

Manuel Saiz

Art and the Rest

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Warning to the Reader

A prologue is addressed to the reader. It thus generates more anxiety than the book itself, which is addressed to “whom it may concern”, the author often being the only one concerned. A prologue must be comprehensible and help make what follows comprehensible, otherwise, there would be no reason to write it. Its “results oriented” nature sparks in the author the desire to reveal prematurely many of the ideas contained in the book, and this is necessarily done in a more superficial way than in the main body of the text.

In this particular prologue, I shall attempt solely to isolate the idea that lies at the basis of most of the speculations contained in the book: the world is a sub-product of the production of the autonomy of art (of its constant autonomization). This process by which art attempts to signify its truth has produced over the course of history a remainder of inert, spent, fixed material that forms what we understand to be reality. The world, which I call “the rest” because of its homogenous condition in contrast to art, is re-created with a greater degree of complexity at the end of each cycle in which art contemplates itself.

Many of the thoughts voiced in the book, such as the one in the previous paragraph, are paradoxical and contrary to intuition, identical in their counter-intuitive sense, and it could be said that every chapter expresses more or less the same thing (the “same thing” is what they *do not* say). Nonetheless, each chapter has its own way of inverting immediate common sense in accordance with the specificity of the subject examined, its own point of view, and each subject possesses its own apparently absurd aspect in its own right, with an explanation contrary to what common sense would suggest. The reader can imagine two potential scenarios in which this discrepancy with common sense reality is possible: in the first, the author aims to stand out from the crowd, and gives free reign to his extravagance, something much taken advantage of by artists in society over the course of history. In the second, the author dupes himself, believing that everything he considers to be “reality” is perverse, and only serves vested interests. If I were given the choice between being portrayed as a gimmicky bastard¹ or a madman obsessed with conspiracy theories, I would be inclined toward the latter. Humanity and its concept would be the conspirators.

¹ This term refers to a type of artist I have described in a previous book, *One True Art, Key Ideas*.

The book has the structure of a pyramid. Its reading – in keeping with the character of a book written in a fashion contrary to good manners – must be begun at the top and finished at the base. As is only fitting, the base has more logical explanations and *foundations* than those progressively shown by the upper layers, which come prior in the reading. From one chapter to the next, the themes evolve from the most specific of the experience of art to the most general in relation to the experience of being human, of being mortal. To understand the first chapters, it may be necessary, therefore, to read the text twice, as the people who have generously helped me to correct and perfect the book have suggested.

I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers. Indeed, what I have here written makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else.

I will only mention one important contribution: I am indebted to the work and figure of Ludwig Wittgenstein, among other reasons because I have copied word for word the previous paragraph from the preface of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The many remaining debts are delegated to the good judgment and learning of the reader.

I would like to give two warnings. The first is in respect to the particularly restrictive use I make of the word “art”, so narrow it requires an impossible effort to find anything that might fit within it. Nothing fits because all art – and this is its primary aspect, as I understand art – is only so when seen from the point of view of eternity, a perspective that can only be glimpsed for an extremely brief moment and only with the aid of a bit of self-deception (the perspective of eternity is only an intuition and an illusion. Otherwise it would not be 'a perspective' but eternal and absolute). Adjusting the scale in accordance with this impossible task is simply another way of showing respect for art when writing about art.

The purpose of the second warning is to unburden me of responsibility. I am aware that it may bother some people that I always refer to the artist or the philosopher (or the idiot) as “he”, with the masculine pronoun. I beg for your understanding in this regard. Everything expressed in this book is personal experience, without the claim of being applicable to anyone who does not feel they are advancing with its flow. When I write, it feels false and arrogant to make alternating or indistinct use of the masculine or feminine, as many authors commonly do, as if I were capable of knowing not only the interior experience of women artists but furthermore that of any other human being other than myself. At any rate, even if this exemption from responsibility is entirely understood and accepted as a fact, the fabric of so many “he’s” in this text may nonetheless bother many people, and I can only regret this.

Another motive for disapproval may be the fact that I constantly speak of “artists” and “theorists”, and perhaps as a result the reader who does not nominally belong to one of these groups may feel excluded. My explanation in this respect is more eloquent: properly speaking, there is no “artist” or “non-artist”, but rather people who face situations, at specific moments, in accordance with the impulses of art and, at other times and circumstances, in accordance with non-artistic impulses. The proportions of time and condition vary according to the person and circumstance. Everyone is an artist, as long as they think and act like one.

My education and development as a human being has occurred within the art world. This means that the mistaken concepts and biases I have had to dismantle during my life (and those I must still dismantle) are implicit in my condition as an artist. For other people who have been trained to negotiate the difficulties of other disciplines, it may seem natural to think that what I refer to when I say “art” is in reality “philosophy” or “religion”, for example. For those who see things this way, I believe the text has the same meaning if one substitutes the words “art” and “artist” for “philosophy” and “philosopher”, “religion” and “priest”, or any other terms that have, in essence, a similar relation to the reality surrounding us.

Art and Art

01 Introduction

The opposition “art/the rest” is not genuine. “Art” on one side and “the rest” on the other is not a balanced relationship between two things of the same significance, but rather the relationship between these terms is one of dependence, such as exists, for example, in “art, therefore, the rest”, or vice versa.

In a first approach to the nature of the world’s things, it could be said that “the rest” is enormous in comparison to “art”, which is why most people subordinate art to another aspect of human existence they consider to be more important. It is logical to think that art, which occupies little space and time in the tribulations of daily life – and solely for a small number of people – is, like many other human events, one more phenomenon easily explained by social, economic or political theories. And, indeed, when observed from the perspective offered by these disciplines, the most evident aspects of art find a simple explanation. The difficulties encountered by theorists when they try to make art into something that works to improve social relations, or when they wish to use it as a tool for political change, or when they lose themselves in the analysis of the fascinatingly absurd qualities art objects possess as merchandise, certainly all turn art into a hard nut to crack, but mastering its exceptional qualities is assumed to be merely a question of time and of the precision of the instruments used to analyze it.

For some artists and art theorists, however, this relationship must be seen in reverse, those for whom social, political or economic events are different forms by which the characteristics manifest themselves of that which makes art what it is. This focus provides a response to questions that take in the totality of the systems of knowledge because it embraces all aspects of human existence from the presumption that these aspects originate and have their *raison d’être* in a past artistic event. If “the rest” is comprehensible through art it is because it was at first art and, to some extent and for the purpose of being coherently explained, it continues to be so.

In this view, which understands the phenomena of the production of reality as poetic acts, and for which each element of the world appeared for the first time as a result of an inaugural artistic moment, all aspects of human experience can be divided into two categories: “artistic events” and “events that were once art”. The objects, ideas and situations that were an artistic event at one time but are no longer so, form what I call “the rest”. They are “dead art” or “dead poetry”, in the same sense that “dead work”, in the writings of Karl Marx, refers to capital, a crystalized value, accumulated work that can be made to produce without reference to its original function. To the extent that

they are fixed, all of the world's events that have accumulated value in the design of their forms or protocols are destined in one way or another to serve the goals of production (to the extent that they are not fixed, they are still art); and just as work can explain the existence of capital, but capital is not aware of the reasons for which work is necessary, art can refer each of the world's objects to a moment of its own existence, but the objects, words or situations are not capable of providing a reason for the artistic impulse. In the world of work, for example, the needs of human beings and the conditions in which operations to satisfy those needs are carried out can explain the existence of some tools and procedures, but why certain types of work are realized cannot be deduced from those tools.² Similarly, all of the events that occur within the realm of "dead art" can be explained by means of art, as well as all artistic events: art confers meaning to the artworks. No artistic event, however, can be explained through "dead art", and the most that objects (whether artistic or otherwise) can do is point to the experience in which they originated. In this field, principles cannot be extracted from results.

Some people, although they agree with this second approach and understand art as a central element of their existence, cannot avoid perceiving certain concepts or beliefs as being more significant than art. "Life" is the most recurring example, being a reference value in all of the debates about the role and importance of art: in many discourses, it is taken as a given that, when art confers meaning to the world, it does so solely with the aim of improving life and its system of legitimization. This, however, is a biased view, given that in other areas of human experience distinct from art – in economics or politics, for example – life is significant only in relation to death; it is valuable only to the extent that it has resisted, and in what way, death's onslaught: it has only a "negative importance". The success of the economy or politics is not measured by the quantity and quality of life they generate, but rather by what they can subtract from death, they are disciplines whose form is established by the mold of humanity's mortal condition.³ The action that affirms life in order to neutralize death is merely another way in which death exercises its power. Although death, of course, prevails over art once life has parted (after the artist has died and with him, his artistic experience), nonetheless, while life still exists, only art can counteract the power the

² They can explain some of them, those directly related to the production of those same tools and only in a tautological way such as, for example, when a hammer is used to make another hammer.

³ The clearest manifestation of this phenomenon is found in the concept of "safety" and in the implementation of measures to *ensure* existence, as Jean Baudrillard explains in detail in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

fear of dying exercises over human beings. It does so, paradoxically, by affirming death and thus, albeit only momentarily, by *clarifying* it. *Its remedy for “anguish” is: anguish.*⁴

In this sense, religious beliefs, for example, are mostly new promulgations of the subordination of life to death, and religion as an institution is one of the forms in which the fear of death crystalizes. However, when religion is taken seriously, that is to say, precisely when its precepts are respected sufficiently *not* to be accepted as unquestionable, when it is rigorously taken to the limits of its meaning and possibilities, then religious beliefs can be a valid adversary to death as well, even if this is only because “religion” has become “art” (or art, religion, for all that it matters). It can be said that philosophy and, according to others, science as well, function in keeping with this procedure that undermines the base that supports the building from which they are enunciated. When attitudes exist within these practices that question the framework within which they are carried out, within which their theories *repose*, they also cease to be “science” and “philosophy” and become “art”. Otherwise, the *regular* functioning of philosophy or science is only a “ritual of truth”, valid solely according to a concept of philosophy or science that is assumed a priori to be certain. As Maurice Blanchot expresses it, in reference to the place of philosophy within the Communist Party, “truth is acquired wholesale, and then it is simply a matter of dispensing it appropriately”.

Anyone who wishes to fully understand all aspects of the experience of life must direct their steps to a place from which to contemplate it that only the practice of art promises to reach. Any system of knowledge, any attitude toward the world, will become art if it is taken to its limits, if it is subjected to a constant examination of its bases and declarations, to an exhaustive investigation of the character of the frameworks within which it operates, to a constant questioning of its own manner of questioning, and of the form in which it questions that manner, and so on, successively. Thus, while one may have been thrust into the reality of the world as an engineer or a scientist, as a priest or a plumber, if one persists in the task of questioning one’s practice (the framework in which that practice develops and is taken as a given), with time one will become an artist, through a process in which certain explanations are discarded that, in their unfolding, neglect some aspects of reality, providing no explanation for them. Indeed, in each situation, whether engineering, scientific, clerical or plumbing, in which one radically renounces one’s own point of view, at the moment in which this “becoming the idea of another” occurs, in which one becomes a little less of a construct and a little more of “what one has been given”,⁵ one is always “an artist”, and is

⁴ *The Gay Science*. Friedrich Nietzsche.

⁵ To cease being a plumber, priest or engineer, which are social constructions, to become more of what one is. Only perhaps to later discover that the only “given” factor is to be “mortal”. To come to believe

realizing art, in the dynamic comprehension of where the limit is between what art is at this precise moment and what the rest is, what art was.

The relation of art to the rest has been studied over the course of history in terms of the “autonomy of art”. The two viewpoints I have described above concerning the subordination of art to the rest and vice versa, are the poles between which the debate about the autonomy of art has traditionally taken place. In most cases, the premises implied by each of these positions are hidden and constitute the foundation on which the various arguments of the two sides stand. The debate is normally circumscribed by the form in which art affects and is affected by social and political matters.⁶ This question can be understood, however, in such a way that the connections and disassociations of the relations of art with the world reach the totality of the spectrum of reality.

02 The Rest

When the artistic operation is interpreted from the point of view of the rest, from the perspective projected by dead art and exhausted metaphors, it may be described as follows: the world is consistent; objects, words and ideas, all of the elements that constitute reality, are structured in a precise way such that they are all continuously meaningful. In the realm of the real, everything is certain and the solidity of this certainty defines the boundaries of this realm. However, if greater attention is paid to details, if reality is studied minutely with the goal of showing that it is, indeed, consistent, then inevitably an inconsistency manifests itself at some point in the examination and what is taken for “reality” seems to cease being so. Art offers the possibility for this accident to occur that transforms sure facts into suspicious ones, to openly display a fact that was previously non-existent until it appeared as an exception to the rule of reality. An updated set of rules, a rule of a definition such that it again seems real, must then come to save the realm of the real to again make it consistent, until another previously non-existing or hidden inconsistency presents itself.

In the words of T.S. Eliot: “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each

that what one has been given is one’s character as an “artist” is only a path to understand that mortality is the only thing that has been given.

⁶ And, more specifically, by the way in which artworks affect and are affected.

work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.”⁷

In contrast, from the poetic viewpoint, the practice of art can be understood as the constant production of an autonomy: the artist searches for a truth without concessions and every time he believes he has found it, in an object or an idea, the very fact of searching for it and finding it, suddenly makes manifest that it was not the complete naked truth, and that those formulations taken as true were, in fact, “formulations”, layers of institutional protocols adhered to something that supposedly lay underneath. Any affirmation, in the final analysis, displaces the truth (or the illusion of its existence) to a place beyond. This disappointment faced by the artist is the obligatory result of a paradox in the nature of the artistic experience: embodiment is necessary for art to exist in reality, for it to be *realized*, and yet, as will be seen later, that body inevitably causes the specificity of art to be dissipated in the object. The artist must painstakingly remove these layers existing between “truth” and “reality” and which permit a temporary agreement between the two. In each renovation of this act of stripping, when for the first time a layer is removed, the illusion of an immanent truth returns for an instant, of a truth in direct contact with reality. The resulting peelings are detritus that contribute to “the rest”, given that this consists of the set of all the previously removed layers. The rest, the world as we see it, is a by-product of the production of the autonomy of art, of art’s attempt to signify its truth. This idea, as I have indicated in the Prologue, is the premise on which the speculations I make in this book are based.

These two forms of relating art and “the rest” – from the point of view of the rest and from the poetic perspective, from that of art – are two accounts of a single process, conceived differently according to where the emphasis is placed, whether on the safeguarding and production of certainty or, in contrast, on the attempt to breakdown the firmest and most conspicuous beliefs. These are interpretations that respectively understand in an inverse way the significance of “routine” and “exception” (what in one is the regular order of events, in the other is a catastrophic moment, and vice versa: the production of certainty is the norm for the realm of the rest, while it is the exception for the poetic approach, for example). The preeminence of one or the other alternates in relation to specific moments of the operation and to the differing factors of the personality of the agent/observer. The polarity of this mechanism regularly switches in virtue of the fact that the mere declaration of each new uncertainty makes this become certain (it is defined), for which it is suppressed as such, and so too the inverse: the expression of something as certain sows the seeds of doubt.

The velocity of this alternation makes it possible to see the two interpretations of the process as if they were woven into a single explanation that coherently describes all

⁷ *Sacred Wood*, T.S. Eliot

of the dynamics governing at every instant what is considered to be “reality”. The analogy between elements of one interpretation and the other can be taken to the limit and thus the combination of the two approaches, from a perspective that also alternates in a synchronized way, can provide an even more precise description of the process: the new set of rules that manages to absorb a new specific exception of an established reality (the first account) is comprised of a new combination of the (conceptual) materials scraped from the layer from which this exception was formed, the layer that has just been revealed as such (the second account).

