, I think Stéphane could have told you about it too, because I often gave him a kind of plan for my works. He would follow it, and then, at the last moment, I would contradict a decision. . . . So often, at the last minute, I would decide to do something different, which made Ludovic [Bourrilly, his new assistant] or Stéphane protest. I'd tell them that I'm the artist after all [laughs]! Which I'm not really convinced of, by the way . . .[44]

Armleder thus exercises a form of control over the final work and its execution. He assumes the position of the artist at the last minute—not during the process of making the work, but while he is being shown the work, or while it is being exhibited. This contradiction seems to have been heightened by his hiring Kropf as his full-time assistant:

> For some years now, with all the work I have been doing with Stéphane Kropf's assistance, I have realized that, since he is an artist too, he sometimes takes the initiative. . . . This is undoubtedly part of my process, but there are also times when I take it back. Sometimes he does what he wants while thinking at the same time that it's what I would have liked to do, that he's really serving the ongoing project. Which he knows as well as he knows me. But recently, when he was making a painting, I stopped him and said: "Ah no, that's not it!" But in reality, he's as right as he is wrong. And so am I.[45]

Paradoxically, the presence of an assistant at his side reinforced Armleder's position of authority, even if this position only seems to be assumed tangentially. If the assistant's role is initially to act as an intermediary between the artist and art institutions, it could be said that he is also the intermediary, the mediator between the concept and the work, a tool among other tools, which would explain Armleder's reversal and the reaffirmation of his authorship position.

2. Welcoming Whatever Comes

Is the human factor as an intermediary between concept and work also decisive in the artist's relationship to an art institution? The modalities of working in a museum seem to be the same as those discussed above, as seen for example in Armleder's *Furniture Sculptures*, in which he often delegates shopping for component parts to someone else. The reasons for this are clearly the same as those cited earlier: saving time, welcoming the element of chance, the random opportunities that arise in a certain place and with those who happen to be there. However, this delegation process, as we will see below, does not exclude Armleder's direct

participation in hanging an exhibition,[46] nor even the possibility that he takes on the role of curator. In talking about an exhibition held in Capitou in 1994, as in a similar situation in Baden Baden in 1998, Armleder told Nymphius that he had initially wanted to collaborate with the curators and had accepted their proposals, but that when he arrived in Capitou, he unconsciously began to change everything and thus to take on the role of curator himself.[47]

However, this approach can sometimes cause problems, including Dantesque hangings at the last minute. What can be seen from the institution's point of view as a certain casualness on Armleder's part—a sort of refusal to plan an exhibition in advance, with a certain degree of improvisation—engenders a situation that urgently mobilizes a great deal of the museum's resources at the last minute. In this case, it might even be referred to as delegating stress to the curators or the installation team, although Kropf, Arnaud, and Portier deny having had this experience. For Kropf, Armleder himself

> is never stressed, so he's never in a hurry. On the other hand, John's motto is *bâcler*: you have to *bâcler*. We talked about this a lot, especially to try to translate the word into English. The verb "to botch" didn't seem to fit since it focuses on doing something wrong, while in John's case, *bâcler* means to "finish" it by fully accepting the final outcome.[48]

Being open to accidents, which is the pretext for the work, is in line with the philosophy of the Max Bolli group, which developed around the glorification of failure and the philosophy of Cage, who dismissed the idea of an artist's omnipotence. As Armleder explained, "I think that since I was very young, I've always had a taste for grabbing onto chance, or for programming it, in a way. It's something that has always driven me, in fact. When I was young, I actually met John Cage, the person who introduced chance into music."[49] Armleder also told Françoise Jaunin that an accumulation of errors was much closer to reality, a stance that Bovier calls being open to the "Id."[50]

But how is this openness to what happens in a situation experienced at the heart of an art institution? To find out, we turned to Christian Bernard, who worked with Armleder on several occasions and who, in the 1990s, delegated to him the curation of the Suite genevoise space at the Mamco (fig. 3). Due to a lack of time, or as a game, the artist delegated in return the realization of his projects to the museum. This was the case for the exhibition *Don't Do It* in 1996, for example, which Bernard described as follows:

> John wasn't around much, and it was very complicated to get him to come up with an idea. When we did manage, we were pretty sure we had one, but he was travelling a lot at that time. The exhibition *Don't Do It*, held in 1997 in the Suite genevoise, was made according to instructions in a fax. At one point, we said to him: "We can't go on like this, you have to give us some instructions." So he sent three proposals [which we produced] . . . . The exhibition was totally delegated. We had no choice. John wasn't there, and I'm sure we opened it without him.[51]
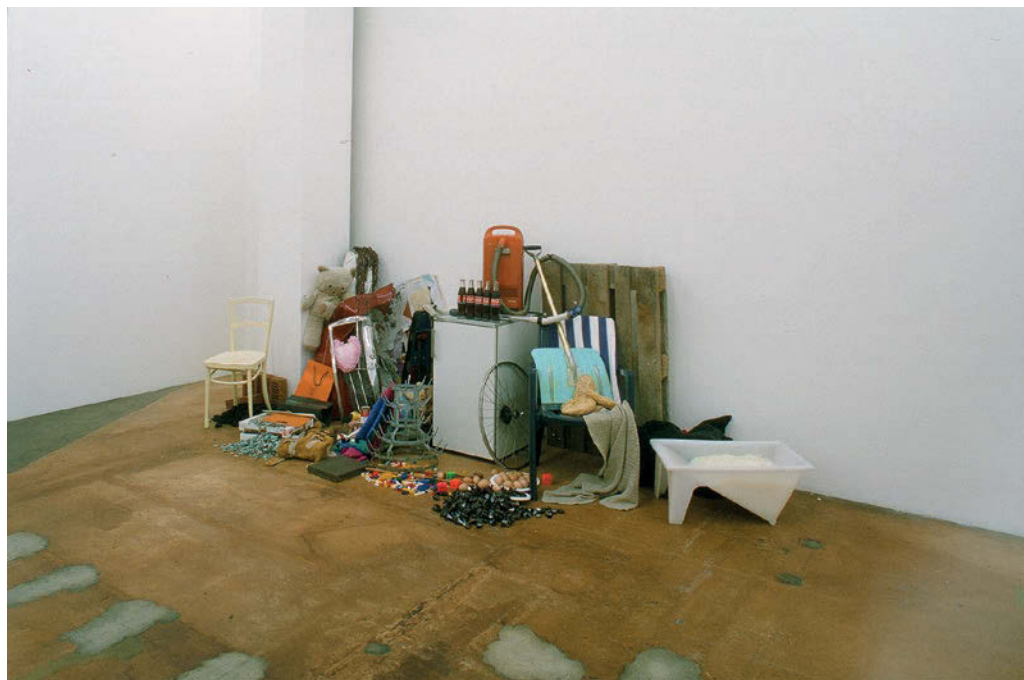
3 John M Armleder, view of the *Don't Do It* exhibition, Mamco, Geneva, 1997

But the process of delegation took place even in the artist's presence. On the occasion of another exhibition at the Mamco, the artist gave directions—sometimes very vague ones—to the museum, so someone could produce one piece or another. The teams tried to follow his requests as closely as possible, and Armleder never commented on the production, because, according to Bernard, "his position is consistently to welcome what comes. Among all the gestures in his work, the dimension of welcoming what arises, whatever presents itself, is fundamental."[52]

In this case, the question of failure seems therefore unimaginable, since Armleder does not think about examining what comes from or returns to the institution, perhaps because in mounting an exhibition, the notion of authorship is diluted within the institutional system. In fact, a whole system, not just a person, is activated in order to produce the work.