In keeping with this it can be said that, at any new moment of this production of autonomy, all those things independent of art, which have become independent entities, reorganize themselves in order to create a more efficient device with which to hide the truth, a more resistant layer to the punishment art inflicts on reality. It is as if the detritus produced by art as it tears off the layers - works of art at one stage or another in their development (from when they are absurd to when they are trivial) – has been conceived by the artist or society solely to impede those inaugural moments from being repeated, because the contemplation of the truth it reveals is painful – and is thus unconsciously avoided – and because art only becomes autonomous by means of menacing existence. In order to allow art to occur again, not only the most superficial layer must be scraped off, but consideration must also be given to the entire world on which this layer rests, which has now reorganized itself into a new arrangement. In virtue of this holographic effect⁸, each new layer that appears contains the totality of the world, and in it elements from all the previous layers are joined together in an ever more resistant way. That moment of grouping together of forces into a unity produces a new work of art, this is to say, a new element of the rest which in some way incorporates all the others in a more brilliant, more stable layer.⁹

An inaugural moment of discovery of a new formulation, of one that reveals a new illusion of truth, only occurs when each and every one of the parts of “the rest” cease to be perceived as a part and becomes unique in its connection and relation to art and with the moment in which it appeared, with that moment in which it could be perceived

⁸ “The world is my world”, says Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. This “is shown by the fact that the limits of language mean the limits of my world”. During the moment of the artistic experience, the artist is as aware as he can be of the limits of language, which is why the world in its totality is directly connected with that work being realized. If one understands that all human life is marked by death, by the influence and constitutive value that death has in life, then *everything* establishes a primordial relationship with each element through death, and each element of human life contains everything else.

⁹ It is appropriate here to recall Hölderlin’s statement that whatever endures is formed by the poets (*Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter*), and which has its masterful reverse formulation in T.S. Eliot: “Poets of the highest level possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience.” Hölderlin: *Andenken*. T.S. Eliot: *The Endless Adventure*. Random House Mondadori.

as totally subordinated to art. This new formula is the one that contains, at that particular moment, the specific and precise ability necessary to again connect all of the areas of the experience of the world in the illusion of a *finite totality*. Each new cycle will require an increasingly sophisticated construction, a broader set of considerations that can demolish the resulting structure of that moment, which can *scrape it* and make it evident. The importance that techniques have acquired in artistic practice can be explained by the increasingly demanding requisites imposed by this task. The persistence of styles and subjects in artworks over history, is the result of the need at each moment of a new technical skill, which is able – not only to confront the present reality – but to confront all the arrangements of elements of the world that were taken for real in the past. This process is endless and the paradox of the unattainable autonomy of art described in this chapter is precisely, and in the final instance, what gives meaning to the constant exercise of art.

03 Art against the Rest

The meaning of art manifests itself when art faces something for the first time, an updated combination of elements joined into a new layer, when it attempts to distinguish and separate itself from what until then has formed part of it. Art, however, is not found in what it confronts, nor in the confrontation, but rather in the way it reacts to this encounter and in the resulting disintegration of the certainties about what “art” is: it is the production of the specific uncertainty of that situation. If it were possible to extract that which art confronted and isolate, as in a laboratory experiment, what art is on its own at that instant, we would obtain a pure reaction to the confrontation, uncertainty in a pure state, autonomous art. Clearly, if one seeks a reaction to a confrontation, a confrontation is necessary, and also something with which art can be confronted.

For example, art reacted in a particular way at a specific moment in the history of art to the idea of territory, and thus the concept of “land art” appeared for the first time. Art called itself into question by breaking the limited frame of the gallery, by working with new spatial scales that were not normalized in artistic mediums, or else by demonstrating that the presence of spectators was a necessary, or irrelevant, condition for art to occur. The concept of “territory” was found once in an inaugural artistic moment, it appeared, and then acquired independence from artistic processes to form part of the rest. The same can be said of the concept of “Transfer and Sales Agreements of Artworks”, which, at first glance, stands outside art, it does not belong to its functioning: art questioned its own being when it was confronted with the possibility, or the need, to incorporate contracts into the artistic process, in the exercise of a

comparison between how art related to contracts and how other practices that are entirely regulated by them did so. To a certain extent, art seems absurd when seen in the light of this contrast, thereby providing an opportunity for the crisis art seeks. Once characteristics of “territory” are eliminated from the idea of “land art”, the essential remainder may be the same as that of the contract-confronting art that is later stripped of those contractual subjects and interests. As will be seen later on, the practice of art revealed at that moment the fact that contracts were already, before they were consciously considered, part of art’s structure, although indistinguishable from it. Upon confronting them, artistic activity affirmed the contractual nature of the structure of art to the extent that it used that particularization of something in its own nature as a means to expurgate it.

Art only happens as such when it restores itself during those encounters in which it violates itself. For when, on the contrary, a new case of contract, that interacts with the idea of art, fails to produce a reaction that moves it, there is no artistic experience (and without an artistic experience nothing is produced that can be considered a work of art). After a few occasions in which art reacted to contracts, the objects that now appear as the result of this relationship are “more contract” (or more “territory”, more “violence”, more “participation”, etc.), instead of “more art”: the function of that encounter is to affirm the contracts (and, in a deeper way, to disarm art’s capacity to act within reality and against reality).¹⁰ The idea is not that contracts, from that moment on, already form part of art, but – on the contrary – that, in virtue of this operation, contracts are discarded as possible terms of confrontation, given that they have ceased to belong to it, to those *doubtful* aspects of art. In this way, contracts become another constituting element of the system of layers that art must peel away each time it attempts to question itself, to be able to renew itself as art. Art has never been in contracts, in territory, or in business, even though art has reacted to all of them.¹¹ What has become a work of art is a fact of territory or of contract, but only as the embodiment of the confrontation and as the medium used by art to expel these facts from itself.

The most significant characteristic of these processes is that, in them, art does not negate the things it confronts, but rather, in fact, it confronts *its self-affirmation as something equal to those things that are heterogeneous to art*, in the ratification of those *other* things within itself. In the affirmation of its “other” (what was not “other” but which will now become so) art finds those points of reference by which it is able to

¹⁰ If art is reactive, the experience is “artistic”; if the contracts continue being reactive but the art is not, then the experience is “political”. If there is no reaction at all, the experience is purely “contractual”.

¹¹ The opposite could be said: contracts, territory or business were in art; they were an indistinguishable component of art until the moment in which art exposed them and, in virtue of that action, freed itself of them.

know itself. Art's self-evaluation is made through realizing acts of affirmation of the things that, despite being contained within it, are *essentially* opposed to it. They "essentially" oppose it to the extent that they are also found in the essence of the art at the moment in which they confront it. Nietzsche's aphorism in *The Twilight of the Idols*, "what does not kill me, makes me stronger", is taken to the extreme in art. Indeed, *the poison that is fatal to those of weaker constitutions strengthens the strong man*,¹² and art permanently seeks the most poisonous substances to ingest; it opens itself up in all its vulnerability to that which could be its undoing, but finds only strengths that unite with it rather than oppose it (those substances were right before, after all, within itself). It always develops greater tolerance to those substances. The autonomy of art is reproduced thanks to this strength conferred on it by its desire to disappear, which may be derived from the fact that the actions of art are unexpected and, upon directing itself to other subjects in an unyielding determination to do away with itself in that confrontation, those things that art confronts cannot *resist* being affirmed, because they have been taken by surprise.¹³

It could be said, therefore, that it is not possible to make art with contracts (to find art in them, in art's reaction to them) because once art confronts contracts, the system of norms that govern them has already been prepared to shelter art in its havens, an established procedure already exists to carefully treat it and thus *kill it*. Art is effectively now dead in each new confrontation with these rules and is not strengthened at all by them. However, this does not imply that art cannot confront other, subtler contractual conditions that are hidden within it and of which it is still not aware. This also implies that an artist in particular can make art with contracts if his concept of art has not yet confronted them, even if the concepts of other artists have already done so.

04 Ready-mades

Ready-mades represent a special case in the confrontations of art with its other, and their study leads to an unexpected turn in my line of reasoning. Ready-mades can be seen, in their relationship with art, as territory, as contracts, as anthropological studies... They are essential to art only when they act as an agent that spurs reflection on its nature, urging art to reflect on itself. The historical moment of ready-mades passed, once art reacted, during a first encounter, to this challenge proposed by the existence of ready-mades: that an object created without any intention of being art (a *visually*

¹² This formulation appears in *The Gay Science*.

¹³ It must also be kept in mind that art as an activity, as will be seen later, in the proximity of its own self-annihilation, changes its priorities and ceases to be art, it ceases to exist.

indifferent object¹⁴) can become a work of art through only a small modification, or even simply through the announcement of that (non)modification. Ready-mades called into question the nature of art at that moment and it could be said that, through Marcel Duchamp, art then moved toward a self-immolation that would dissolve it in the magma of the relations of all the networks of the world's objects. Instead of causing art to perish, however, that poison equipped art with an additional tolerance, a much stronger difference from the rest of the world, even if only through its extreme subtlety, just as had occurred with all other challenges art had successively chosen to face.

Ready-mades, however, possess a characteristic not shared by these other things with which art has faced itself, and which effectively assimilates them into art, not only before their encounter but also afterwards: this distinctive feature is the self-referential character of ready-mades, as well as of art. Those objects used to create ready-mades are not only something external to art, but their meaning, the quality that defines them, is a predisposition to *not* become art. Ready-made works of art, by definition, cannot be made from art objects and materials (at least not before they have been deprived of their artistic and aesthetic qualities, of their integrity: they first have to be “de-artified”)¹⁵. They are insignificant (they must be so) and then they are *decided* to be “art”. The ready-made introduces into the artistic system a paradox of the kind identified by Bertrand Russell.¹⁶ It is an exception included in the rule, an exception that incorporates itself into the rule as soon as it enunciates itself, and through this enunciation, art simultaneously both negates and affirms itself. The decision to create a category of art objects with this characteristic not only transforms objects manufactured without any artistic intention into works of art but also, at the same time, makes it possible to see the works as mere objects, by depriving them of the exclusive difference that their artistic objective assigns them. Art objects can also be, in virtue of this decision, visually *indifferent*.

Indeed, to explicitly affirm that art can be incarnated in any object selected from the ocean of industrial objects also implies the possibility that any art, before or after

¹⁴ “The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste”. Marcel Duchamp in Cabanne, *Dialogs with Marcel Duchamp*, Thames and Hudson (1971)

¹⁵ For example, the work *L.H.O.O.Q.* “de-artifies” the *Mona Lisa* through mockery to transform it, in an infra-thinly simultaneous operation, back into a work of art.

¹⁶ Russell’s paradox arises from the simple and apparently innocent observation that some sets include themselves as one of their elements. Let R be the group of all the groups that are not members of themselves. If R is not a member of itself, then its definition affirms that it must contain itself and thus it contradicts its own definition as a group of all the groups that are not members of themselves. The paradox was formulated by Bertrand Russell in 1901.

Duchamp's declaration, was already, by all rights, a ready-made.¹⁷ The affirmation of ready-mades expressed by art when it faced that concept, the movement it undertook to annihilate itself in the confrontation, nonetheless gave art a new degree of differentiation and deprived the ready-mades of their difference, it annihilated them: artistic ready-mades as such do not exist, either because everything is already a ready-made or because nothing is. Each work necessarily contains objects or ideas that are *indifferent*, and to the extent they depend on a decision of the artist to become "art", to be *different*, it does not matter if that decision is in respect to how paint is spread on a canvas or which object is placed in an exhibition or how it is placed. What is more: the figure of the curator acquired importance at the moment in which this idea reached the zenith of its popularity, given that this figure feeds on the same thing: to make works of art into non-art objects, which can be artistically recombined and interpreted in virtue of the decisions of the curators. With the appearance of the ready-made the above can be affirmed exactly in the same way as contracts, business, landscapes or any other thing with which art is confronted, in a way that was not previously possible: the relations of art always contain a contract, there is always an economic transaction of some type and, at some level, art always occupies a ground (art galleries can be seen in such a way as to be understood as "territory", a concept that was perhaps forgotten at one point). The splitting of this atom initiated a chain reaction that disintegrated the entire universe of art. At that moment, art contracts were shown to be useless and ridiculous because of their partiality and limited reach, and the idea of "territory" as the context of the work proved to be as arbitrary as that of the gallery.

It could be argued that these confrontations and these de-authorizations took place a posteriori, once the concept of ready-made had already appeared, and there are justifications supporting one view or the other. What is certain, at any rate, is that, prior to the concept of "ready-made", collisions had already occurred between art and certain agents, such as political action, economic forces and the idea of death. These agents were all similarly affected by the disintegrative effect of art and together they constitute the ideas on which this book focuses. The relationship of art with these three areas of human existence gives substance to a concept of art that runs throughout the history of humanity and which, it could be said, constitutes it.

Thus, above all else, what the enunciation of the concept of ready-made presents is a central idea of this book: the essential characteristic of art is that it re-experiences over and over again the relationship it maintains with other things, only to the extent that in each of those repetitions of the relationship art experiences its own relationship with itself. This is the first subject of the autonomy of art: art confronts itself not when it

¹⁷ "Just as the tubes of paint used by an artist are manufactured and already made products, we must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'assisted ready-mades' and also assembled works". M. Duchamp.

reacts to the ready-mades (or to any other thing of the rest), but when it reacts to the idea of its own autonomy (threatened by this flexible focus art adopts towards the other things it contains within itself). What these things are and represent become relevant for the artistic experience only in the process of confrontation, of *introspection*, inasmuch as they bring up complex relationships, relationships that challenge the reigning certainties of what is understood to be art, and as such constitute a new, more resistant layer against which art is going to react. In order to enable a correct understanding of this idea that makes the autonomy of art a consequence of its relationship with itself by means of the rest, it must be presented alongside another previously expressed idea that complements and balances it: the world is a sub-product of the autonomy of art (of its constant autonomization) and thus its relationship with itself is in fact a thought, and a re-establishment, of the world in its entirety.

05 The Autonomization of Art

Art is self-referential and this essential concept (which is not identical to that of “art for art’s sake”, although it is often assimilated by it) does not refer to a narcissistic art that looks at itself, absorbed in contemplation and separate from all else, but rather implies a view that understands the rest of the world as if it were a part of art (which, in a certain way, is a *radically narcissistic* idea). Paraphrasing Spinoza, it could be said that, “art’s interest in the world is an aspect of the infinite interest art has in looking at itself”.

Art depends on the world to be autonomous, to be itself. Similarly, it could be said that the rest of the world exists solely as a function of art, given that, from the point of view expressed, only art defines itself in the act of situating itself against the rest, against all the rest (against its homogeneity), and thus expresses the lack of *absolute* value of the rest, whose function is therefore merely that of a counter-mold.

The cause and the consequence of art’s self-referential quality is this autonomy, which can only exist when there is an external object with which art contrasts itself. An object is “external” to art when its meaning cannot be understood as belonging to an artistic moment of the past, and because of this it represents a fault in the perception of art as a whole (and of the whole as art), of the identification of art with the world, a fault *in* art. This sounds like a paradox, because the fact that such an object is not seen as a past moment of art means it is still in art, that what is external to art is in fact what cannot be differentiated from art, what constitutes an indistinguishable part of art, what is (still) included in the conception of itself that art is processing at that moment as an exercise of its autonomization: that which is external to art is that which is about to become part of a world characterized by embodying an artistic moment of the past.