In the same interview, the art historian Valérie Mavridorakis remembers some striped paintings made for Armleder by students at the fine arts school in Rennes that were obviously failures, but which the artist accepted:

> The example in Rennes, in 2006, is quite telling. There was a three-part exhibition at the University's Galerie Art & Essai, at the Galerie du Cloître at the art school, and at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, where he did a hanging of the contemporary collections. John had delegated the fabrication of striped paintings to students. They were using scotch tape as a guide, but the art

students in Rennes were not particularly expert with this technique, unlike those at the ECAL. The paintings were failures. From a technical point of view, they were awful. We were appalled and thought John would refuse them. But he found them fine, because they were bad.[53]

This way of doing things is a strategy of avoidance on the part of the artist, who seeks to choose, to decide as little as possible. Bernard went so far as to talk about Armleder's withdrawal from decision-making.[54] Working in an institution with Armleder, as in the case of working with an assistant, therefore means carefully preparing the groundwork and creating or accompanying situations so the work can be accomplished. From the institution's viewpoint, this implies placing a great deal of trust in the artist: Will he get involved early enough or actively enough to ensure that the exhibition opens on schedule? From Armleder's viewpoint, this means trusting the institution to take the artist's place in the decision-making process and in coming up with proposals.

3. Delegating Invention

A last and more recent example illustrates this issue of trust very well: the exhibition *À Rebours*, which took place in 2017 at La Salle de bains, an exhibition space for contemporary art in Lyon. This exhibition showed us how delegation between artists and curators could take place from a distance, from the first contact to the invention of an artwork. La Salle de bains has been codirected since 2017 by the artist Pierre-Olivier Arnaud and the art critic Julie Portier. Its specificity is that it proposes exhibitions that evolve while they are being shown to the public and that are presented in three different forms.

From the outset, Armleder adopted an ambiguous position regarding the exhibition project. While he immediately accepted it, he also made a point of telling the curators that they did not need him in order to organize the exhibition. He asked them pointedly to reach out to him on a regular basis, describing himself as "lazy" and encouraging them to recontact him to obtain a scenario for the three parts of the exhibition. Arnaud and Portier were not too discouraged and took these warnings more as a sign of modesty than as a way of working. Once the dates of the exhibition had been determined, Armleder at first remained vague about his intentions, but subsequent telephone conversations led to an initial proposal:

> Portier: We set the dates and that's when we understood . . . that he expected us to tell him what we expected of him.

> Arnaud: We set a first date, and he told us, "Ok, I'll get to work. Call me back next week." We called him back and, as he also did in so many successive phone calls, he replied, "I haven't done anything this week." We then clarified our request and let him know that we wanted there to be wallpaper.[55]

The exhibition organizers had considered several avenues of work with Armleder, but time was running out, so they eventually decided on the content of the exhibition themselves and commissioned a specific task from the artist.

> Arnaud: The following week, we received two proposals for wallpaper designs. We were obviously very happy, but we still needed to know which one of them to produce. Time was running out and we had to start production. John Armleder's response was quite simple: "You choose."

> Portier: We knew that was his way of doing things in this type of situation, but it was strange to receive two proposals.

> Arnaud: No matter how well we were aware of it, experiencing it was something else entirely.[56]

Kropf, who at the time was still working occasionally for Armleder, explained that the more demands were made on the artist, the more he resisted doing anything.[57] We compared and contrasted the curators' points of view with that of Armleder, who felt that he had given sufficiently precise instructions, that he himself had suggested the idea of the wallpaper, and that he had simply left the curators to choose the color.[58] This first part of the exhibition had probably not yet mobilized a particularly successful relationship with the delegation process, but it had already highlighted two different realities: that of the artist and that of the curators.

Arnaud and Portier soon discovered that they had to take the place of Armleder if they wanted to exhibit his work. Although they had expected him to provide them with other elements for his exhibition, nothing came. The curators then tried to imagine what an Armleder object or sculptural ready-made might be.

> Portier: [W]e ourselves started looking for things, as if we were his assistants going shopping with him, except that he wasn't with us. We ended up saying to ourselves, "Well, this is a John M Armleder work, this is not." I think that's the strength of this work. With ready-made objects, borrowed styles and unsigned styles, there ends up being an obvious formal signature. It's not a petty pleasure, but I think there's curiosity on his part, which we felt, to see things that are shown by others and that could be signed by him.

> Arnaud: I put a lot of quotation marks around these terms because we were not "forced" to make decisions for him, but up to what point had we been "pressured" or "cornered" into it? As time went on, delegation took place de facto, in a tacit way. It was like a contract established with us without our knowledge. As the discussions progressed, the work seemed to be going nowhere. Except that in fact, the work was moving forward; the process of delegation, which we had to accept, was taking shape.[59]

Although the two curators had not been unaware of the artist's way of working, they were nonetheless disconcerted by the extreme freedom he had given them. They had to fulfill themselves the role of the artist, which had been left vacant.

Portier: Do you really want to tell the truth?

Arnaud: You had been saying for a while, without thinking about this project in particular, that it would be great to do an exhibition of fake ice cream cones.

Portier: These were objects that I'd been looking at for a while, in summer, at seaside resorts. . . . They're standardized objects, but some of them are touching, when they try to stand out by being a little classier than others. So we looked for Italian-style ice cream cones. This allowed us to put the question of design aside while still having objects with a strong connotation. We found them in a black-and-white form—vanilla and chocolate—which we really felt was a kind of baroque perversion of Suprematism.[60]

Arnaud and Portier submitted the two objects representing ice cream cones to Armleder, who accepted them enthusiastically, confirming at the same time his future presence at the opening. Arnaud explained, "From the moment he told us this, we understood the entire mechanism, both that he was going to 'sign' the exhibition and also that he was going to be present and therefore 'validate' the ensemble. It seemed clear to us at that point that we were in this process of delegation."[61]

Armleder saw the introduction of the two ice cream cones into his exhibition very differently. According to him, there was nothing extraordinary about them. What the curators saw as an experiment in inventing Armleder's work was little more than a proposal that the artist accepted. Arnaud and Portier nevertheless believe that the delegation process was actually a test. If they managed to make the right choices, the artist would be more involved in their exhibition; if they made poor choices, he would not have gone to the opening, although we can assume that he would have agreed to accept the exhibition in any case.

The third part of *À Rebours* included a painting by Armleder produced by Kropf, in which the wallpaper motif appeared to be stained by dripping chocolate ice cream (fig. 4). The artist's reappropriation of both the objects and the ensemble formed by the ice cream cones and wallpaper is embodied in this painting, in this very pictorial gesture. This last element is a materialization of Armleder's way of working. To begin with, the artist delegated not only the execution of the work, but also its invention. In this way, he first diluted the notion of authorship, then asserted his position as author in extremis by means of a painting produced by his assistant. Although he himself did not produce any of the works presented in *À Rebours*, it was the dialogue with him, from a distance, made up of negotiations and vague instructions, that enabled the exhibition to exist.

4 John M Armleder, view of the *À Rebours 3* exhibition, La Salle de bains, Lyon, 2018

4. By Way of Conclusion

Armleder's position on delegation is paradoxical and cannot be reduced to a strict operational opposition between making, making someone else make, and not making. In this, it is very different from the process of delegation in conceptual art, of the execution of a work according to instructions, as in the works of LeWitt. Rather, it builds on what Parvu, quoting Tim Ingold, describes as a situation traversed by forces and energies that the artist gathers, synthesizes, or distills.[62] In his *Pour Paintings,* Armleder questions his position as author in yet another way. He makes these works horizontally, covering the canvases with paints and various materials before raising them up halfway through the drying process. The chemical reactions produced by the mixed substances act long after the artist has finished working. Armleder has no control over the drips that result from this process and that continue to transform the work. It is odd, according to him, to think that "works of art should be permanent and never change."[63] Delegation is thus not necessarily limited to people, assistants, or curators—it can also be achieved by the materials themselves.

Although he rejected the position of inspired author, Armleder paradoxically invented a style all his own. Curators and assistants strive to define it, despite the fact that it is so difficult to identify. The work is initially inseparable from collective thinking, made in dialogue with an

art institution, a context, and assistants. Nevertheless, Armleder reserves the last gesture for himself. At the end of the process, he returns to his position as author.

Because of his reputation, Armleder is favored with a great deal of tolerance on the part of his collaborators. Although he has undoubtedly succeeded in desacralizing his position as the all-powerful artist-author of a work, he nonetheless exercises a kind of formal control, which may be in contradiction with the rejection of the artist figure. This contradiction can give rise to tensions with his collaborators, occasionally or frequently, in that the artist's way of doing things is sometimes incompatible with the expectations of art institutions or assistants. He is, no doubt in spite of himself, a figure of authority, perhaps supported by the art world, and the casual way in which he delegates can be difficult to live with for those who experience it. To borrow his own expression, one would be tempted to consider his collaborators as "collateral damage." This raises the question as to whether delegation requires a relationship of trust established beforehand, with someone familiar with an artist's work, or if it can be done with anyone, even outside the art world, in accordance with the Fluxus principle of blurring the boundaries between art and life.

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

Notes

1   This principle was evoked for the first time by Robert Filliou in his installation *Principe d'équivalence : bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* in 1968.
2   Maurice Besset, "Untitled," in *John M Armleder*, ed. Dieter Schwarz, exh. cat. (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1987).
3   Ileana Parvu, "Manières de faire," in *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire : Entretiens sur la production de l'art contemporain*, ed. Ileana Parvu, Jean-Marie Bolay, Bénédicte le Pimpec, and Valérie Mavridorakis (Geneva: Haute école d'art et de design; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2021).
4   If Dada or Duchamp may be at the origin of such a practice, let us note that Henry Flynt, a composer associated with Fluxus, is credited with the association of the notions of art and concept: "Concept art is first of all an art of which the material is concepts, as the material of e.g. music is sound." Henry Flynt, "Essay: Concept Art [1961]," in *An Anthology*, ed. La Monte Young (New York, 1963). The essay can be viewed at https://henryflynt.org/aesthetics/conart.html.
5   Ibid., and Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
6   Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 79–83.
7   Joseph Kosuth, "Notes on Conceptual Art and Models," in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 3.
8   Lawrence Weiner discussed in Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*.

9 Parvu et al., "John M Armleder," *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire*.

10 On the Bois, Bolli, and Écart groups, see Lionel Bovier and Christophe Chérix, *ECART, Genève, 1969–1982 : L'irrésolution commune d'un engagement équivoque* (Geneva: Mamco; HEAD, 2019).

11 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 76. All quotations from interviews published in *Faire, faire faire, ne pas faire* have been translated into English by Laurie Hurwitz.

12 Lionel Bovier, "L'irrésolution commune d'un engagement équivoque," in *John Armleder*, ed. Lionel Bovier (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).

13 See examples in the exhibition catalogue *John M Armleder : Furniture Sculptures 1980–1990*, ed. Claude Ritschard and Charles Georg (Geneva: Musée d'art et d'histoire, 1990), pp. 15–103, esp. pp. 20, 181, 185, 229, and 234.

14 The expression often appears in Armleder's interviews. See, for example, Parvu, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 29, or Françoise Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation : Entretiens avec Françoise Jaunin* (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 2016), p. 40.

15 Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "La politique du terrain : Sur la production des données en anthropologie," *Enquête*, no. 1 (1995): 71–109.

16 Friederike Nymphius, *John M Armleder: Pudding Overdose* (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2002), p. 75.

17 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 99.

18 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," pp. 45–47.

19 "Daher nutze ich oft die Hilfe von Assistenten oder anderen Künstlern, um meine Werke erstellen zu lassen. Ich gebe ihnen nur noch die notwendigen Anweisungen und sie führen sie für mich aus." Friederike Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius, Genf, 28.10.99," in *John M Armleder: Pudding Overdose*, p. 154.

20 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 97.

21 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 44.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 51.

25 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 96.

26 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47.

27 "Ich glaube schon, dass meine Technik malerisch ist, nur dass die Schüttbilder vielleicht keine 'Pinsel-Malerei' sind. Ich habe gern und oft mit traditionellen Techniken gemalt, leider mache ich das heute nicht mehr." Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius," p. 155.

28 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47.

29 Lionel Bovier, "Peinture abstraite et sculpture d'ameublement," in *John Armleder*. Claude Ritschard goes so far as to describe Armleder's attitude as paying attention to circumstances. Claude Ritschard, "Pièce nocturne, dit-il : Le temps, la non nécessité, l'ambivalence dans la démarche de John M Armleder," in *John M Armleder : Furniture Sculptures 1980–1990*.

30 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47.

31 Stéphanie Moisdon, "Entretien," in *John Armleder*.

32 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 47. Due to serious health problems that Armleder has often spoken about, he can no longer climb ladders.

33 Parvu, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 29.

34 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, p. 95.

35 On the aesthetic of indifference, Moira Roth quotes a statement written by John Cage, to accompany an exhibition of Rauschenberg's white paintings at the Stable Gallery in 1953:
"To whom
No subject
No image
No taste
No object
No beauty
No message
No talent
No technique (no why)
No idea
No intention
No art
No feeling . . ."
Cited in Moira Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," *Artforum* 16, no. 3 (November 1977): 50.

36 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 75 and Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius," p. 154.

37 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, pp. 94, 97–99, 148.

38 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 74.

39 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 50.

40 Ibid., p. 74.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 47.

43 Ibid.

44 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 73.

45 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation,* p. 154.

46 Dieter Schwarz, Suzanne Pagé, Jiri Svestka, and Dieter Honisch, "Préface," in *John M Armleder*, p. 7.

47 Nymphius, "John Armleder im Gespräch mit Friederike Nymphius," p. 157.

48 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 45.

49 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 26.

50 Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, p. 152. Bovier, "*Whatever by Whomever* ou Du principe de 'remise en jeu' dans le travail de John Armleder," in *John Armleder*, p. 44.