Art reveals its defects one by one, the aspects of itself, within itself, through the affirmation of the laws that govern reality (for example, the laws that govern reality in terms of “contracts” or “territory”). In a certain way, it acts as an *ironic process*¹⁸, which, by affirming how certain the (transparent) laws are that govern the visible world, makes them as visible as the world, susceptible to scrutiny and, therefore, to suspicion. In virtue of this positive action, art shows the limited nature of the current concept of reality. What is more, through this procedure, art *ironically processes* itself and, by demonstrating the usefulness of its own tools, their suitability to carry out the task of de-authorization, it signals how certain they are, which necessarily implies that, as with any other certainty, they must also be questioned. The suitability of art’s tools for dissecting reality is the operating certainty that art must constantly reflect on. Art is therefore autonomous when nothing within it can be seen as something apart from it, at that instant when it is not possible to distinguish between art and the world, when the terms “art” and “non-art” have no meaning. Art is what for an instant does not consider itself as either “art” or “non-art”, in a sort of hypostatic union.¹⁹

When a person is thrust into the world, he always enters into a previously existing reality, according to which he takes his form. Similarly, all of art’s functioning must be conceived *according to* (not only “despite”) a context that is already there, by defect, when the process of art begins and which always exists in one way or another. All of these elements confronted by art are part of this pre-existing context, the concept of art and the world within which it develops, which could be said to be “consubstantial to art”. The context may appear as the unnoticed background against which art must necessarily operate, but it becomes part of art (one *with* art, and a fault *in* art) at the very moment in which art begins to confront it (to confront itself).

Art’s autonomy in the absolute sense is impossible, because no definitive separation, or final identification, exists between art and life, which is a subsidiary condition of the impossibility of the artist’s autonomy, his independence, as long as he is linked to a body which demands a regular supply of food, heat, water and respite. Because no *unmarked* materials exist from which art can be extracted, or in which it can be implanted, there can be no ultimate, perfect autonomous art, nor a strict, unambiguous relationship of the artist with his art. And yet, art is perfect, freed of the duties and imperfections of time, in the process of becoming autonomous, in its *autonomization*.

¹⁸ The theory of ironic process, or the white bear problem, refers to the psychological process by which the deliberate attempts to suppress some thoughts make those thoughts more present. A classic example is that of a person who deliberately tries not to think of a white bear and is thus more likely to image one in his conscious mind.

¹⁹ The hypostatic union is, according to Christian theology, the union between the Word of God and human nature in the single person of the Son of God. Both the divine and the human maintain their own attributes.

Each small step toward autonomy produces the illusion of autonomy, which is so complete that it seems to achieve it in its totality and *to all* effects behaves as a reality. Art exists in its search for autonomy, and this does not exist except in the movement toward greater autonomy.

Art and the Object

01 Art Objects

All of the agents that intervene in activities related to art reveal a clear tendency to impose the art object as the axis around which the whole artistic phenomenon turns. This predisposition to interpret art according to its most tangible results exercises a constant pressure on the entire process, which at least must be acknowledged if one wishes to maintain a meaningful point of view from which to consider the confrontation of art with the rest. The value of the object as the primary basis of all reflection on art has a self-evident presence in the market of art objects, an area in which there is never a need to explicitly accept this condition because it is never called into question; it never needs to be imposed, nor even stated. The object, however, also has a conceptual, economic and social influence that extends much further and permeates all artistic mediums and processes, including the artistic experience itself.

As the object begins to take form, as it emerges *from* and *by way of* the experience, the role it will play is precisely that of the negation of the artistic impulse and it serves to reaffirm the status quo that is threatened by the very artistic experience from which it is born. The object has no value for the artist or, more precisely, is useful to him only to the extent that *it does not exist yet*, a use that progressively diminishes as it comes into existence. The object may have significance during the process of its creation, as a retroactive trigger of the experience and as an instrument to reinforce the circularity of the process, but this is circumstantial. Once the artistic experience reaches its end and the object acquires a definitive substance, or in other words, the condition of a discreet entity, its true nature is revealed: the artistic experience produces the object only to the extent that the object brings to an end the artistic experience. All the decisions favoring the emergence of the object and its consolidation are made without consideration of, and even against, the artistic impulse.

The artist values the object insofar as he is concerned with managing its production, insofar as he ceases to be an artist. As he abandons the (necessarily) uninhabitable circumstance in which the artistic experience has occurred, the artist begins to assess the connection of the object with his past experience; he examines how to better describe it, studies the quality of the testimony the work offers regarding what has occurred, what the best arrangement for the object in the space is to strengthen this connection and make it easier to be understood by others, what increases the possibility of selling the object and makes it possible to determine how much to charge for it.

This finished object is generally seen as the center of the artistic phenomenon because it seems as if an invitation to participate in an artistic experience emanates from it. However, the possibility provided by this object of achieving such an experience is equal to using as a catalyst any other object in the world, regardless of whether it has been created through the artistic experience or not. If an object provokes this experience it does not do so because of its quality as an art object as such, but rather simply because of its quality as an object. It may be that an art object has a greater aptitude than other objects to trigger an artistic experience but, regardless, any special ability of the art object to supply experiences stems from the prejudices held by the viewer, which make the work act as a type of placebo: the effect is not produced by the specificity of its active ingredient but rather by the characteristics of the excipient. This advantage of the art object may be the result of the inherent disparity of rules in the use of materials and ideas in the production of art objects, or perhaps it is also due to the bias that art objects impose on the viewer and which obtain their importance by how they are promoted and exhibited, by their adherent and pedestalizing characteristics,²⁰ but not through their specific condition as an artistic object.

The key difference between an art object and a *normal* object, as far as providing an artistic experience is concerned, lies in the fact that the person who experiments *through* or *with* an art object is responsible for the existence of the object. “Responsibility” is the condition of assuming a risk that has not been assessed and accepted as tolerable, but rather is blindly subscribed to in its totality. The risk is the possibility of the object’s transformation during the process, for it to be dislodged from its fixed and registered form and changed into something different and unknown, with unexpected consequences for the person who has a commitment to the object as “artistic”. If this happens to be the case with a normal object, if care is taken to leave open the possibility for the object to develop and transform itself, for it to imply real danger for the artist or society, it is no longer just another object, nor an artistic object, but a new work of art at the moment of its becoming, in an inaugural presence, an artistic experience properly speaking. And the person who experiments this, regardless of whether he is considered to be a viewer or an artist by others, is simply an artist in his own right, who has the opportunity (and thus the responsibility, the duty) of changing the object, of finishing it, of closing it.

If the situations that result from this possibility are excluded, all other activities caused by the existence of the art object in the social realm have no relation to art at all.

²⁰ “Pedestalization” is a term I have coined and used ironically on various occasions to describe a set of strategies for the physical or conceptual presentation of artworks in order to give the works a more artistic, more luxurious or more secure aspect. The key idea underlying pedestalization is that of making some works stand out over others through fraudulent improvements and the use of added embellishments.

In most cases, they are, point by point, movements similar to those made by the artist once the artistic experience has ended, in which he uses the object as a discreet entity, in those cases mentioned above in which the artist ceases to be an artist and busies himself with his survival.

02 Approaches to Art Objects

There are two ways to look at the art object within this realm of its relations with the world that are external to art (that is, once the artistic experience has ended). These are “non-artistic” views to the extent that the object can no longer be transformed, to the extent that that responsibility can no longer be exercised, and are, in terms of the type of focus, approaches to art made exclusively from the perspective of the viewer.

The first is what has been called the “aesthetic approach” (as in “sensitive” and “perceptive”), and in this case the viewer effectively considers the art object to be distinct from other objects. He values it as the representation of an artistic experience found behind it, as a sign that points toward the art embodied in this same object, in this matter. The viewer is affected by art’s capacity, through this object, to alter his behavior and beliefs, by art’s ability to administer this experience which passes through him as he contemplates the object. The viewer uses an object to reach an experience.

A positive interpretation of this approach would affirm that the art object is capable of unleashing, in a type of Socratic recollection, the memory of a forgotten artistic experience that the viewer (who has not created this particular work) once had when he realized another work distinct from this one. The art object helps to *recreate* the past artistic experience (which is identical to any other artistic experience, although to produce the same effect each time, each experience must necessarily derive from a different type of object). The operation realized by the object consists of attracting the viewer towards a state he does not recognize and which he would like to recognize, as a medium to acquire knowledge or, simply, driven by a tragic impulse. Generally, in the literature on art, this approach is interpreted as the astonishment that artworks spark in viewers, taking for granted that the goal of art (of artists) is to produce extraordinary objects or experiences.

It is, however, also possible to think of a negative interpretation that considers the object as a decoy of the artistic experience. The value of art objects from this perspective is precisely their *anesthetic* use, the capacity they have to numb the viewer. The object calls attention to itself, mediates the experience and in this way obstructs the viewer’s exposure to a phenomenon the likes of which an artistic experience would

have provided him. An art object offers many more certainties on which to grasp, its meaning is easier to understand and negotiate and it implies less responsibility (or none at all) than the artistic experience. The object is an area of play in which sublime qualities are rehearsed and which calms art's authentic need, the desire to experience the truth, albeit only through symptomatic treatment, by launching enough questions to allow a glimpse of the risk that emanates from the object, but establishing enough certainties to bestow a sense of security. Instead of assuming the risk art implies, the object deviates it. The phenomenon is observed indistinctly, or in an alternative way, as if the viewer were attracted by the object, through deceit, to a diluted experience, or else as if the object were animated by the viewer's desire to free himself of commitment.

A second type of approach sees the art object as equivalent or indistinguishable from any other object, and thus available without reservations for use in all exchanges. In this case, art objects, being an exchange value without use, resemble money in all ways.

03 Coincidence

The aesthetic function of the art object, whether as a spark of experiences or as a decoy that eludes them, has its central act in an extraordinary meeting of form and concept, which have been carefully chosen, by the process itself of the object's action, to become, from among many other combinations that would have been possible in other circumstances, the unique correspondence between form and concept that each particular work constitutes. The coincidence of this encounter is commonly understood to be fortunate, which explains the exaltation of the artistic object, albeit only when perceived from outside the artistic experience, in all those approaches and appreciations of the work inasmuch as the work is not art, or is *no longer* art.

The arrival of the object is celebrated because it can act as a lifesaver. It presents itself before the artist in a convulsive moment during which whatever he can grasp onto seems to him sufficient: any *adequate combination* of form and content that expresses whatever must be expressed to separate the artist from that extreme situation in which he finds himself – that *magic formula* – will be effusively embraced. Such a form and such a concept *coincide* here because the object that appears is unique; it is the only available combination that can resolve the situation at that moment, to save one's life. The form and content acquire the configuration of a previously unknown definition, because never before has such a convulsive moment been experienced and never

before has such a situation occurred with such a limited amount of elements available from which to extract the object, the lifesaver. The precision of the agreement between the form and the content comes from the urgency and magnitude of the demand, from the inevitability of its appearance and the scarcity of resources.

The artist, driven by the artistic need that motivates him, by his desire to reach an experience outside the profane world, throws himself into the ocean of uncertainties that the practice of art implies, in search of the truth of the waves that play with his defenseless body. At a given moment, however, he needs to grasp onto that lifesaver, to produce that object: exactly when the life vest is on the verge of appearing, the artist has drunk enough saltwater to fear for his life or his sanity, and he no longer has the necessary steadiness of mind or personal self-control to remember and understand the urgency that forced him to abandon the boat. At that moment, he no longer remembers the courage that pushed him to jump.

Similarly, the artist does not understand at that moment that the artwork is not, in fact, the magnificent result of his efforts that has arrived to end his problems, but rather the contrary, the symbol and instrument of his failure, the tool used to make him succumb. It is thanks to the artwork that the artist has not drowned in the ocean, but only at the cost of remaining, from then on, tied to the mast on the deck of the boat or, even worse, imprisoned in the hold, where there is not even the intuition of the free flow of the sea, a place where almost no temptations to jump again remain.

The object delays its arrival until the moment when there is nothing else, when it is the only thing in sight: it arrives as a relief. This perception, however, is caused by a rupture with a situation that it itself has caused. The object can be seen as a drug dispensed at the critical moment of abstinence to someone who wants to come out of his addiction. In these circumstances, the substance is chosen for the sensation of wellbeing it produces, more intense than any previous one, as long as the fact is ignored that taking this drug represents the failure of the rehabilitation program and nullifies all earlier effort. At that moment, the entire detoxification process, the long hours of resisting temptation, could be reinterpreted unconsciously as a technique applied in order to increase the marvelous effect of the high (of the objecthood), given that the closer an addict gets to complete detoxification, which could represent the end of his addiction, the more intense the effect is of consuming the drug, the greater the pleasure is of surrendering to desire, and the happier the co-incidence is of the addict and the drug.

One could convince oneself that the appearance of the lifesaver at that moment, precisely there, is the product of chance, and nothing and no one will argue against such a version as long as the body is back onboard the boat, because common sense will incessantly affirm the good fortune of the object's appearance on the path and will praise the skill of the artist in having reached it. The artistic experience opens a crack in

reality through which chaos can enter into the lives of those around it, and now that the artwork has sealed and disinfected that opening, it is possible to again breath a deep sigh of relief.

04 The Artwork as Reality

The artwork has meaning for all those around it and, therefore, so too does art when it is observed from the perspective of that work, from the context that that object has established. The artwork is the precise device capable of temporarily blinding (during the period of its novelty) that point of comparison that makes manifest the fact that art is meaningless. Art exists in the object as long as the artist can still make decisions that modify the result, while he can make decisions whose execution are impossible, decisions that are absurd. But as soon as the object acquires a form that resists change, when that unreal “something” turns into the reality of the work (and reality is precisely defined as being the “non-impossible”), art vanishes. As it would be in Epicurean logic, the object means nothing to art, given that when art is there, the object has not yet arrived, and when the object has arrived, art is no longer there.

The artistic experience achieves the illusion of a limited totality but, once it concludes, the resulting artwork is a reflection that does not represent the whole, but rather its limits dissect the world. Objects no longer signify that whose representation was only possible thanks to the indeterminateness conferred on it by its dynamic character: the imagined has become a presence. An artwork is art dragged outside the flow of time, art that has been removed from the sequence of causes and effects with which it constantly interacts and readjusts itself while it exists. The artwork represents a *part* of eternity, a fragment of something whose nature is, paradoxically, not to be divided. It is a slice of reality and, at the same time, a thing *in* reality, a thing that *constitutes* reality. But the work is one and eternal only to the extent it substitutes the artistic experience, it participates in art only when it is seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity, in other words, when deprived of the circumstances that make it an object (when the object is still everything but the object).

Objects, as they appear, are available and immediately ready to be consumed. Thus, no matter how specific and immutable the scope of its significance may be, the object becomes submissive, flexible and easily manipulated. The fact that the object can be measured and evaluated is the condition for its management, study, commercialization and storage, and is also the quality by which the art object establishes an equivalence between art and the world’s things, thereby enabling a reconciliation of these two realms. However, its role as double agent for both art and reality is fictitious, given that the object is always on the side of the factual world, is validated by reality and is a

guarantor of it. Artworks are a type of signification and to the extent that they are objects that communicate and are communicable (vehicles of communication) they accept and are fed by reality's network of relations, they legitimate and defend it.