51 Bolay et al., "Entretien avec Christian Bernard," p. 85.

52 Ibid*.,* p. 89.

53 Ibid*.,* p. 97.

54 Ibid., p. 96. Jaunin, *Du minimalisme à la saturation*, pp. 149, 153.

55 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Pierre-Olivier Arnaud et Julie Portier," p. 58.

56 Ibid., pp. 58–59.

57 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Stéphane Kropf," p. 51.

58 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 71.

59 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec Pierre-Olivier Arnaud et Julie Portier," p. 59*.*

60 Ibid., p. 63.

61 Ibid., p. 65.
62 Parvu, "Manières de faire," p. 13.
63 Bolay and le Pimpec, "Entretien avec John M Armleder," p. 77.

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BRENDA SCHMAHMANN

Between the Conceptual and Artisanal in South African Art

Works by Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie

In 1990, the South African artist Willem Boshoff began one of his most complex initiatives—an ongoing project entitled *Blind Alphabet.*[1] Struck by the ways in which unequal relations of power are related to acquisition of language and literacy, particularly of English, Boshoff sought a means of subverting interactions so that those who are usually empowered and capable would be obliged to depend on those who are marginalized.[2] In an art gallery, he reasoned, those who are least able to access works are blind. But what would happen if he made a work in which meaning was conveyed through touch rather than sight? Producing carved shapes in wood that would evoke meanings about a word through touch, each was then placed in a mesh container that blocked it from view, on top of which—embossed in metal—was a description of the relevant word's meaning in Braille. "Do Not Touch," the usual language of the art gallery, would apply to sighted viewers who would see only endless blocks of mesh, arranged much like a graveyard. But for the blind visitor, immune to such signage, the works would be read differently—as discursively descriptive, and with objects that are sensual to handle. To make any sense of the work, the sighted visitor would need to ask the blind visitor for guidance.

Conceptual art is perhaps one of the most allusive designations of art, not only because there are a range of definitions of what might constitute a conceptual orientation but also because, having neither precise global nor temporal specificity, the designation has been applied to works that have emerged in numerous geographies and at various periods. But if, as a designation, it is understood as a mode of practice that responds ontologically to its own standing and identity, Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet* could be understood as a conceptual artwork sine qua non. But *Blind Alphabet* is *not* a work whose making is a "perfunctory affair," a term coined by Sol LeWitt in his famous "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."[3] Indeed, the artisanal aspects of the work could not have been more important. Boshoff describes how his father was a carpenter, and how he inherited his equipment when his father died in 1985. The artist has also described how, immersed in a background in which he was made familiar with wood, he had made forms and objects in this medium during his fine art studies, fascinated by what it could do formally.[4] All the shapes and forms included in *Blind Alphabet* are exquisitely made,

with an obvious love and respect for their artisanal qualities and with the memory of the precision and care with which his father treated wood. The artist, in fact, describes how the translation of ideas into material forms is important to what he does:

> I have to make thoughts real. In English you [use the word] "reify" to make a thing . . . . You have too much talk, [so] make a thing! They used to say it in Greek in another way: when you have too much thought "put it." And the word in Greek for "put it" or "show me" is "thesis." A thesis is something you "put." . . . I "put" things, I make things, I "reify," I make the abstract real. You have to "see" the stuff, not just talk it.[5]

In emphasizing his role as a maker, and to "see" ideas rather than just "talk" about them, Boshoff was also by implication recognizing that in making "the abstract real," important aspects of the work would emerge. The sheer exquisiteness of the objects would be felt and appreciated by their audience. A sense that sculpture might valuably be read through touch rather than sight could only happen if objects elicited a response of appreciation and awe about their formal beauty.

Boshoff is not alone or unusual in South Africa in finding the making of conceptually complex work far more than just a "perfunctory affair" but rather a process manifesting a love of exquisite craftsmanship. What I will in fact reveal in this chapter through an examination of selected works by two other South African artists, Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie, is how rich and complex conceptual ideas are articulated through an artisanal engagement with materials, and how, rather than preceding making, these often emerge through the process of the work's production. I will suggest that the conceptual and the artisanal aspects of these works are in fact intricately linked to and bound up with one another.

Prior to discussing examples, I offer some brief contextualization of conceptual art in South Africa. I then turn my attention to works that Marasela produced as part of her ongoing interest in the theme of "Theodorah in Johannesburg," focusing in particular on her *Letters to Theodorah* (2009) and *Sarah, Theodorah, and Senzeni* (2010) from a show at the Axis Gallery in New York in 2010. I then consider a work, *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, which Dixie produced in 2020 and which was included in *Blueprint: The DisOrder of Things*, an exhibition at the Wits Arts Museum in Johannesburg in 2022.

1. Conceptual Art in South Africa: A Brief Overview

In an essay first published in 1999, Okwui Enwezor indicates that, as far as he can tell, "there has never existed anything that can be definitively declared a conceptual 'movement' in Africa, at least one in which everybody agrees to its parameters."[6] Rather, "conceptualism in Africa is a practice associated with scattered, isolated, and solitary examples and never blossomed into a full-fledged artistic discourse." The practices Enwezor identifies as representative of

conceptual art in South Africa, specifically, are those of Boshoff, Malcolm Payne, and Kendell Geers. Describing Boshoff's focus on language as indicating the artist's resistance to the idea that the world is knowable, Enwezor speaks about the ways in which his dictionaries and encyclopedia do not reveal so much as conceal. He sees Payne's work as emerging in opposition to the modernist ideas of Clement Greenberg that were influential in South Africa in the 1970s, with conceptualism being used to produce art that resisted the power and authority of the apartheid state: "Appropriating tools of surveillance, Payne began to meld video, slide projections, photographs, and facsimiles of his body and face into a conceptually sophisticated practice, the goal of which was to deny the state's final right of adjudication in the construction of identity."[7] For Geers, however, the politics of art institutions themselves are a focus. Enwezor describes a work from 1995 called *Title Withheld (Boycott)* in which Geers emptied a room in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, suggesting that it "questioned the pervasive modernist hunger for market-oriented post-colonial objects."[8]

If the term "conceptual art" is understood to involve an orientation in which the material manifestations of work are ultimately less important than the ideas they convey, another example in South Africa is the activities of the Possession Arts Group, a collective based in Johannesburg in the early 1980s that undertook various interventions, usually of a performance-based nature. The group included the late Neil Goedhals, Joachim Schönfeld, the late Ivor Powell, and John Nankin.[9] Relatedly, there was also the Flat Gallery—a cooperative of artists who resided in a flat in Mansfield Road in Durban between October 1993 and January 1995. The founders in this instance were Ledelle Moe, Neil Jonker Thomas Barry, and Siemon Allen, and they were joined at various moments by Jay Horburgh, Sam Nthshangase, Adrian Hermanides, Samkelo Matoti, and others. As Allen explains, its "primary program was an active production of documented and undocumented 'actions,' interventions, works created out of the collection and display of 'found objects,' participatory events and audio pieces."[10]

There have been a number of group initiatives in more recent years that continue in this tradition, albeit with a conceptualism influenced by relational aesthetics and new-institutional theory. The Center for Historical Reenactments, for example, was initially conceptualized by Gabi Ncobo and Sobrab Mohebbi in April 2010 and would ultimately include Ncobo, Kemang Wa-Lehulere, and Donna Kukama as its key members. Focused on events, seminars, exhibitions, residencies, and interventions, this Johannesburg-based initiative sought to look critically at history and, as they indicate, how art might "suggest different historical readings and help in the formation of new subjectivities."[11] Relatedly, The Parking Gallery, founded by Simon Gush in 2006 initially in a storeroom in the apartment block in Pritchard Street where he lived but subsequently in a space made available by VANSA[12] in New Doornfontein, was conceived less as a gallery in the conventional sense than as an artist-run experimental platform that resisted producing saleable art objects and instead generated dialogue about art. Robyn Cook explains that the Parking Gallery focused on

so-called "secondary" institutional activities, such as panel discussions, artists' talks, round-table events and so on. As such, even if artworks are exhibited . . . the gallery's emphasis remains on the production of discourse around the work, positioning the audience as an active participant rather than a passive viewer.[13]

But if activities by groups such as these are largely associated with the "dematerialization" of the object that Lucy R. Lippard saw as characteristic of conceptual art, there are also instances of of what has been termed "conceptual art" where the formal impact of the artwork is crucial to its meaning.[14] Boshoff and Berni Searle were the two South Africans among the seven African artists whom Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe selected for an exhibition of African conceptual art in *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, inaugurated at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. The importance of the object and artisanship in Boshoff's work has already been noted. But in Searle's work, likewise, the artwork is never just the aftereffect of an act or event, or simply the means to prompt an idea, but instead has its own integrity as well as visual or aesthetic impact. Engaging with the label "colored" and what it may mean or imply in South Africa, Searle has explored its slippages and anomalies through videos and photographs focused on her own body—works that, in addition to conveying or exploring ideas, have powerful visual forms. Her *Colour-Me* (1998–2000) series, where she photographed her body overlaid with spices, is particularly well known. But it is also true, for example, of her *Profile* (2002). I included this work in a traveling exhibition of self-representations by women artists in South Africa, which I curated in 2004–05 and discussed in an accompanying publication.[15] Comprised of eight photographs of the artist's own profile that are suspended in Perspex, they are constituted into structures designed to be hung in such a way that they can be viewed in the round. Searle appears in the images with traces on her cheeks of objects she had pressed into them. The images, which seem fragile and shift gently through any slight breeze in the room where they are hung, speak poetically—through their actual physical form—about an identity that is itself always fluctuating.

Even an artist such as Dineo Seshee Bopape, whose installations often include found objects, including soil, and are clearly concept-driven, have an evocative materiality. This is clear in, for example, an installation including three videos that she showed in 2022 at the Ocean Space, Venice, called *Ocean! What If No Change Is Your Desperate Mission?* The videos emerged from visits to the Solomon Islands and the coastlines of Ghana, Jamaica and elsewhere. Responding to an interest in the oceans, Bopape—who has always worked with memory—became focused on not simply the sensory and associative aspects of water but also histories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Maximiliano Duron describes the installation as follows:

> Across the three screens are various shots of moving water—deep blue, turquoise, crystalline gleaming in the sun, reddish, murky brown. They are intercut quickly, and the soundtrack begins to intensify. Soon a hand, clad in a dozen or so bracelets, dips into the water. Then

two hands drum on the water, followed by various objects floating by: a cut pineapple, half a coconut shell out of which smoke rises, a sliced lemon, green leaves, a potato, pink flowers, sections of a tangerine, a bunch of bananas. At various points, the camera dips below the water's surface and we see fish swim by the objects as they begin their descent to the ocean floor. The sound of drumming becomes all-encompassing at times.[16]

As this description makes evident, Bopape may work within the realms of the conceptual, but her work is simultaneously evocative and elicits emotive responses through her deployment of image and sound. And her making process, far from a "perfunctory affair," is one in which she makes choices and decisions that enable the development of the work's meaning.

2. Senzeni Marasela's *Theodorah in Johannesburg*

An engagement in which works marry the conceptual with the material or artisanal is also true of many other South African works made in the new millennium. Among these are works by Johannesburg-based artist, Senzeni Marasela. Born in 1977 in Boksburg, about twenty-seven kilometers east of Johannesburg, Marasela was educated at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and has had a number of exhibitions and residencies locally and abroad since completing her studies in 1998.

Between October 1, 2013 and September 30, 2019, Marasela undertook an ongoing performance. Dressing daily in a red *isishweshwe* dress of the type worn by conservative married women from rural areas, she would wear this kind of garment on all occasions and to all events to which she had been invited. Over the performance's six years, Marasela obtained thirty-six dresses of this type, all more or less the same, which she subsequently exhibited in a solo exhibition at the Zeitz MOCAA entitled *Waiting for Gebane*, which took place between December 18, 2020, and August 29, 2021.

In taking on this costume, Marasela was constructing herself as a character, Theodorah, whom she named after, and is a type of surrogate for, her mother, Theodorah Marasela. Her mother had relocated from the village of Matatiele in the Eastern Cape to Johannesburg in 1966, at the height of apartheid, to join her husband. In dressing herself in the kind of garments that her mother often continued to don, Marasela experiences the city as her mother must have done when she first arrived—that is, as an alienating and hostile space, one where black women from rural areas would have been regarded with suspicion. But the autobiographical reference is richly poignant in a further sense. Theodorah Marasela suffers from a form of bipolar schizophrenia. Emotionally fragile in a way that is incapacitating, she is inclined to be estranged from the world around her and unable to fully understand people's experiences and their implications. In the context of her own family, she struggled to fulfil a maternal role. Emotionally removed from her children and inclined to behave in unpredictable ways, she was unable to involve herself in the lives of Senzeni and her siblings or to be present

to offer emotional or practical support to them at critical moments. As the artist observed in email correspondence with me in 2003:

> I recall there was a deep shame and angst when it came to speaking about my mother. In a sense her illness was never properly explained to us as her children. We have had to struggle over the years to piece together what made her an absence in our childhood memories.[17]

The artist's engagement with her mother's experiences through this sustained performance also formed part of a narrative that she began developing after reading Njabulo Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, first published in 2003.[18] Ndebele's novel speaks of four fictional women during apartheid who, in the same way that Winnie Mandela awaited the release of her husband Nelson Mandela, find themselves in the position of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*. Penelope waits faithfully for more than two decades for Odysseus to return from his travels and resists all the suitors who attempt to woo her in his absence or persuade her that he will never return. One of the narratives speaks of a character called Mannette Mofolo, who is left behind in Lesotho while her husband takes up employment on the mines. After she fails to hear from him for two years, she heads off to Johannesburg, where she attempts unsuccessfully to locate him. In *Theodorah in Johannesburg*, the character of Theodorah is conceptualized as perpetually seeking a missing husband in Johannesburg—in this instance a character called "Gebane." Marasela named this elusive male after the husband of her mother's cousin, who had disappeared in Johannesburg, leaving his wife and four children without any means of support. As with the fictional character, Mannette Mofolo, this abandoned wife made an unsuccessful attempt to locate her missing husband in Johannesburg.