The artwork always fails because the nature of art is to attempt solely that which is not possible, that which cannot be achieved or expressed in an object. The only purpose of the artwork as art is to probe the possibility of its own failure, to show what *art is not*, to discredit the premise that gave rise to it, in order to discard a new possibility of being "art" and of being an "artist". The collection of all the artworks made by an artist is organized around a space that remains empty, whose form, although never completely and exactly defined, is always so a little more, around a value that is never positively expressed and which is art. The object is thus a spurious result, detritus, as well as the lever by which the spirit is once again moved until the next possibility arises of temporary redemption, until a new irritation presents itself that must be diagnosed and treated. Each artwork is a case study in which its own exclusive formula is tested in order to prove it invalid.

05 The Task of the Artist

In a humanist concept of the world, omnipresent in society, the term "objectification", as it is commonly used when referring to phenomena that affect human beings, has a negative bias that implies that the objectification of an individual is morally incorrect and must be avoided.²¹ In the processes that occur regarding the artistic experience, the term "objectification" designates the reduction of the artistic experience to an object and suggests that art exposes itself to objectification when it enters the public realm, when, upon becoming an object, it establishes contact with society. The artwork is a demand directed at the artistic experience in order to close it and enable it to thereby make reference to society, in order to turn the experience into a body, integrable, integrated and an agent of integration.

Objectification in art, however, rather than an accident that terminates the artistic experience once and for all, is the necessary continuous exercise that gives art its reason for being. Its urgency derives from the fact that the non-object existence of art is uninhabitable, an illusion. Objectification and subjectification are the two movements of pulse and repulsion in whose alteration art finds its space of meaning, and by which the

²¹ In social philosophy, "objectification" refers to the action of treating a person as if he were a thing. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has enumerated the properties that, attributed to a person, can transform someone into an object: instrumentalization, the negation of autonomies, inactivity, fungibility, the violation of integrity, to be the property of another person, and the negation of subjectivity.

artist swings, during the artistic experience, without being able to do anything to avoid it, in one direction or the other. The process of objectification is primarily and essentially produced in the core of the artistic experience. The artist must face objectification within the realm of his own desires and excellences, his own objectification, and only in a subsidiary way in the action of opposing society's strategies to integrate artistic experiences.

The artist's commitment to the work is manifested in resistance to the advance of objectification, given that the aim of the later is to fix experience and bring it to an end. The work is in contact with art as long as it is faithful to all of its possible results, to the extent that it does not hide or promote certain possibilities of its becoming in favor of others. However, keeping the object open while attending to its *functioning* as an artwork, or in other words, "at the moment in which it is about to become an artwork but is not yet one", absorbs all of the artist's energy. The vertigo of the artistic experience is fueled by an exponential increase of spending without any income. Maintaining the highest level of indetermination demands from the artist the maximum amount of energy, commitment and faith in the inevitability of both the experience and its termination.

On the contrary, by favoring one result in particular, or by discarding it, one manages to keep that possibility from consuming resources, while at the same time it becomes a solid base from which to initiate the acquisition of new ones. This is an ever-increasing temptation, which, with time, forces the emergence of the *object that will be* outside the domain of the artistic experience, from that uncertain state toward definitive crystallization as an object.

The decision to close the object imposes on the artist an accusation of lack of courage, it makes him suspect of having given up *too* soon, responsible for the incomplete state of an object that, although it seemed satisfactory during its becoming, has failed at the last moment. That responsibility lies in the fact that the artist holds in his hands, while the object is being made, the possibility of keeping the process open, or of ending it. This, however, is not a real option, but rather a compulsion: the artist is forced to keep the object open for as long as possible and he is also forced to finish it. What distinguishes an artist is his identification with the task, his sense of the inevitable, and by the fatal determination to push the object beyond the point in which it would be reasonable and useful, which explains the dysfunctional way in which the artist interacts with society.

06 The Artwork as Dead Art

The artwork has an unquestionable practical value for those who commercialize it, for those who admire it as a technical achievement, for those who see it as a jewel. It also has a use for the artist, to the extent that he is not an artist, as previously mentioned, to the extent he commercializes the work, or uses it to present his technical achievements, or exhibits it as a jewel. Most of the objects produced over the course of history have been destined for tasks that have already been thoroughly studied, to satisfy established needs and, within their frame of action, they adapt perfectly to the function, as random as it may be, to which they have been assigned. Prototypes represent a small, exceptional proportion of the world's objects and, in the best of cases, the artistic object would have been conceived as a prototype. Artworks, however, inasmuch as they refer to art, inasmuch as they are significant as art, are much scarcer, given that they are among the prototypes that fail, those that never make it into mass-production, those that never become the norm.

Prototypes are at the “cutting edge of technique”, planned and built using the most advanced technologies and strictest methodologies. In general, they function perfectly within the limits of the current technology in all aspects of the operation they carry out, except in terms of what makes them specific to their task, the procedure that is being tested, and the improvement of which is the reason this particular prototype has been conceived.

It could be said that artworks are created according to the highest standards, that they exquisitely perform their functions and that this is why they are beautiful. Normally, it is understood that the artist's goal when he makes an artwork is to reach this attribute of beauty and that the improvement of his technical skills leads to this objective. However, as occurs with prototypes, at the moment in which the artwork is coming into being, what the artist attempts to achieve is the specific task he has never attempted before, for which no established protocols exist, and which he carries out clumsily. The motive for which that specific work has been conceived is the search for that unexplored realm in which the artist's expertise is useless. The skill and elegance with which he carries out all the preliminary procedures, necessary to reach that point in the development of the work in which an anomaly appears that impedes the object from adjusting to its assigned place, are a sub-product of the search for uncertainty. The culminating moment of the artistic experience occurs when, after having applied all available knowledge, the artist, at the limit of his capacity and effort, behaves without grace.

What provokes the viewer's admiration is, generally, beauty.²² Different viewers appreciate different levels of subtlety in the way in which a work is executed, but few, if any, are aware of that minimal section of the procedure that is defective, and in which the specific artistic value of the work is found. During certain stages of the development of an artist's life, he may believe that his duty is to aspire to beauty, that that is what he wants to achieve: the insistence of the public and his colleagues on that quality of his objects and, even more importantly, the satisfaction he feels in skillfully executing precise movements, may convince him of this. But to the extent that he is an artist, he will ultimately reach the conclusion that anything he does effortlessly or *solely* with effort, is to be scorned. The finalization of the work (its end) generates first frustration and later relief, both of which sensations are found indistinctly in the achievement of beauty and in the failure of the ultimate purpose of the operation.

For the artist, for his realization as such, beauty is not so much a value as an inevitable weight. All those preparatory movements must be executed on each occasion as if dealing with a clockwork, in which all gears must fit together perfectly and all the springs remain permanently loaded, and that work of *maintenance*, which demands more and more resources, leaves the artist exhausted when he reaches that point which in fact represents the true challenge.²³

Furthermore, however, as he puts up with that servitude to beauty, the artist feels a growing temptation to stop and rest, to act in a way he knows well, and it is increasingly difficult for him to resist the grace of his own movements, the flow of well-adjusted ideas that are pleasant in and of themselves and which are always met with praise and encouragement, which are practical and practicable; and he finds it arduous to take that step forward which announces itself as ugly and of little satisfaction and yet which gives meaning to his practice. The requirements of beauty form a ritual that, with time, become art's liturgy, a set of procedures that permit the softest possible contact of the artist with the public and with society's mechanisms of production. The artwork is always under pressure from a demand by the public, and by the artist himself, to appear with a certain degree of beauty, which works on its own, either as a drag or as a rotten reward. The beauty of the artwork is dead art. A body of work is, ultimately, a cadaver.

²² Beauty can be understood in two ways: one, as a disinterested viewer would, with distance in respect to the object being contemplated; and two, in the way that takes into consideration the emotion that caused Stendhal to faint, as something that is beyond what the viewer can bear, as something that overwhelms him. I use "beauty" in the first sense and keep the second to define the artistic experience, beyond beauty.

²³ For example, a ballerina who attempts a new, special pirouette must skillfully realize different movements of a series in order to reach the state of balance, inertia and gravity that will allow her to become aware of the possibility of achieving that new pirouette.

Art and the Economy

01 The Value of the Object

Most people who describe art as an economic phenomenon attempt to establish its significance according to ideas derived from the economy of need, in which individuals initiate transactions in order to acquire the goods they require, in a more or less close relationship, for their survival. The preeminence of this perspective in the analysis of the nature of art is the consequence of the value society gives to art objects, to their potential to replace - when these objects are seen as containers or vehicles of art instead of a substitute for it - something that is there instead of the art and whose appearance marks the end of the artistic experience.

Thus, the world's traditional economic views understand artistic processes, and the implications of those processes, in the light of exchangeable objects or, in other words, as commodities. Such views offer expert analysis of an economy of the artwork in which the work is produced, traded and consumed as a commodity. Political economy is not concerned with art, but rather only with art objects, given that the conditions in which art is produced are in an alternating relationship with those of commodities, which is to say, the one excludes the other, and when political economy addresses art as the production of objects, it blocks its own understanding of art in any other form. The economy of need takes into account everything that surrounds the artistic phenomenon, except that which is specific to art, that quality by which art defines itself, among other things, as a non-object (as what is not *yet* an object). For economists, however, for the theorists of the economy of production, art *must be* a commodity, because it is natural for an economist to see everything as an economic factor and as nothing more than that.

The economist is disconcerted when he finds something in the work that escapes his analysis, something that does not refer to the object but rather to the artistic experience. Each attempt to define art as just another commodity inevitably fails. Despite this, economists consider that the solution to this problem only requires a new, more decisive approach to the definition or to establish more specific exceptional rules, to look at it in a different, more ingenious and clearly riskier way, but one which still fits within an economic theory that would otherwise be shown not to be valid, not only in respect to art objects, but also regarding everything else. Economists can be fascinated by art as a commodity, given that from their perspective it is, in fact, a fascinating product, one that is not governed by the rules other commodities must obey. The artwork is the apotheosis of merchandise, a pure representation of commercialization,

of the capacity of trade to be free of purpose or teleological limitations (at least in its beginnings).

02 The Objective Value of the Art Object

Whatever the artistic value of an object may be, it always has an objective value within the economy of need as a commodity independent from the effect of art. The exchange value of artworks may derive, first of all, from the particularity of their having been made from objects or materials that are valuable in and of themselves, using products that could have been directly used to cover needs of production, and which can be extracted from the artworks again to serve as valuable resources at any moment: the object is a depository of another value, in addition to its artistic value.

Second of all, the value attributed to an artwork may be found in the use of certain materials destroyed in its production, which are no longer useful, but which convey greater force to the art object when it competes with other objects (these materials, *disappeared* into the work, give it, through their spectacular expense, the quality of a jewel). For example, a slab of marble acquires value when it is chosen for the qualities that make it appropriate for the creation of sculptures. The stone is scarcer the more specific the requirements are of its artistic function and thus it costs more, which is added to the work as an adherent value. These qualities of the stone contribute value to the work whenever an exchange of artworks exists. Otherwise, the marble would simply be used as a building block or as mortar, functions for which the specificity of its use in art is of no importance, and thus does not confer any added value to the materials or, therefore, to the art object. Although this type of exchange is not easily subjected to the scrutiny of the economist because it can be seen as an unproductive expense, it does have a peculiar correlation with the theory in that this type of expense, as with the redeemable materials explained above, is contemplated, in terms of production, as an investment, as capital that has been put into circulation with the expectations of later being recovered.

However, the high prices reached by art objects are not due to the behavior of these objects in relation to the laws of supply and demand, but rather to their (initial) refusal to enter into a system of equivalences. The production of objects aims to facilitate the system of exchanges called for by the economy of need and objects (including artistic ones) are, from the moment of their conception, essentially favorable to exchange. Artworks, however, are not formulated *at first* in order to be exchanged, they are not expected to be significant to anybody and they are not conceived in response to a pressing demand (except for the one the artist imposes on himself). When the work appears, it is neither valuable nor worthless, given that it only enters into that logic

when a protocol for its exchange is established. Until that moment arrives, there is not enough money to pay for it. If someone wants to own the object and it has not yet been integrated, if someone wishes to integrate it, the object enters into a self-reinforcing spiral of increasing symbolic value, which continues to grow as long as that value does not become liquid.

The tension art puts up with while it is committed to its own inconsistency has only a potential value, which grows until it crystalizes at a given moment in the object and the object's predisposition to exchange. The art object acquires value only when it acquires a definitive form, when the artistic experience ends and there is no possibility of additional (artistic) transformation.²⁴ The artistic experience and value are mutually exclusive. Artworks are exchangeable because they are objects, not because of their condition of being vehicles of art. They are catalyzers of the potential commercialization of the artistic experience.

The laws that govern the materiality of art objects eventually come to control the work's artistic aspects, and, at different levels and in respect to various types of works, the narration of that process has become the subject of the recent history of art. Marcel Broodthaers even goes so far as to state that the transformation of art into merchandise is perhaps the only necessary parameter to consider when defining art. For him, if there is a process of objectification, art is a singular representation of that process, a kind of tautology: something is art if that something is about to become, for the first time, merchandise (if art is merchandise, the act of becoming merchandise is art).

The same phenomenon described by Broodthaers and to which this last quality of explaining art is attributed, can also be seen inversely: art is not realized when what is outside the equivalence is caught in a system of values. Rather, on the contrary, it could be defined as the constant attempt to escape the laws of value and, what is more, as the absolute irreducibility of the artistic experience to the status of merchandise. In such a case, the tendency must not be interpreted as if art were progressively being transformed into merchandise, nor even as if art desperately and repeatedly searched for a place outside the realm of commercialization once the territory in which it has appeared has been captured, but rather as if art were something that existed *outside of value* (it is valuable only because it is meaningless, because of lack of value and meaning), while the system of production always tries to regulate and absorb a quality that is irreducible to that system, and inevitably fails in all its attempts to do so.

If artworks are not conceived, in the first instance, as exchangeable, it is because they proclaim the significance itself of exchange from their beginning, a clause of

²⁴ The only relevant change in the artistic process and in fact in any process, is that in which the object shifts from being free floating to being integrated. The transformations of the object once it has been integrated are, in comparison, insignificant.

“everything or nothing”. The commercial aspect of the art object (which is the artwork’s aspect of being an object) makes it *fully* merchandise, endlessly exchangeable, precisely because a pure work of art, a work empirically impossible without materiality, without an object, would have no value of use or of exchange (it would be the artistic experience, which is *zero* merchandise).

03 Life as Alienation

The artwork establishes and manages the relationship between the artistic experience and reality, the world of facts. Also, however, partially driven by a deep unconscious demand, the artist engenders it as equivalence in order to establish a channel of exchange, as spurious as it may be, between the elusive world of the artistic experience and that of the economy of commodities, which allows him to satisfy the demand presented by his material needs.

Evading the law of exchange is impossible, because the object is disposed to become value and because the artwork is an indispensable factor for the artistic experience *to take place*. The artwork participates retroactively in the beginning and development of the experience from which it itself results, and the declaration its final presence imposes also has an important role as initiator of a new, posterior artistic process. The conflict between the fact that an artistic experience must give form to a body as a condition for it to be realized, and that of the object compelling the artistic experience and the artist toward dissolution in equivalences, is constantly repeated at various levels of the artistic processes. Any sacrificial expenditure that is produced in art is ultimately dragged into an equivalence and, therefore, into the realm of exchange, of production. This fact is as unavoidable as the one that implies that the commodities produced in this transaction also later provoke, directly or indirectly, a new sacrifice. The tension implied by the alternation of the preeminence of these demands may contain an integral definition of art, as much as if it is interpreted from the perspective of art as from the world of production.