In donning an *isishweshwe* dress and presenting herself on all occasions in such a garment, Marasela refers to her mother's experiences of apartheid Johannesburg as well as her mother's personal sense of alienation due to her illness, while also invoking the idea of looking for a man who has disappeared and lost ties with his wife and family. But while richly resonant in its evocation of women's experiences during apartheid, it is perhaps equally resonant in its commentaries about constructs of womanhood within the present. Marasela observes that her dressing in this way accords her a certain conservative respect: "I'm essentially presenting a much older, respectable type. So cat-calling doesn't happen. Men treat you in a particular way, and sometimes people try to help you: when you're in a bus they give up a seat for you."[19] Yet she tends also to be treated as someone alien to the middle-class world of business or the arts. She describes, for example, how security personnel refused to allow her in the building when she had an appointment with the CEO of a bank or how she was followed suspiciously if she entered an upmarket shop.[20]

Marasela's six-year performance could be understood as an example of conceptual art in its "dematerialization" of the object, to borrow the words of Lippard, and its obvious downplaying of the artist's hand. And yet, alongside the performance, and enriching the "Theodorah in Johannesburg" discourse, Marasela has made numerous works where there

1 Senzeni Marasela, *Letters to Theodorah*, 2009. Series: *Theodorah Comes to Johannesburg*. Polyester uniforms and embroidery, life size

is an emphasis on the artisanal and where meaning and association are bound up with their materiality and form. Some examples of these were included in the exhibition *Beyond Booty: Covering Sarah Baartman and Other Tales* at the Axis Gallery in New York in September 2010.[21]

Letters to Theodorah (fig. 1), a work comprised of three white domestic uniforms overlaid with text applied through a flocking technique, is a case in point. Both uniforms and flocking are key to the meaning of the work. While not a domestic worker (and in fact not equipped to hold down formal employment, given her illness), Marasela's mother was nonetheless inclined to wear domestic overalls from time to time. Such uniforms are also profoundly resonant in light of an apartheid history where domestic employment—and the donning of this characteristic uniform—was often the only way in which black women could be given access to so-called "white" areas of South African cities. But while a point of access, it also marked the wearer as subordinate as well as an outsider to the family she served. But in the case of Theodorah Marasela, a uniform of this type assumes additional pathos: it invokes a sense of her personal estrangement within her own family and her inability to assume a meaningful maternal role.

Marasela employed a former inmate from a Zimbabwean prison to produce this lettering in flocking—a technique he had used while incarcerated to earn money for ordinary amenities such as soap. Associated with skills deployed for survival, it was consequently also pertinent to the negotiation of a hostile environment in a broader sense. Articulated in large cursive script that loops around the garment, the letter to her mother, the implied wearer, consists of thoughts about the difficulties of negotiating Johannesburg. While suggesting challenges that Theodorah may have experienced, these simultaneously speak of the artist's own perceptions of the city as an alien space. Crucially and poignantly, they are observations and thoughts that the artist would be unable to express to her mother in day-to-day life. On

2 Senzeni Marasela, *Theodorah, Senzeni, and Sarah IV*, 2010. Cotton cloth, cotton thread, satin ribbon, 213 × 41 cm

another level, they speak of an era when the handwritten letter would have been a means of communicating with somebody in a different geography and are suggestive of the "threads" of contact maintained (or lost) during relocations.

While the flocking in *Letters to Theodorah* was outsourced, most other works by the artist include artisanal techniques that she herself manages. An example of this is *Sarah, Theodorah, and Senzeni*, a series of four embroidered panels on cotton that represent an imaginative meeting between Sarah Baartman, Theodorah Marasela, and the artist herself, the three of whom then undertake a journey together to Johannesburg. A metaphorical equivalent of a journey to Durban undertaken by the descendants of Penelope in Ndebele's novel, where Penelope assumes the form of a hitchhiker whom the group picks up on the way, the journey here is also transformational. There is a suggestion that the three figures, who negotiate a swamp, aim to emerge cleansed and able to assume new identities at the end of their journey. Johannesburg remains a long way off in the final cloth, and whether or not the trio ultimately complete the trip is left unanswered.

As is evident in the last of the four cloths reproduced here (fig. 2), they are exquisitely embroidered and edged in silk, reminding one of a runner on a sideboard or table and thus of the kind of domestic craft skills of women makers. Marasela's own labor and precision in making the work is in evidence in its meticulous satin stitching. But the artist's deployment of embroidery also has autobiographical resonance. When a child, the artist had watched her mother embroidering and, according to the Axis Gallery, "always using red thread, as if to suture the secret wounds that psychologically inhibited her from mothering."[22] The redness of the cotton has still further connotations. She notes how her paternal grandmother spoke of a period in which isiXhosa-speaking men were recruited to fight in World War II as "the time of the red dust." This time was associated with social upheaval: her grandmother apparently remembered men riding horses into local villages, setting up a flurry of red dust.[23]

Important too is the very fabric in which the embroidery was made. The unbleached calico fabric was purchased from a dealer who commented to Marasela that it was the kind of cloth that followers of Gandhi would wear. For him, it was associated with the practice of passive resistance as a way of bringing about social change as well as indicating the humility

of wearers.[24] This association of it with change as well as humbleness encourages one to associate the depicted figures' negotiation of a swamp as a kind of transformative baptism.

In Marasela's work, clearly, the choice of materials as well as the process of making is important to meaning. Even in a rare instance when the work is outsourced, as in *Letters to Theodorah*, importance was placed not only on the capacities of the maker she had employed, but also on the biographical factors associated with the technique he used and how they might enrich the idea of seeking survival in a hostile and challenging environment. In her work, as these examples illustrate, concept and form or materials are interwoven and inextricably linked.

3. Christine Dixie's *The DisOrder: Trade-Off*

Another instance of an interplay between the conceptual and the artisanal can be identified in the work of Christine Dixie. Born in Cape Town in 1966, Dixie obtained her bachelor's in fine arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and graduated with a master's in fine arts from the University of Cape Town in 1993. For two decades, she has been based in Makhanda, South Africa, and has worked as a staff member at Rhodes University. Best known as a printmaker, she often works in mixed media. As with Marasela's engagement with Ndebele's novel, Dixie's work is often prompted by textual sources.

In her solo exhibition in the Wits Art Museum in 2022, called *Blueprint for the DisOrder of Things*, Dixie produced a series of works that engaged with what she described in an interview as the inadequacy of language to describe a world changed by COVID-19:

> During the hard lockdown, especially in the beginning, I was very distracted. And I found it very hard to read. I'd read something and then realize I hadn't taken it in. I'd then start to read it again. Language itself seemed to be at odds with what was happening around me. Part of the impulse behind this exhibition was to work out how to disrupt language itself by making it disappear [or become] . . . difficult to read—which is what I was struggling with: I was finding it difficult to read, difficult to make sense of things. Language is about making sense of things but everything didn't seem to make sense anymore. That was the beginning point.[25]

Blueprint for the DisOrder of Things included nine sequential prints called *The DisOrder: Trade-Off* (fig. 3). The earliest work on the exhibition, *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, was made between March 27 and April 30, 2020—that is, during the most stringent of the lockdown periods in South Africa.[26] Its idea of a "trade-off" originated in discourse in news media about a "trade-off" between, on the one hand, the damage to the economy that would result from a lockdown that prevented people from working and, on the other, dangers posed to the population by the spread of infection if people were left to interact as usual.