Nevertheless, this confrontation is only an indication of a broader conflict that is debated here, in this one, in an exemplary way. The materiality of artworks, the objectification of the artistic experience, the recurring attempt of cooptation by value and art’s refusal to make concessions, are only some particular cases of the heterogeneity of the body and the thinking mind, of the (quasi) simultaneous existence of the human being as both subject and object: it is in the materialization of art where this paradoxical phenomenon provokes a more violent friction, where it remains longer and where it presents a greater potential difference, of current and intensity.

Given that body and mind are heterogeneous, alienation is a condition of the life of individuals. Birth marks the start of a necessary activity that is foreign to them (insofar as they are individuals), in order to be provided with food and shelter, to remain alive and thus obtain more food and shelter. The self is caught in an existence that is subject to the logic of a chain of cause and effect from which death is the only definitive exit. Only while it is cared for can a human body temporarily counteract the inertia toward the state of being a cadaver that it is by default. The artist, to the extent that he is also an object, a body, a future cadaver, must pay attention to production. The decision he must make about when to allow an equivalence to establish itself marks the start of this life or death debate.

The theory of the economy of need reflects the procedure by which the idea of this confrontation with death vanishes from public discourse. However, both a component of self-preservation and a movement toward self-destruction exist in each action human beings perform. The individual cannot forget this need for self-preservation, on pain of death, but over and over again he is forced to resist succumbing completely to it.

04 Art as Total Surplus Value

The tension of art is maintained in the opposition between forces that tend to squander commodities, time and energy in a spectacular expenditure (which seeks death), and other forces that tend to accumulate, to save for the future (in an impulse of self-preservation). The operation of art, in its purity, in its empirically impossible condition of absolute waste, carries out acts of an exclusively destructive nature, while the accumulation of commodities for the future is always a form of “creation”, which likewise cannot be empirically carried out completely. Everything that mediates between pure destruction and pure creation is “investment”, the consumption of commodities in order to produce new commodities to accumulate, an aspect of the same teleological spirit of production (that is to say, also creation).

Art is such to the extent that it is destructive, with the term “destruction” understood as consumption that does not allow *any* restitution. Even if the yield of the artistic impulse materializes as knowledge, pleasure, satisfaction, unease or consolation, it will eventually be exchangeable for money or commodities, the tension will be freed and art will vanish, and thus, from the start, art must resist any benefit in order to be able to continue existing. This extreme perspective of the specificity of art leads to the following reflection: if the waste implied by the use of these spent materials is completely unproductive, in other words, it *realizes* no benefit whatsoever, and thus what results from the expense does not repay the initial capital necessary to acquire those materials and the means for their transformation, then the value that is destroyed

upon being transformed into art must come from an excess produced elsewhere, from the labor of someone who has worked in order to accumulate and who has been exploited proportionally to the value that is now being spent on an artistic experience that does not benefit anyone. For every euro spent on artistic experiences, someone somewhere is working hours without being paid for them. The value spent must necessarily have been extracted from his salary. From a strict perspective of the economy of need, all art is thus “surplus value”.²⁵ This is applicable to the truly useless expense, which can be achieved only for an instant and as an illusion (the meaning of “uselessness” must always be questioned), until the law of exchanges catches up to it and integrates it.

An integral Marxist reading of the economy of art cannot be based on the idea that artists are exploited as workers, as some authors interpret.²⁶ One must go further and state that the entire system of art is based on exploitation, given that there is no way for the commodities consumed in art to come from any source other than surplus value. When the artistic experience, through the conversion of the artwork into an element of exchange, into merchandise, enters the realm of creation, of utility and of production (also of knowledge or political awareness), when it becomes involved in the teleological system of cause and effect, then it ceases to be art, to be a sacrifice. To the extent that the artistic experience is transformed into profit, the artist is transformed into a worker, exploited by his own artistic impulse to consume, and inversely, and even more precisely, by his own desire to be productive.²⁷ “Socially good” and “socially bad” art are concepts that exist only in a reading of artistic exchanges that does not contemplate the specificity of these exchanges. A work ethic based on justice is constitutionally impossible in art, given that in an extreme conceptual formulation of the economy of art, there is no expense that is not derived from an injustice.

An attempt is thus made to redeem art for society as creation, because in this way it seems as if some aspects of the investment have been returned to the producers of the surplus value used in the artistic experience, by way of which the work has been

²⁵ In Marxist theory, surplus value is the excess value produced by the labor of workers above the salaries they are paid. Carried to the extreme, as Proudhon stated, the possessions of the rich are stolen property, given that they have been acquired through surplus value. In one way or another, this implies that private property is also theft.

²⁶ The error, in fact, lies in considering them “workers”, when they are, as artists, exactly that which that term excludes.

²⁷ In this sense, a clever director of an important museum once said, speaking of the need to be paid for the activity one realizes, “Enthusiasm is a form of self-exploitation”, meaning that when one is enthusiastic and spends more energy than is required on one’s work, he is benefitting others. In keeping with the opinion expressed here, stinginess, on the contrary, is a form of self-exploitation, while enthusiasm is a sacrifice (which makes it, in the final instance, an exploitation of others).

produced. Here, one finds an explanation for the constant pressure art is subjected to for its works to be useful in some way, the insistence in the presentation of the results of art as something beneficial (profitable, educational, pleasurable, a catalyst of ethical and political motivation), however vague may be the place where the benefit is produced.

05 Absolute Material Justice

If all art is made from surplus value, this also implies something in the opposite sense: none of the resources consumed in activities other than art, *otium* o *negotium*, are surplus value, product of non-remunerated work, because in one way or another, and thanks to an exhaustive ramification of the logical structure of cause and effect, they serve for self-preservation. While they may not help preserve the life of the worker who created that particular good, they still serve to preserve the structure of the machinery of production and of the human species, of which the worker (to the extent he is one) is not a victim but rather an integral part. As long as a worker does not spend without reserve, which would make him an artist during the period such spending lasted (or the illusion of such spending), he works and lives in the spirit of production.

Production seeks exactitude, a total correspondence between inputs and outputs, between income and expenses. This goal is exemplified in the machine, whose perfecting consists in avoiding friction as much as possible, in the constant reduction of losses produced by heat and wear, in the minimum expense of energy for a maximum functioning. All decisions made over history to facilitate this exactitude have been stored in the manner in which the machine is structured, in the unique design of its pieces, of its relays, of its singular “wiring”. Similarly, the parameters for just relations between human beings are incorporated in the regulation of the functioning of social structures, in currently existing institutions and in the form in which they were constituted. The improvement of the production apparatus consists of a series of marginal improvements to define more efficient routines that carry out exchanges with fewer losses, through a process whose distinctive protocol is to isolate subtle differences that can be specifically addressed by means of new sets of rules or new institutions.

An extreme realization of this tendency toward precision means *absolute justice*, an exact equivalence between any force that is exerted and its contrary, in virtue of which

both are canceled.²⁸ Justice is at any moment absolute in as much as it extends to the zones dominated by dead work, realms in which all the clauses that regulate exchanges have been fixed, clauses that regulate *all exchanges*. Dead work, dead words, dead metaphors, are inert because nothing more is expected from them, not even by them, with the exception of the operation that they actually perform, that activity whose sole purpose is to provision, whose significance is to make them “other” than what they are. There is no life in them, because they can no longer be transformed, and no life is wasted on them, because it was all wasted when they became fixed.

Seen from this extreme perspective, it can be said that all justice based on an ethic of work contains its own negation. In other words, if this distributive justice were carried out to its ultimate end, and only just exchanges were permitted – a single perfect universal exchange, *without changes*, in a sort of tautology – life would be impossible or unbearable, suffocated by the lack of resources to *waste*. The specter of this discovery haunts all utopian endeavors.

There is unquestionably something liberating in the idea of becoming a machine, of being rid of the body’s inconveniences through dissolution into a pure (hard) body. If this were perhaps possible in its totality, it would solve all human problems. But the promise of total justice is not only asphyxiating, given that its fulfillment would terminate any human life recognizable as such, but also, and more importantly, impossible to complete and this inconclusive condition ratifies and makes even more lacerating the awareness of being human, that which one yearns to free oneself from by becoming a machine (the yearning). The preservation of life (or, in art, the purity and exactitude of the experience in the object, the perfect representation) ultimately fails and, by implication, in each of its attempts and this is why that yearning for death and destruction, for awareness of the objective existence of the subject, repeatedly enters into play and, with it, the sacrificial practice.

The dogma of the apparatus of production, which has also been adopted by the doctrine of the work ethic, is that nothing is free, that everything has a counterweight, which must be paid for in one way or another. For Bataille, only the sun gives an infinite gift, a gift that *cannot* be returned, for which reason *it does not have to* be returned. However, the artist, the poet, the philosopher (anyone, as long as he attempts to spend without benefiting) tries to return the gift. The artistic operation is based on an impossibility and, for it to exist in some way, it must be re-initiated over and over again.

²⁸ “Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political, I deem [one of] the essential principles of our Government, and consequently [one of] those which ought to shape its administration.” --Thomas Jefferson: 1st Inaugural Address, 1801. ME 3:321

On a personal level, the realization of total justice would mean that all individuals would be absolutely rewarded for every action they carried out and which produced some value. This also implies that nobody should participate in any non-payable action, given that such activity would be a possible waste solely by virtue of someone's work not being remunerated, primarily the executor of that work. The account must be balanced, without excess payment or payment by default in any link of the chain of exchanges. It could be said that this doctrine the need for exactitude defends, establishes the realm of the economy of need to which both capitalism and communism belong. However, in a broader perspective, the same attitude reveals itself to be the result of a complete, techno-scientific and instrumental vision of the world, which is properly the constitutional principle of human existence, implied and implicated by the use of language and the sense of time. In this respect, absolute justice and injustice are indistinguishable, given that their fundamental goal is to capture everything within the law of value and equivalence, forcing any action to be discussed in the terms and with the tools of production, and integrating it into a logical structure of cause and effect.

The law of value devours all forms of experience. Acts, attitudes and objects that were not *appreciated*, not considered, not even noticed, are, in one way or another, through their mere enunciation, thrown into existence and reveal a label with their price. Everything that appears in the conscious mind does so as a case of a promise of equivalence, just as any expense is prone to produce a profit that annuls it as such (as an expense) and which forces it to be understood as "credit". But even if constant pressure is applied on all levels, in social and individual realms, toward achieving rules for universal and exact exchange, there is always a final point in which, using Roland Barthes' metaphor, "the body gives itself freely".

Indeed, some things are free, even if only for an instant, when the totality is taken into consideration and something is briefly perceived as if it were the *limited totality*. By means of destruction, art escapes, even if fleetingly, from that demand for parity, by giving without calculation, by sending that compensation to a future so distant it can be called *timeless*. In sacrificial actions, the artist spends without creating benefits, not only not for himself, but neither for any other person who can, with time, return the spent amount. Art is the ultimate gift, an offering of such demanding dimension that it can neither be refused nor reimbursed. This is the only way to do something in a free way, through the determination to attempt to repay the gift of the only thing that does not need to be repaid, sunlight, or in other words, life: the gift is an attempt to pay the infinite debt one incurs simply by being born, the liquidation of which only comes with death. The artistic practice deals with the extreme execution of a useless expense that constitutes the only *infinite justice* (the only way to correct the exploitation art implies).

The artistic experience, through the exercise of extreme expenditure, searches for a formula capable of breaking the thick fabric of rules of equivalence that constitutes the woven texture of “reality”. Art’s method to do justice consists of creating structures whose destruction will be unable to find a counterproposal, by presenting a type of offering never seen before and for which, therefore, there is no established form of repayment.

The only way to make sure a gift will not be returned, for its value to be great enough to make its reimbursement impossible, is for it to be, in all senses, *more than enough*. A gift is only guaranteed when it is excessive. But it is not possible to measure excess, the limits of which are found only in an internal logic (an internal procedure to break its own logic), when it is exhausted. How much will be enough cannot be predicted beforehand: the mere suspicion of calculation would immediately make the gift equivalent, co-optable and, therefore, co-opted.

Overflowing is implicit in art: to give too much, to try to say too much, and to undertake endeavors that are too large; ultimately, to try something that will not be achieved regardless of how much effort and enthusiasm are put into it, because it is beyond the artist’s capabilities. The final offering an artist presents is that of his own failure. Failures, it can be said, *are successful* in cancelling the doubt if they are sincere, if they are *carried out* (as a project) fully committed to achieving success and with the clear knowledge that doing so is impossible, when they are assumed as the inherent tragedy of the artistic experience.

The definitive danger, contained in this tragic condition, is the always open possibility of dying in the process of realizing the sacrifice,²⁹ during the artistic experience, that is, of being capable of paying the debt in its totality. Excess leads to death. The artist’s commitment consists of maintaining the door open (an object which is yet to be born), of always gathering more material to throw on the sacrificial pile, of consuming all of his resources in an out-of-control hemorrhage, until the energy is exhausted, until the artist loses consciousness and the forces in charge of preserving his life defeat his desire to face death. As the master of the sacrifice, the artist’s task is to maintain the hemorrhage for as long as possible.

²⁹ This can happen, literally, on some occasions, with the death of the individual artist’s body. But this failure occurs whenever there is an artistic experience, whenever there is some degree of death, in the collapse of some part of the psyche.

08 Anxiety

If the artist survives his frenetic orgy, if his instinct for self-preservation takes control and stanches the bleeding process, then the offering can finally be captured by the law of the economy. The social order will put into play all of the means within its reach to integrate any floating potential value into its chain of equivalences, to annul the disturbance caused by something that is not exchangeable, something whose significance, in fact, is not to establish any equivalence at all, because it still does not exist as something that can be exchanged. In virtue of this internal and external pressure, the artist leads the artwork to a close in a stable shape, which makes it perceptible. In doing so, the work's relation to value is brought up to date and an equivalence can finally be established and in this way the artist enters the art market. The art market is merely an indicator, circumstantial evidence of these tensions that occur, on a more essential plane, in the inception of the work.

The artist, weakened by a devastating experience, has thrown the switch, has changed the direction of his march, and now openly accepts the realization of all the benefit that has been (unintentionally) accumulated *in potential*, which so overwhelmingly demanded be maintained in that potential state. The generous and brave attitude of the artist, which leads him to bleed imprudently, his willingness to die in the name of infinite justice, a little later provokes in him an insatiable greed to accumulate new material (to later also be squandered). Weakness demands survival and survival feeds accumulation in a self-reinforcing loop similar to a turbine. All accumulation, however, later demands new excessive spending. The artist is thus pure anxiety for material, simply to spend it.

The artist often finds himself in this situation, at different levels and intensities, upon willingly subjecting himself to the demands of production, when acting without reservations according to its rules in order to produce those commodities he will waste on the artistic experience, and also after spending them, only to yearn for them a little later. The artist can be seen as a vampire who bleeds, or who donates his blood, as someone who alternates between these two movements that run in the same direction but in opposite senses. The duplicity of the image of the artist over history, alternating as a generous hero or a cruel tyrant, derives from this condition; likewise that of the artist as genius or idiot, depending on whether he is in free fall, at the moment of the wasteful orgy, or collecting the benefits of his potential; or else wasting his life "as an idiot", or exhibiting his technical skill and the beauty of his productions.

09 Deadweight

It could be said that the disrupting energy art accumulates when it is not exchanged is put to work in the commercialization of art, and that the liberated potential serves the final purpose to accumulate more, in other words, to preserve life more efficiently, which was the original aim: to use art as a highly powerful explosive, the fluid whose expansive wave is directed in a controlled way to the movement of all the machinery of social institutions, which provide the commodities to ensure life and, ultimately, make life more livable.

This process, however, can also be seen in another way: the true sense of the production apparatus is to avoid the violence that art communicates, and which is generated by its capacity to make conscious the idea of death. If an awareness of the limitations in space and time of their bodies is what makes human beings specific among animals, or, in other words, the alternation of the individual between his role as subject and object, then the world of production would not be using the violence of the experience of art in order to transform it into work, but rather would have *invented* work as a means for the exchange of the violence inherent to the human condition: work would merely be the neutral and inert material in which the explosion could be smothered. As the explosion has grown more violent, due to the progressive reduction of the space in which it occurs and the corresponding rise in pressure, it has been necessary to put more *deadweight* around it, to build thicker walls of institutional sandbags. Ultimately, in artistic processes, all violence is exchanged by the *creation* of new branches of this system of deadweight. Such a perspective again locates in this book the artistic experience— this time in economic terms – as the origin from which the rest is born and by which it develops.

01 Reality

Most relations between art and politics have been discussed – primarily in the 20th century, in two defined periods before and after World War II – in terms of “commitment”. In the context of this discussion, commitment refers primarily to the intention and capacity of artworks and of artists’ actions to transform social conditions.

The quality of that commitment is always represented as a degree of involvement in “reality”. The importance given to this involvement explains the demand for art to interact with society, for those who so wish it, as well as the release from responsibility for those who defend the independence of art. Militant political attitudes unhesitatingly classify as fantasy anything that develops unrelated to a concept of the reality orbiting the development of a teleological notion of human purpose. Strictly artistic attitudes, on the contrary, see the preeminence of social problems, if not the concept of “reality” as a whole, as nothing but an excuse to avoid problems that are, although less evident, more pressing on an individual level (less evident and more urgent perhaps due precisely to their individual and subjective nature).

For both groups, at any rate, “reality” is an aspect of their activity they must deal with. Whatever the aim may be – to improve it or to be free from its influence – inevitably a relationship with it must be defined, given that it is a default condition. The strategy of ignoring it, of letting oneself be naively carried away by its effects, is not liberating, but rather causes a situation that intensifies the restrictions it establishes and, ultimately, only manages to impose a simpler reality whose coercion is stricter and more integrated, the reality *one deserves*.

Reality is a set of perceptions that can be named, which refer to one another for their verification, and which constitute a structure in which the world’s activities of transformation are seen as facts. Reality is self-evident, it rests on a network of institutions and institutional facts, and perfectly and transparently conveys an affirmation of objective certainties that can be shared inter-subjectively.

The natural tendency of most human beings, and on most occasions, is to let themselves be led by the impulse of self-preservation that these institutions propose and favor, and it could be said that the only reason why reality is accepted as such is to satisfy this desire. A certain degree of awareness of the conditions in which individuals and societies live helps them to foresee possible eventualities that can threaten their

survival, or at least provide them with the illusion of being prepared for some of the situations that may occur. The sense of reality is a suppuration that comes from a conservative aspect of the human condition and all institutions have been established to protect the status of reality from the blows and darts of uncertainty. They have been conceived to protect human beings, as well as themselves, from that uncertainty.

Most actions that transform or destroy the self-evident world are carried out to avoid the effects of this structural problem contained in the concept of reality and which consists of the aspiration to establish secure situations: to the extent that their meaning is fixed and that *sure* reality is not questioned, its structure becomes fragile. A simple concept of the world, and of what its reality implies, i.e., of those actions made to preserve it, can only predict threats to life up to the *simple* limit that this particular idea of reality establishes. More defined concepts have more distant limits, they aspire to broaden the speculation concerning the development of events and to foresee possible problems in the future (a shortage of food, for example) with greater precision and more in advance. If an individual profoundly questions himself about the network of facts in which he finds himself submerged, he can reach a more precise idea of what might happen next and in the more distant future. However, there is no exhaustive idea of reality and any prediction about it will necessarily have some defective endings and requires another, further reality over there (over here), which, seen from the present conception of the world, from this incomplete and present reality, is accepted as if it were still exhaustive. Art is an action carried out to predict situations with a reference so far in the future, to establish such a complete concept of reality, that it does not aid in self-preservation, either because the solution to those problems requires so much calculation that it is beyond the time limits of individuals and organizations, or else, in its speculation, the artistic practice exhausts all present resources available for subsistence.

02 The Role of the Artist

Political agents of all types are concerned about the conditions in which they and other human beings develop their lives and wish to predict the future and deal with any possible difficulties that may arise. One could say that artists are also concerned about the future, about their lives. It would be more accurate, however, to say that an artist's reflections are about *his death*, about how knowledge or lack of awareness of his death

affects his life and the lives of others.³⁰ The social order uses the institution of “death” as a means to manage life and thus must keep the artist from being able to apply the techniques he has learned, and which serve him, to reveal society’s disciplinary systems and how those procedures use death as a deterrent. “Death” is the primary institution that shapes reality, the one that encompasses all others.

The goal of artists is difficult to determine, even, or especially, for the artists themselves, because it is always mixed in a messy way with accessory desires, needs and intentions, from which artists cannot free themselves without years of distillation, self-analysis and control, and only momentarily. Thus, what at any given moment must be understood as their goal is constantly changing. The only signs of identity to recognize what they tend toward is found precisely in this constant change, and in the particularity that each change responds to art’s need to confront the world, the conception of which is also dynamic and adaptive. Reality, that set of perceptions, constantly changes according to the artist’s goal, and he changes his goal according to what he finds when he confronts reality.

The artist devotes himself to the task of challenging reality, the purpose of which is to make evident its partial character, and to reveal that it does not encompass a totality, but is rather merely *décor* for facts, behind which lurks at least another. If reality were contemplated outside this orchestrated context that protects it, it would collapse. One could say that the reality existing beyond this one also aims to be absolute, but this does not matter to the artist, at least not when the one he finds himself facing has yet to be discredited. The aversion to accepting this background curtain as an unquestionable truth, the resistance to consenting to this fraud, spurs the artist to scratch it. For the purpose of continuing the unending investigation of his life and death, of his body and his language, the artist questions sure and proven facts (not only “reality” as a concept, but also, or primarily, *his* reality).

The artist’s confrontation with the world emerges at the moment of his encounter with institutions. These have been established precisely with the sole aim of preventing reality from collapsing. They prop up reality, are part of reality and, to be more precise, *they are* reality. When an artist analyzes the functioning of institutions, his intention is not to improve them, to replace them with better institutions, but rather to decompose them. This task is sometimes so demanding it becomes almost his only activity, leaving him no time or energy to think about his life and death. Ultimately, however, to think about life and death, thought itself, is nothing other than labor to discredit institutions, those certainties that protect an individual from himself, within himself, and which also, in a certain way, threaten him.

³⁰ This difference is always present, to the degree that there is art and there is politics.

03 Art and Political Activism

The moment the artist confronts institutions he joins the march of political activists, whose interests also oppose them. Both seem to be united by the same principle, one may say they are working together towards the same goal. What artists attempt in this confrontation, however, is to undermine their own certainties, of which institutions are an external reference, while political activists subvert institutions in order to build on top of them and thus legitimize their certainties. Political activists want to assault and take over *only* present institutions, not the concept itself of the institution, nor those that accommodate their convictions.

Political agents who wish to improve or replace institutions but not destroy them and who do not understand or ignore this distinction, assume that activists and artists are similar, that no distance exists between them. The artistic difference, however, is implicitly valued in the context of political commitment, given that artists master certain techniques of language acquired through a lengthy practice committed to using these methods in non-traditional ways and they tackle problems laterally, which efficiently contributes to the task of demolishing the institutions. Their skills come primarily from a constant training that is developed in conditions different from those of their companions in arms: artists perform an operation of pure destruction, driven to run all risks without hesitation, because their actions are not restricted by the need to preserve already existing elements that can be put to use in establishing a possible future organization. Indeed, artists are not even concerned about their own future.

Likewise for those who establish institutions and support them, art is indistinguishable from activism because, regardless of their intentions, both equally threaten the status quo. Institutions do not discriminate between those who covet the power they possess and those who want to destroy the foundations that legitimize that power. The pressure that reality exercises by way of its institutions on the social body levels into a single category all those who do not comply with its rules, all “those-who-resist”: artists, revolutionaries, suicides, the insane, delinquents... Institutions spare no efforts when it comes to discrediting and nullifying any person who attempts to publicly denounce the reversibility of sure facts and the fragility of the contexts on which they rest. This tendency thus reinforces itself: the priority of any marginalized group becomes to oppose those institutions that block the possibility of their carrying out any other activity they may be committed to.

Despite the similarities, however, in the diverse processes in which artists and activists are involved, a moment always comes when the differences between them become visible. Political means, the procedures activists use to take control, can be destructive to a certain extent, but political attitudes always remain within the realm of production. The ideal that drives them is to create better institutions, or institutions that better serve their interests, which better serve the alternatives they consider to be appropriate. Politics is “the art of the possible” and, as such, realizes itself in the management of reality: any political comprehension of the world, as long as it is not too outrageously extreme (and thus not politics), is structurally a support of reality. Art, however, does not concern itself with achieving *what is possible*, given that the total destruction of the world’s certainties, even if momentarily achieved, is ultimately impossible (a new, defective reality will appear at one moment or another). The practice of art, in contrast to political activism, is useless; its goal is impossible to reach, and its authors know it is useless and impossible.

When institutions are sufficiently weak, political activists take them over. The political branches distance themselves from the revolutionary military organizations, or the latter are disbanded, and they begin to manage the potential power they have accumulated during the revolutionary period. Artists, in contrast, stubbornly persist in their attempt to wreck reality, or else lose interest and become disillusioned. Activists who have been taken for artists and artists who have been taken for activists can now be taken for what they are.

Artists’ attitudes become political, for better or worse, when they dedicate themselves to the construction of a new, perfected reality, instead of to the destruction of an old one, or to the destruction of any reality. On the other hand, some political activists also become artists, when they question everything that has happened and whatever may occur, beginning with their own ideas, when they commit themselves to a process of radical self-analysis that never manages to produce a new form of power and government.

04 Political Art

The presumption of guilt, of the fact that everyone is subjected to hidden agendas, is inscribed in the core of institutional order. Institutions have been established, and conscientiously prepared, for the eventuality of having to confront people who want to take power, but not completely so for those threats whose goal is to destroy without benefit, at least in respect to what can be understood as “benefit” in the institutional

realm, the type of benefit that generates institutional legitimatization. This predisposition of the institutions has often proved advantageous to the artistic practice, whose methods take institutional certainties by surprise and overturn them, which is why during revolutionary periods artists have been repeatedly praised.

Once the revolution ends, and by the reverse effect, artists are scorned and ridiculed if they do not collect benefit from their investment, they are denigrated by the status quo by means of resorting to the doctrine of the economy of need that converts anyone who squanders opportunities into an object of scorn. The climax of revolutionary or artistic frenzy gives way to a situation that demands integration, in which both the rewards for establishing oneself and the instruments of deterrent that pressure one to capitulate, increase exponentially. A seasoned political activist knows the precise moment in which he must pull back from the operation, abandon an attitude to adopt another that will provide him the best return on his investment. In the instant when order is restored, political forces demand from art a commitment to reality: when artists resist exploiting the power and capacity to act in the world generated by the artistic experience, politics term the artist's attitude to be an irresponsible waste. The relinquishment of the use of this resource, from the political perspective, is irresponsible and shameful. The antagonism between art and politics may derive from this attitude of the artists, which offends and provokes those who look differently at the events of the world.

An artist commits himself to maintaining his violent action for as long as he is able but, regardless of his determination, ultimately there comes a point in the process when it is impossible to ignore the combined pressure applied by those incentives and deterrents, and the artist is forced to stop and make concessions. The option insistently offered to most artists is the expectation of commercialization of the objects that result from their artistic experience, which could result in rewards such as money, recognition and the capacity to act. Artists who refuse to go along with the change of attitude involved in entering the market and redeeming the capital they have accumulated can still be threatened with social and economic exclusion. Many artists are aware of the tragic character of their artistic impulse and accept this risk. Others, however, temporarily cease their practice to recover their energy, or definitively abandon it and search for a way to understand life and make a living in an easier environment.

The tensions between these two alternatives, either to succumb to the gifts of the processes of production or else to their punishments, open up the possibility of "political art". Money and the public recognition that offers a bet on the market could be used as a means to continue, supposedly in a more effective way, the process of weakening the institutions: the legitimatization of political art is carried out, ultimately, when it seeks to redeem itself using all the potential power accumulated during the artistic process in the task of transforming the world. Of course, the same circumstances

could be understood in the opposite sense: art's capacity of political action in the world, its "agency", is a tool and an alibi to accumulate money, fame and recognition. If this were so, the tasks of a political artist, ultimately, would consist of instilling objects with social and political concerns, so as to make their distribution more attractive (and with it, although not necessarily, to acquire more power to change the world). Both readings simultaneously coincide with diverse ways of understanding reality, in proportions determined by different situations and people.

Even, however, if this were not the case, in order for the distribution networks of art objects and ideas to become a lever for political action, networks, objects and ideas must necessarily be manipulated to some degree. A political artist who finds himself in such a situation will be hard pressed to maintain a broad social and political focus and, *for the artist*, the questioning of the functioning of those networks would be a priority that would bring such a situation to an end. One can say that institutions are not weakened when, first of all (and likewise throughout the process), certain institutions must be, as a condition, accepted and reinforced without reservations. In the field of political activism, however, it is generally understood that the investments made in the legitimatization of such systems can be a small concession, an allowable, temporary, lesser evil for the purpose of achieving other goals, in an exercise of *realpolitik*, which, in reference to the arts, I have called elsewhere, somewhat facetiously, "realkunst".³¹ Despite this, no *strict* political or artistic scrutiny would accept the use of such means.

The attitude is well-received, at any rate, by moderate political sectors, as well as by the art market and its associated agents. The former, because they are thrilled by the thought of the capacity of art networks to reach a broader public and because they feel that any level of politicization is good. The latter, because the political implications of a work satisfies the particular psychological complexes of guilt and redemption of art collectors and of those in charge of public cultural policies, and because they believe that all additional commercialization at any level is good.

Political artists are constantly suspected of using art for spurious political purposes, and at the same time of using politics for spurious artistic purposes. They are permanently required to demonstrate that they are both "artists" and "politically committed". The task of legitimatization is so demanding that it completely takes over the artistic and political goals, which then become a nuisance: if artists/activists pay sincere attention to them, one of their flanks will inevitably be neglected.³² Political

³¹ "Realkunst" is the conformity with the use of certain lines of action in order to obtain a political gain within the field of the arts. The term can also be used when one seeks as a result "more art" or "more market".