3 Christine Dixie, *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, 2020. Monotype with embossing and watercolor, nine prints each 54 × 69.5 cm

Dixie indicates that she was listening to an audiobook of Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* while making this work.[27] Defoe's book, first published in 1722, focuses on events in 1665, when a bubonic plague epidemic struck London and killed about 15 percent of its population. Dixie was struck by commonalities between the Great Plague of 1665 and what was happening in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. She indicates that, in both cases, people stayed indoors, viewed other people as a threat, and were overwhelmed by feelings of doom. And, crucially, Defoe also spoke of ways in which fending off infection affected the economy. As she observes, Defoe wrote of Dutch merchant ships that had arrived in London but were not allowed to unload goods; consequently, economic activity suffered, and people began to starve.[28]

But while influenced by Defoe's book, the origins for the iconography of the work and the exhibition as a whole were primarily in another larger project by Dixie: *To Be King*. An installation and video with stop-frame animation that the artist first exhibited in 2014, *To Be King* is a reworking of Velazquez's landmark painting, *Las Meninas*, in light of Michel Foucault's famous study of the work in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, first published in French in 1966 and in English translation in 1970.[29] As explained in the catalogue for the exhibition when it was first shown, Foucault "suggests (amongst other

things) that it is through language, the taxonomy of the day, that things are ordered. This order, particular yet tenuous, is dependent on who is in control of the gaze, who is 'king.'"[30] Reworking the painting's language, and destabilizing the gaze, Dixie creates a different order of power in the work. The only sculpted figure in the work is one she named "The Black Infanta," and she stands in front of the video projection—that is, in the implied position of Philip VI in *Las Meninas*.

In his essay on *Las Meninas*, Foucault writes:

> But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms; it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax.[31]

This uneasy relation between language and image is invoked in *DisOrder: Trade-Off* through the overlaying of text onto figures as well as the blind-embossing of text—extracted from Foucault's essay—onto the representational field when the work is viewed close-up. Allusive and impossible to grasp or interpret, it speaks of its uneasy and inadequate correspondence to the representational field. Indeed, this uncomfortable relationship between text and image becomes one form of "trade-off" invoked by the work.

But the "trade-off" suggested by the title is more immediately conveyed through a confrontation between two figures—a princess wielding a paintbrush and a plague doctor wielding a knife—who are its key protagonists. Modeled by the artist's daughter, Rosalie, when she first appeared in *To Be King*, the princess or infanta is derived from the figure in *Las Meninas*. At the same time, she encapsulates the persona of the artist, another key figure in *Las Meninas* and one whom the artist herself enacted in *To Be King*. Associated with creativity, the princess is a positive life force in *DisOrder: Trade-Off.* The figure of the plague doctor became of interest to Dixie shortly after completing *To Be King* and after reading Camus's *The Plague*[32]—but before the onset of COVID-19. The artist had considered making sculptures from strange hybrid figures or personae; however, while she developed her iconography in two-dimensional work, no sculpture of the figure was ultimately produced. The clothes for the figure were based on those of the lady in waiting, Doña María Agustina Sarmiento de Sotomayor, who kneels on the left of the princess in *Las Meninas* and offers her a drink from a red goblet. Finding commonality between this figure and the angel Gabriel in images of the Annunciation, the artist began, however, to think of her as a sinister angel of death. The outline of the figure's head and headdress was influenced by a white spirit maiden mask that Dixie had obtained from the market at the National Arts Festival. Having ascertained that the wearer of the mask is conceived as a conduit between the spirit world and the physical world, and between death and life, she deemed the object relevant to the plague doctor. But

4 Prints 1, 2, 4, and 5 of Christine Dixie's *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, 2020. Monotype with embossing and watercolor, each 54 × 69.5 cm

the design of the figure's profile—with its beak-like form—was also influenced by historical designs of a plague doctor's mask. Having encountered masks of this type during a visit to Venice, she also looked at a widely reproduced print of a plague doctor from 1656—the same year that *Las Meninas* was painted.[33] Finally, in devising the figure, she added medical instruments to its headdress and around the figure's waist.[34]

Important not only to this work (where the princess is dressed in blue and drips blue paint off her brush) but also to the exhibition more generally is the use of indigo. Punning on the idea of a "blueprint," it simultaneously invokes a long history of trade in this dye. Ghulam A. Nadri observes that "Indian indigo reached the markets of Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries via the Levant" but that, after "the Portuguese sailed round the Cape of Good Hope and discovered an allwater route to India in 1498, indigo began to reach Europe through the direct oceanic route as well."[35] If during the sixteenth century, the coast of South Africa saw ships carrying indigo from Asia for European markets, this line of trade was subsequently coupled with the development of another. From the seventeenth century (and the time when *Las Meninas* was painted), indigo began also to be cultivated in Spain's colonies in South

5 Prints 6, 7, 8, and 9 of Christine Dixie's *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, 2020. Monotype with embossing and watercolor, each 54 × 69.5 cm

America. The color, then, is intricately bound up with not only globalization and the exchange of commodities but also with histories of colonization and, by implication, slave labor.

Dixie has increasingly challenged the boundaries of printmaking as a category of production, often combining it with other media. *DisOrder: Trade-Off* is no exception. For each component of the work, one or more figures was printed via monoprint and then cut out and collaged onto a blind-embossed print. Drips of paint were represented via watercolor paint, and shadows were rendered via pencil.

The work is constituted as an open book, and its nine prints create a sequential narrative. In the first four prints, the princess dominates. In the first print, she appears on the top left (see fig. 4). Blind-embossed on the page opposite to the princess, and therefore only faintly visible, is the outline of a dog that also casts a shadow. A counterpart to the dog in *Las Meninas*, Dixie associates the animal with the witnessing of events[36] and situates it in this role elsewhere in the exhibition. The title page of Foucault's *The Order of Things* is also embossed on the right. On the left of the work, and beneath the princess, a bandage extends horizontally across the left of the format—a motif associated with wounding, but which simultaneously also reads as

a sealine. In the second panel of the sequence (see fig. 4, top right), in the middle of the top row, the princess has imprinted on her dress a detail of *Las Meninas* that shows herself, the curtseying maid, and the visitor in the doorway. On the right, the dog remains in place, stoically waiting for events to transpire, his body and the surrounding field being blind-embossed with text. Also rendered in blind-embossing, and therefore hardly visible, is the outline of the plague doctor who appears on the left of the princess. An ominous presence, her association with impending disruption is compounded through the rendition of the bandage across both pages, which have now been cleaved apart slightly. In the third print, the princess's dress has shifted from image to a textual field. The dog remains as is, as does the plague doctor, but the cleavage between the two pages has increased. In the fourth print (see fig. 4, bottom left), the plague doctor remains on the far left, but the two pages have cleaved still further apart. Also entering the field is a motif of a ship, on the far left, which may have been inspired by Defoe's account of ships unable to unload goods, but which also speaks more generally of processes of colonization and the challenges and upheavals left in their wake. The blind-embossed outline of the dog on the right, meanwhile, now shows the animal recumbent.

In the remaining prints, the plague doctor assumes increasing predominance. In the fifth print (see fig. 4, bottom right), she is no longer a blind-embossed figure on the left page but is instead printed in black on the right. Her scythe-like knife has made an actual cut—tinted red, like blood—in the page on which she is placed. The two pages are cleaved still further apart, constituting a dangerous chasm, and a ship now appears on the bandage/ waves between them. The dog has disappeared, and blind-embossed text from Foucault's essay on *Las Meninas* is included on both pages and is also imprinted on the bodies of both protagonists. In the sixth print (see fig. 5, top left), the two pages have drifted apart entirely, and a second bandage appears, overlapping the princess's skirt. In the seventh print (see fig. 5, top right), the princess is printed with less saturation than the plague doctor. There is still less saturation in the rendition of the princess in the eighth print (see fig. 5, bottom left), which now includes three ships in the chasm between the pages and where the second bandage now completely overlays the bottom of the princess's skirt. The plague doctor has cut a second red slash into the page on which she is placed, while the drip of the princess's brush has reduced in scale. In the ninth and final print (see fig. 5, bottom right), the princess has faded to a pale ochre, and three bandages overlay the page on which she is represented. The pronounced cuts made by the plague doctor are in the shape of two large scythes, invoking the idea of her increased power. A shadow that extends from the tip of her knife toward the hem of the princess's skirt suggests a showering of infection. It reiterates a motif appearing elsewhere in the exhibition—a hand from the heavens expelling noxious droplets of virus.

Here, as in Marasela's work, a rich set of concepts and ideas are manifest through a creative use of materials. Dixie's engagement with language and its complicated and imperfect relation to image is in keeping with a characteristic of much conceptual art. But her approach is not one in which the concept precedes the act of making, with the latter being simply a rote process of giving shape to an idea. Rather, it emerges through the process of production.

4. Conclusion

Conceptual art has a long history in South Africa, stretching back to the apartheid years. While there have been examples of it that tallied with a notion of "dematerializing" the object or that saw making as a "perfunctory affair," there is—much more notably—a rich and compelling set of examples of South African art where the conceptual is intricately bound up with an artisanal focus on making.

Works by Willem Boshoff and Berni Searle have been included in studies of "conceptual art" in South Africa, whereas those of Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie are not normally regarded in this light. Still, the works of Marasela and Dixie—like those of Boshoff and Searle—each begin with a concept or idea while accruing additional potential meanings through its translation into material form. Marasela and Dixie produce works that celebrate craft or the act of making rather than obliterate signs of the artist's hand. Both, it may be concluded, work between the conceptual and the artisanal, never favoring one over the other.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1   Photographs of *Blind Alphabet* can be found on the artist's personal website. See https://www. willemboshoff.com/product-page/blind-alphabet.
2   See "A Brief History of Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet*," *Moving Cube*, UJ Arts Centre, 2021, https:// movingcube.uj.ac.za/watch/blind-alphabet-documentary-series/brief-history-willem-boshoffs-blind-alphabet/ (accessed in September 2022 but since taken down).
3   Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 79.
4   "A Brief History."
5   Ibid.
6   Okwui Enwezor, "Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism," in *Authentic/ Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in African Art*, ed. Salam N. Hassan and Olu Oguibe (New York: Forum for African Arts Inc, 2001), p. 74.
7   Ibid., p. 81.

8   Ibid., p. 82.

9   See James Alexander Sey, "The Trauma of Conceptualism for South African Art," *Critical Arts* 24, no. 3 (2010): 450.

10 Siemon Allen, "The Flat Gallery: Conceptual Practices in Durban, South Africa," in *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, p. 90.

11 Center for Historical Reenactments, 2013, http://historicalreenactments.org/index3.html.

12 It stands for Visual Arts Network of South Africa, an organisation promoting access and equity in the Visual Arts.

13 Robyn Cook, "The Parking Gallery: Experimental Practice and the Artist-Run Initiative in South Africa," *De Arte* 51, no. 1 (2015): 64.

14 Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

15 Brenda Schmahmann, *Through the Looking Glass: Representations of Self by South African Women Artists* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2004), pp. 70–74. In addition to being reproduced in this book, a photograph of the work that was taken when it was exhibited at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington DC appears online at https://www.flickr.com/photos/nicmcphee/58684525/. See also the site of the Michael Stevenson Art Gallery: https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/works.htm.

16 Maximiliano Duron, "In Venice, Artist Dineo Seshee Bopape Asks Us to Consider Our Relation to the World's Waterways," *ArtNews*, April 22, 2022, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/dineo-seshee-bopape-ocean-space-venice-1234626320/.

17 Quoted in Schmahmann, *Through the Looking Glass*, p. 45.

18 Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2013 [2003]).

19 Interview with the author, April 17, 2018, in Johannesburg.

20 Ibid.

21 For a comprehensive discussion of the exhibition, see Brenda Schmahmann, "Senzeni Marasela's Reworking of Women's Histories in *Beyond Booty: Covering Sarah Baartman and Other Tales*," *Textile: Cloth and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2021): 49–75.

22 *Beyond Booty: Covering Sarah Baartman and Other Tales*, Axis Gallery, undated, https://axis.gallery/exhibitions/beyond-booty/.

23 Interview with the author, April 17, 2018, in Johannesburg.

24 Ibid.

25 Interview by the author on April 12, 2022.

26 Following the adoption of what were defined as five "alert levels" to designate the severity of viral circulation and the readiness of the health system to cope with them, this initial lockdown was designated "Alert Level 5," which signified high spread of the disease and low health-system readiness to deal with it. It was a period in which all those not involved in the delivery of essential services were obliged to stay at home; leaving one's home was only permitted for the purpose of such essential tasks as buying food, obtaining medicine, or collecting a social grant. Along with the police, the army was deployed to ensure compliance. For information on the levels introduced, see "About Alert System," South African Government, August 7, 2020, https://www.gov.za/covid-19/about/about-alert-system.

27 Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*, read by Andrew Cullum, 2018, audiobooks.com, 9:50:00, https://www.audiobooks.com/audiobook/349108/?refId=38712&gclid=CjwKCAjws8yUBhA1EiwAi_tpES4-JiYn51ld8mood1T42vCKb9_s9s4GpMzQPhODpfHbgQZ0xHGIHhoCwRwQAvD_BwE.

28 Christine Dixie and Heléne van Aswegen, online discussion of their collaboration on an artist's book titled *Blueprint for the Disorder of Things*, hosted by the SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg, October 6, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= Y56HneQcr7k

29 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002).

30 Christine Dixie, *To Be King: Christine Dixie* (London and Cape Town: Sulger-Buel Lovell, 2015), n. p., https://christinedixie.com/publications/to-be-king-installation-catalog-2015.

31 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 10.

32 Published in French as *La Peste* in 1947. An English translation was first published in 1948.

33 Interestingly, a figure with a plague doctor's mask appears on the front cover of an illustrated reprint of Defoe's book, called *Illustrated Journal of the Plague Year*, published by Miravista Interactive and published in April 2020.

34 The insights in this paragraph were from Dixie and van Aswegen, online discussion.

35 Ghulam A. Nadri, "The Indigo Trade of the English East India Company in the Seventeenth Century: Challenges and Opportunities," in *Goods from the East, 1600–1800*, ed. Maxine Berg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 62.

36 Interview by the author on April 12, 2022.

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