³² Of course, this dilemma has occurred previously in art in relation to areas other than politics. Thus, for example, some artists who have been seduced by technical quality of their works and by the fascination they produce in the public, have abandoned art in favor of their specialization as technicians: painters,

artists dedicate most of their resources to a task of fine tuning the parameters of disconnection between the context of art and the political context, in order to impede the perception of the contradictory character of these mediums and to thus guarantee the existence of their own figure. The reward for political artists is no longer to change the world or to question their own beliefs, but to renovate a feeling of participation in the political loop, while they still consider themselves, and are considered by others, artists. That is, to access the public, social benefits offered by one field, and private ones, of personal promotion, granted by the other.

05 Politics by Proxy

Political art acquires its legitimacy through its ability to establish various mutually isolated contexts in which each one of the parts of its functioning is resolved independently. A political artist accepts certainties in specific areas of his experience and builds on them, while flaunting a rebellious artistic attitude in other areas: he establishes that certain values are unquestionable, such as, for example, his race, his sexual preference, his nation, his social class, or his right to be compensated for injustices committed against his people in the past, and these values remain in a reservation, in an unconsidered zone. The institutions surrounding that concept, those in charge of managing its social and political resources, are ignored, while other social institutions of all kinds are frontally attacked. Many of the poor or shamefully light *political* decisions made in political art are justified as requisites of the structures of art and of the procedures of acquisition of artistic knowledge, while inconsistent, non-rigorous aspects of many artistic projects are politically imposed, adducing ideological motives. The political artist's skill consists of establishing a well-balanced frame, given that an overly innocent affirmation can seem insignificant, conservative, without the solemnity of a reclamation that must be heeded; and a very audacious one is dangerous and sets off an alarm bell, warning of the urgent need for it to be actively silenced.

This progressive fragmentation of experience that discriminates and isolates different aspects in various independent contexts is made possible by the existence of buffer spaces, of intermediate devices of isolation that constitute a system similar to the networks of fictitious companies used in financial engineering. These impede an immediate contact between the two spheres of interest, that of art and that of politics,

photographers, sculptors, etc. (instead of artists); others, who opted for economic success and fame, at some point had to choose between art and public relations. The task of legitimization absorbs resources that would otherwise be used for art.

which would otherwise reveal the incongruence of their association. For the operation to be successful, it is necessary for the public to relate solely in the conditions produced within the intermediating space, in other words, for the public to be ignorant of the original contexts in which the decisions were made about each aspect of the project of political art. This is the characteristic that defines the “fallacy of the scarecrow”: instead of tackling problems with a genuine basis in reality (the problem of reality itself, in this case), the action takes place in a model, usually false, of that reality, which serves as a sort of voodoo doll, which is more manageable and against which it is easier to argue. One would like to think (and make others think) that the pins the artist sticks into the straw threaten the status quo.

In other words, the illusion of threatening the establishment arises from a representational device through which any institution is equivalent to “reality”. Reality, however, is the complete set of institutions, which includes those *regulated efforts* made by the artist and whose goal is to tear down institutions (artistic institutions, of course, but especially the institutions within his own impulses, those efforts whose regulation “makes an institution”). Political art creates *proxy* realities with which to interact, which keep it at a distance from the settings, both political and artistic, that can endanger its consistency.³³

Essentially, what is avoided by this fragmentation is for art to have to face itself, for it to investigate its own reason for being. Once art is useful and used, it loses the specificity granted by its significance. Political art affects social movements and the development of artistic activity, because it favors settings in which it is more difficult for art, or political change, to occur. If art’s gaze, which supposedly should be focused on ceaseless, *internal*, self-referential questioning, is directed toward an external object, and political activity, which supposedly should lead a change in the shared conception of the world, is aestheticized to deal with the problems and emotions of the subject, both lose their capacity to influence and are disarmed. The figure of the political artist serves to reinforce the status quo, not only in abstract terms as a safeguard of the concept and relevance of reality in general, but specifically to endorse current institutions.

06 Propaganda

³³ Political art did not have to adapt, for example, to the parameters within which the Occupy movement developed (which accepted, in a certain way, its internal contradictions), while art could seem as if it were resolving its internal contradictions by supporting the Occupy movement.

Even if the artist inadvertently ignores the effects of that rupture and believes he is still in direct confrontation with reality, this is merely an illusion, given that any aspect of the artistic (or political) operation whose questioning is neglected articulates the rest in the teleological structure of the sphere of production, and alienates all the (now differentiated) elements of the artist's experience in the service of purposes external to art. Any critique of reality that remains submerged in the regulated conditions of this context, leaves the frame unblemished, regardless of how violent that critique may be in respect to the subject matter and composition of the interior image.

The consistency with which this phenomenon of the fragmentation of experience occurs can be explained by the technical skill art has developed to represent the world, which manages to repeatedly create the impression that actions on one level *truly* affect those on another, through an operation of adjustment of the laws of cause and effect, which serve as symbolic links between these contexts but which in reality are independent of each other. This mechanism corroborates the agency in a manner that makes it easy for art (for the artist) to succumb to the temptation of becoming the instrument, a tendency that always applies pressure on artistic processes through its ability to drop responsibilities, and which must constantly be controlled and corrected. Art's skill at producing messages that supposedly can transform the world imply a danger, because the artist's will to act can cancel out his commitment to investigating the form in which the institution (ultimately, language) interacts with his own (the artist's) mortality.

The phenomenon of the fragmentation of experience and of the separation of the contexts in which the origins of political art are found also plays an important role in the process by which art turns into propaganda or, simply, into commercial advertising (which is a less intense form of ideological propaganda but one with a broader reach). Artworks are verbalization and it is in their nature, to a certain extent, to become vehicles of communication directed at others. To the degree that they are capable of producing an effect on the people with whom they come into contact, they are required to do so.

Thus, whatever is communicable and directed at others is, in principle, propaganda, or has the tendency to become propaganda. All political action is based on the idea that agency is a definite fact; it uses means of fragmentation to focus its efforts on external goals, for the purpose of transforming the world. All political attitudes permit and encourage fragmentation when they draw a line between "us" and "them", and must necessarily be based on propaganda, because consciously or unconsciously (in their own level of consciousness) they hide some aspects of reality in order to show only others, which they show to hide the former (for the purpose of projecting *a* reality). Communication is not an effect achieved by the presence of the object as a totality, but rather by the capacity of the transmitter to reveal certain parts and hide others. Which

is which is known only by those who create the messages. This attitude, which simultaneously both offers and negates, is also a primary characteristic of seduction, an important strategy in propaganda, especially in the art world, and which, by its nature, soon becomes an end in itself (it becomes seduction, the sole purpose of which is to increase the importance of seduction as a strategy).

Fine tuning is important, because the cruder the strategies of propaganda become, or the more clearly their goal is manifested, the wider the area is of the messages' distribution, although their intensity diminishes, and less people perceive them in such a way as to be affected by them. A message written with rigorous information, with the aim of being complete, generates a friction in its distribution that limits its capacity to circulate, and thus produces few results (even if everyone who receives it is positively affected by it). If the artistic experience could make use of propaganda (if it were not extinguished through such an action), it would solely produce messages of such intensity, of such rigor, that they would not reach or affect anyone (except the artist producing the message, who cannot help but be affected). Propaganda of this type would no longer be such, because it would not permit the fragmentation of experience, or that of the contexts, or that of the messages.

07 Dualism

Propaganda is produced as the result of fragmentation and is also the cause of a greater fragmentation. It acts by means of the management of a metonymic effect that makes it possible to take specific aspects of the world, which the institutional perspective consents to being attacked, as if they were the entire extension of reality. By making an active decision about what to hide and what to show, political attitudes create a duality between what must be protected and what must be attacked and, ultimately, between what is in absolute terms, "good" and "evil".

Most of the facts that pass through the daily experience of an individual necessarily take a form that fits a pre-established moral structure, the moral structure that constitutes that individual. One is constantly urged to abhor and approve, and to organize the world in this way into categories that reaffirm each other. An aphorism of Franz Kafka³⁴ provides an explanation for this: "One of Evil's most effective seductions is the call to struggle." Evil's first advance is simply to present itself in such a way that it must unavoidably be attacked, as something that exists as a distinct, isolated entity, as if

³⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Zulu Aphorisms*.

something called “evil” existed. In order to be able to face situations without assigning moral values to any of their aspects – a task that is never fully completed because more subtle values always exist on another level -, a constant state of alertness and training is necessary: the individual must be disposed to violence toward whatever he can be identified with.

Militant political attitudes, which take shape in the exercise of addressing other groups and individuals, reinforce a comforting sensation of belonging, a feeling of being in company, which can momentarily dispel the anguish of the individual’s aloneness in the world. This effect repeatedly gives rise to a recoil, like that of a firearm, by which, upon rejecting one group, the individual becomes part of the other, and vice versa. To deal with the injustices committed against other human beings, to find an objective to attack in the *bad* actions committed by others, offers sensible people a feeling of relief. Actions governed by binary principles are gratifying. To align oneself with the just, to see oneself as just and to believe that a just life is possible is a tempting option, because it has both practical and psychological benefits. Most social institutions are disposed to support and reward any movement in that direction, due to the fact that the constitutional principle of institutions is, precisely, to support these types of actions.

The best psychological reward, however, is implicit in the offering of a political function to fulfill, a purpose. A sense of what is “good” and what is “bad” not only gives certainty (in respect to which all of reality has meaning), but also establishes a program of action that is satisfactory in and of itself, in each small achievement, for many reasons, but above all because the action taken towards a goal inhibits reflecting on the motives that justify achieving that goal, given that action and reflection are mutually exclusive and can only occur alternately. The primary effect of aligning oneself with (one) reality and granting a purpose to one’s actions is, ultimately, to transcend, to give daily life a meaning that no sudden mental spasm of death can take away.

One might think that rejecting political attitudes would be on the institutions’ agenda, because such attitudes increase instability. On the contrary, great care is taken to promote them, because activism offers artists all types of objectives (of which “politics” is just one among many) with which to establish the bases for negotiation. Binary attitudes suggest a balanced image in which each cancels the other in a dialectical dynamic, as if the negotiation led to peace. However, when they resolve a conflict it is only to create other new ones at other levels, with a wider reach and reduced power. This procedure extensively reinforces belief in sure facts by highlighting some of the consequences and hiding some of the premises. Dualism purports to be moving toward its own dissolution, but it reproduces itself at each step. Upon assuming and promoting the idea of a world in which problems can have a final solution, dualism subjects each action to this teleological structure of delegation imposed by the attempt to reach the goal, in which the violence contained in social problems expands and

dissipates. The solution is never definitive, because the violence of life and the social body does not originate in the need to realize that task of moving toward its cancelation, but rather in the need to violate.

For artistic tasks to be such, they must conceive reality as a whole, and when the artist consents and accepts these local victories as his own, as if they were real achievements, he ignores the fact that all militancy implies a belief about what is good and what is bad. What is more, he also overlooks that this certainty is part of the reality that is being constituted at each moment with the aim of administrating - and making more efficient and innocuous - the concepts one holds of life and death.

08 Micronization

A political attitude that gives priority to the task of legitimatizing itself in order to establish a base from which to later act effectively, implies, in the person who adopts it, a tacit agreement with the institutional facet of oneself, a structure that is apparently in place to help develop new capacities but which, on the contrary, has been conceived solely to control and restrict. Even the most resolute impulses to tear down reality are soon disarmed, dissolved in the first meanders of the course of action: they generate an institutional mirror on the level of the inner self that balances them with the world, and thus they immediately become part of the assumed landscape. The artist, upon observing his own institutions, the institutions that constitute him and through which he acts, can see micronized in his thoughts the image of the world he projects in front of himself and with which he engages in debate. He can understand, identify and deal beforehand with the aspects of his own understanding, which, without this previous labor, would have gone unnoticed in the conception of the world with which he interacts. The most pressing risk of stagnation comes from within the artist, and if he rushes to face the effect of the threats dangling over other human beings, he blocks the view of the mechanisms that drive the operation within himself.

When someone carefully analyzes his own conceptions of the world step by step, always going a bit deeper, the difficulties that these present tend to break up into simpler questions, into smaller particles. For example, in a thorough examination, all actions that can be defined as “evil” (or “good”, for that matter) will become divided, like a magnet, into two distinct poles. Everything that can be called “bad” in a specific context or with a specific criterion, upon being carefully examined and in relation with other contexts (with the most general context available), has some aspects that free it of its absolute badness. Certainties can always be inspected more closely and one then

discovers that they contain parts that are not so certain (that more attentive inspection is precisely what makes them uncertain). This attempt to define differences is expressed beautifully by Ludwig Wittgenstein when he writes that his method “is not to divide the hard from the soft, but rather to see the hardness of the soft”.

Oriental philosophy contributes an important idea in this respect: the world must be perceived neither as a duality nor as a unity, because a unity would imply an “other”, a confrontation. This is the origin of the expression “non-dual”, an affirmative *negation* or double negation that affirms, which challenges itself in a dynamic way, and which denotes an activity more than a state, description or concept. Non-duality cannot be understood without a constant process toward the analysis of ever-smaller differences, in the movement toward a greater micronization of the *constitutional dualism* of reality, given that the “hardness of the soft” contains within it a “softness”, whose hardness must also be revealed.

Micronization is produced by a series of extreme affirmations, not by negations (nor double negations). Negativity forces the subject to participate in frontal collisions that rearm both terminals of the conflict, which makes them “certain”. For this reason, the artist must avoid negativity, but he is unable to fight against it, because doing so would require an increase of negativity. The action, so technical, precise and expert, that the artist executes to make reality collapse, consists of affirming it more, in the way Georg Simmel states that Michelangelo’s works capture the unity of life in each gesture, “by highlighting the incompatibility of its two constitutive parts”.³⁵

This idea is very present in Kierkegaard’s ethical focus: “My *Enten-Eller* (Either/Or) does not at first adjust to denoting the choice between good and evil, but rather denotes the election by which one chooses *good and evil*/excludes them [...] It is not, therefore, a question of choosing between wanting good or evil, but of choosing *to want*.”³⁶

Indeed, the artist *wants* and, in each fractal cycle, both good and bad are effectively affirmed and so too are their limits, which find in this way a better, purer, more defined explanation, and thus a more certain one, until the arrival of the new cycle. The artist affirms reality in order to be able to perceive by contrast, with greater light, the effects that reality has on *him*, and as a result of this introspection (and exposition) the tricks and gifts of reality are also revealed.

The expression of this desire is likewise manifested in a search for perfect institutions (for perfect definitions) that reveals their absolute impossibility (to be

³⁵ Georg Simmel, *Florence*.

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or. A Fragment of Life*.

thought and realized), the inadequacy not only of those projected in the future in a perfect culmination, but also of present ones, which in contrast seem crudely constituted. The artist develops a desire for perfection and for perfectibility *ad absurdum*, a sort of saturation test that, upon affirming without reservations the goodness and badness of things, raises the bar to a height that none of them can overcome, to an unreachable and unsustainable degree of goodness and badness.

If art is a form of politics, it is so only in its attempt to control the power fear has over life, the capacity that fear has to alter decisions of life and death. Art wants to do away with fear, not by hiding its threats (by negating them), but rather by their constant proclamation, to face them with such frequency and intensity that (in some way, momentarily) they dissolve.

Thanks to this viewpoint, it is now perhaps possible to see political art in a different light: political art is the unequivocal evidence that the effect of the fragmentation of experience and of the multiplication and isolation of contexts extends to all activities and all levels of the world, including of course politics, and that politics in any of its manifestations solely functions through those series of buffers that validate its results strictly within each of those frames. And this also reveals that, ultimately, that phenomenon similarly occurs in art, and within the artist.

Art reveals the impossibility of its agency, of its capacity to transform the outside world, precisely by attempting to *sincerely* connect those two fragmented realities, by trying to connect with that general reality responsible for imposing fragmentation, given that when it manages to establish a connection it simply transforms itself and does so at the cost of contributing to a greater, later fragmentation. Here is where art reflects on its essence, where it looks directly at its own annihilation in the confrontation with politics and survives that encounter, and thus strengthens the movement of production of its autonomy (and ultimately also, as has been mentioned, that of fragmentation).

09 Ethics

Any sincere political activity (or any sincere social attitude) requires an ethical subject, an ethics incorporated into its system of beliefs. Ethics can be understood in two ways: as the attitude that tends to establish and follow certain rules according to which the individual must interact with society, or as the action of developing an endless inquiry into the keys that govern behavior and a periodically repeated enunciation of these, in words and deeds, always in a more precise but never fully satisfactory way.

The artist is an ethical subject in that he must inquire into his own impulses. He cannot always be aware of the complete range of his inner motivations but, through ceaselessly questioning the basis of his beliefs, to the extent his stamina and determination allow him, his awareness can grow in a recurring manner. Art as ethics means a movement toward ethics, the enlargement within oneself of the limits of that inquiry, an infinite game. Other ethical approaches based on firm rules, such as those behind most political attitudes, benefit from an effect of suspended belief that makes it possible to ignore some of the conditions in which they occur and to act as if those conditions were a solid base on which to build the precepts that constitute them. The artist's task, when he comes into contact with such cases, is to inject the contrary action into the scene, an enlarged version of Brecht's estrangement effect (a *verfremdungseffekt* in the expanded field, so to speak), exercised in both directions, toward the world and toward oneself (the audience and actors), which denounces that familiarity and makes it conscious. Once more, this is not an easy task, because it involves directing enormous violence toward the artist himself, above all through the loss of the constituting elements of his own identity that must be *estranged* from itself. To terminate with an aspect of reality means severing that same aspect from oneself and thus, in a certain way, it is *to terminate oneself*.

Behind any ethical façade lies the need to affirm life in general and the life of individuals in particular, and this is also true, even explicitly, for art. Imre Kertész expressed this clearly in *Heureka!*, his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, when he stated that "the Kantian categorical imperative - ethics in general - is but the pliable handmaiden of self-preservation". The practice of art, by way of constant self-review, wishes once again to achieve this impossibility: to reach an ethics that does not offer one's life as the condition for everything else. Artists have *too many* desires to be just, they want to look directly at death, live their life fully, free of the fear that it will end, *but* to the point that this desire becomes the only meaning in their life and, thanks to this (or because of it), their life finally also acquires a reason for being and a power of deterrence over them, as much as they may have wished to avoid such an outcome.

Art and Death

01 Art in Death

Every artwork points toward death, which is to say, it indicates the direction in which death is hidden, and whatever value and significance the work may have is found between the force vectors of that relationship: they are the measure of its artistic quality. Art can be praised or denounced for the subtle and sophisticated focus with which it undertakes the production of objects, for its capacity to provoke intense emotions, for its role in the creation of worldly and abstract beauty, or for the power and fascination it exercises on those who view it. However, these are only circumstantial aspects, which make art precisely *what it is not*. If art had to be defined by these conditions, derived above all from the way in which artworks relate with the world, it would be necessary to do so by its absence, and by the manner in which these conditions define an empty space around which the artworks are placed. Each artwork is an attempt to draw a more precise profile of that absence, always with a certain degree of imprecision caused by the unnamable quality of death.

All art is about death, because, in addition to other more specific reasons, all human matters have a relationship with death. Any action an individual carries out must originate in, or be directly influenced by, an awareness of his mortality. A long history of feedback and retrofitting, as old as the existence of humanity, has brought the structure of social life to a (quasi) perfect functioning in which all the goals of private individuals and of humanity in general have been subordinated to the aim of preserving life. The resistance that has repeatedly emerged against this tendency, by either aware or dysfunctional critical elements, has, over the long run, done nothing but contribute to a better adaptation of its structure as well as to the perfecting of the technique to efficiently hide that same fact, that structure itself. Regardless of its superficial aspect, almost all human activity has a profound basis in a directive of self-preservation.

The decision that leads an individual to dedicate his efforts to art cannot be made independently from an existence that is fed simultaneously by a desire for survival and a death drive, and the practice of art could be considered, occasionally, as merely yet another means to face mortality, perhaps on another level. However, there are still differences between making art (and thinking and writing about it) and drawing up and perfecting lists of necessities for survival, as complex as these may be. In keeping with this precision, all human activities can be defined as belonging to two different categories: those that correspond adequately to some strategies of production whose tendency and intention is to keep death physically and psychically at a distance (the

psychic task also being a means to contribute to distancing physical death), and those activities that are in the realm of art, whose efforts are to make explicit the mortal condition of human beings.

The artist's determination is directed toward confronting his own particular death when he attempts to see himself as an object, as a body that perishes. This contradicts the second directive of self-preservation, whose goal is to get the first directive, the absolute priority of the operation of self-preservation, to exist in a self-evident manner through erasing all of its tracks. If art can take on this task whose goal is to reveal death, it is thanks to the space left free by the unfinished process of improvement of the social systems of integration (hence its condition of "quasi perfect"). Thus, each time such an event occurs, and a new level of exhibition of this relationship of daily life with death is reached, first for the artist himself and secondly for other people, immediately an institution emerges to take control, suppress or integrate the disturbances the rupture might have caused, and adds new layers of sealing to that structure whose aim is to reject and hide death.

This same reaction is carried out, on a different scale, within the artistic experience with the artwork as a result. While the artist's activity is essentially directed toward the unreserved destruction of the certainties that make up those disguising layers, the resulting work of that action is born with the pretension of being a screen that protects the artist's life and ensures his survival, and defends him from his own impulses: it is a movement within a game of language by reason of which the artist allows himself to ignore certain aspects of his condition. Artworks negotiate the relationship of the artist with his own death in the nucleus where the conflict begins, by controlling and repressing the violence that radiates from that point to the rest of the social body. To the extent that an observer can penetrate through the institutional layers that surround an artwork or, more precisely, which constitute it, he will be able to perceive art's relationship with death in that creation and experience the tension maintained in that nucleus of subordinations.

Artworks become *institutionalized death* immediately after their closure in a fixed combination of meaning and form. They then begin to contribute to the system of rituals that make up those institutional layers that cover and mute the disturbing power of death, and which are funerary rites. Indeed, each human endeavor, ultimately, is a funerary rite. The fascination artworks exert on those who view them is fetishistic, because they refer to everything related to death (the pomp of the ceremony, the skillful arrangement of the layers, the precision of the representation, etc.) except death itself.

02 Attachment to Life

Indeed, the priority of individuals is to stay alive, and all undertakings are first directed toward self-preservation. Managing one's life requires constant attention, because death is not only the end of human life, it is not simply one among other events that can happen, but rather the default, which progressively imposes itself over the lifespan of individuals. A body is an unfinished cadaver, which, if not constantly cared for, can reach its conclusion at any moment.

When death by starvation is imminent, the matter is resolved instinctively, as a reflexive act: food is sought and immediately consumed. However, the operations undertaken to accumulate food and obtain or build a stable shelter must be accompanied by a system of legitimatization whose purpose is to link the moment in which the goods are produced and collected (and the efforts involved in those tasks) with the moment they will be consumed, to show the need of the one in respect to the other, to structure them in an integral sequence of cause and effect. Institutions emerge to protect the bridge between those moments by creating a reality that spans and covers up the breach and which serves both to strengthen the chain of necessity and to make it transparent, so that accumulation seems to acquire a meaning of its own.

The anxiety that accompanies the need to guarantee the supplies that maintain life, once it acts free of its referent, is relentless because there are never enough provisions. The desire for safety and protection becomes an indefatigable passion that grows stronger the more it is satisfied. If a loaf of bread covers one's needs today, it is a grace period that is accepted with the goal of covering tomorrow's needs, and to consider those of the day after tomorrow, and later the needs of the coming months and years. The endless outbursts of *irrational* greed and violence in social relations are the result of this insatiable impulse that affects individuals and organizations, and one cannot help but hear naivety in those voices that ask how such acts are possible in a civilized world.

Given that life is constitutionally in permanent danger (this danger or its negation is what constitutes it), there are no limits to preventive measures regarding supplies, safety, or medical systems, except those imposed by exhaustion. No matter how large the reserves may be, death sooner or later catches up, symbolically or de facto. The mechanisms to *reinforce life*, to legitimize the imperative preeminence of life, must therefore proliferate and remain constantly alert to be able to detect and deal with any manifestation of futility. A network of institutions is thus established whose purpose is to uphold reality and, in turn, reality upholds this network. The institution appears as if it were an aspect of a world that has established itself on its own, open to being questioned, but it is, on the contrary, its vanishing point, a decoy that proclaims that the problems it resolves in its realm are also resolved, in virtue of that openness to

questioning, in the whole. The debate within the institution, however, leaves untouched the primordial base: that reality which, in fact, was legitimized in a fraudulent way in the first place. In doing so, it inverts the manner in which human beings consider priorities in their lives, by subjugating life to those procedures for its preservation of which the institutions are in charge. When one considers the efforts invested in this undertaking, one might conclude that life's only purpose is to preserve itself.

The attachment to life is constantly demonstrated in society, above all implicitly in the tacit dedication to these administrative functions, in the submission to the effects of an integral scheme of deterring the questioning of reality and of integration into the systems of production and the preservation of life. The condition, however, also becomes explicit each time there is an indication that the end is near, or there is a threat of physical violence, which happens repeatedly given that the mechanisms to hide the mortal condition of human beings, no matter how generalized and perfected they may be, are never efficient enough to definitively seal off all the sources of disturbance.

Despite this, it can be said that the institutions are solid, given that, in face of the painful evidence of the inevitability of death, a concession of some sort is obligatory, one that opens a space that enables life by providing an understanding of death, in religion, in philosophy or in science, that resolves the matter, at least partially or temporarily, or which gives the illusion of having resolved it.

03 Unknowns

When human beings face the desperation produced by having to deal over and over again with this Promethean task, the regeneration of their own lives, they are subjected to a simultaneous ardent desire for consolation and evasion, which urgently demands a delegation of responsibility of some type. Despite the pretensions of independence and abstract immanence offered by discourses of consolation, these always have the same premise: preserving life is the priority, the goal and the frame within which most of the speculations concerning the (un)avoidable nature of death occur, and this fact must be made to vanish from the terms that are discussed.

As a consequence of the strict limits prescribed by this principle, the main task of religious beliefs has become to deal with the radical asymmetry of death. The goal of the doctrines of most established religions is to hide the fact that all images of death, and of a possible life after it, are viewed from "this side", drawn from the side of the living: they are based on concepts of death that are acquired at a moment in which one is already subjected to its effects, ideas whose constitutional structure is marked by fear

of death, by the conjuration of its effect, and whose priority is the instinct of preservation. In this sense, life is the original bias of all biases. Those prognostics of a life “beyond” are projected as a *trompe l’oeil* on a wall behind which everything is unknown. The supposed symmetry of values, of joys and sufferings, is achieved only through the use of a mirror-like effect.

Philosophy regularly presents death as something that gives meaning to life, emphasizing the presence, or absence, of death among the living. Over the course of history, successive philosophical perspectives have trotted out different formulas with the intention of terminating the tension that is maintained between life and death, between the precariousness of one and the certainty of the other; in other words, to establish a solid basis for the believability of the idea that there is a meaning to life. Any established (enunciated) formula, however, contains too many unknowns, because everything on the other side of the “equal” sign is pure speculation. All those unknown terms can only become certain through sophisms, and the reasoning is always organized around the *sine qua non* condition of self-preservation. That wall beyond which nothing is known invades the space of life like a high-relief, a round, solid shape that grows and molds life according to ways proposed by the useless attempts to domesticate death.

Science promises a constant postponing of death, and enters a race that could only end with immortality, and is thus like the race between Achilles and the tortoise, an infinite vanishing. The goal is to design a system that can indefinitely halt the body’s decomposition or, more recently, a way to free the self, whatever that may be, from its bodily existence. Along the lines of the ideas expressed by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, it could be said that this final immortality is at any rate unachievable: we might believe that we are already immortal given that our trust in the ability of medical science to find an *absolute final solution* (and to do so before the programmed date of our death) can well be as solid as the doubt that lingers in those who have been told that they will not die. Nothing but circumstantial evidence exists for one thing or the other, and the matter is resolved according to each person’s degree of gullibility, by the confidence each person has in one reality or another. Science, as it tries to definitively break down the wall, simultaneously continues to push it a bit further into the beyond. And it does so by also projecting some *trompe l’oeil* images – as sophisticated as these may be – in order to strengthen the case it defends.

A strong desire to embrace these narratives, to ascertain a meaning to life, invites a suspension of disbelief, which almost makes it possible to ignore the defects of religious *perspectives*, of philosophical reasoning and the viability and convenience of scientific ends. All these affirmations of life are not up to the level of death and ultimately reveal that death is not only something unavoidable found outside of life, where life stops, but also a powerful example to mold the interior of life itself. The affirmation of life by

scientific, spiritual or philosophical means is simply another form in which death triumphs, unnoticeably.

The only constant activity that seems to escape the gravitational force exerted by this need to survive, this necessity to believe such endurance is achievable and the motives for doing so, even if momentary, is the activity of art, which, in an inverse way, through a radical affirmation of death, manages to move itself, during the time it takes place, into a new orbit in which the forces of traction are momentarily unbalanced. Those who are not satisfied by any of the options offered to them to face their own mortality, sooner or later find themselves questioning reality in the way art does (questioning their own questioning), when they try to go bit further in the search for a cypher of the unknown, and when they avoid all paths in which the suspension of disbelief is obligatory. Art, as the poet has said, is *a wounded pulse that probes things on the other side*, if indeed there is *another* side.

04 The Death Drive and the Pleasure Principle

The network of institutions that makes up reality strengthens the belief, in people and organizations, that all actions to preserve life are good in their own right. By virtue of this idea, any operation that gives satisfaction to the needs of the body is pleasurable; and the impulse that drives people to fulfill these domestic tasks is called the “pleasure principle”. It would be more appropriate to name it the “submission principle”: the presumption that life consists of a series of comforting activities and must, therefore, be preserved, is the result of ignoring the qualification that each pleasure is so because it brings to an end an effort that was begun solely for the purpose of satisfying a need inherent to the fact of being alive. Food, for example, is a drug administered by life that calms an addiction that life itself engenders. And even more so in the case of sexual activity, by which death is reproduced through new copies in which the desire to live dwells. The reward for actions directed toward preserving life consists of both bringing urgent needs to an end and of hiding the perspective from which life is seen as a sequence of pressing necessities. These actions are gratifying in both Freudian terms and as narcotics (a Narcissus satisfied and drugged by his own image). In fact, it is difficult to see a difference between the “reality principle”, that of need, and “the pleasure principle”, except in terms of the thickness and amount of institutional layers existing between the appearance of desire and its satisfaction.³⁷

³⁷ Both the reality principle and the pleasure principle pursue personal satisfaction, but while the former seeks satisfaction over the long term, the latter ignores everything except the immediate satisfaction of its desires.

The identification of pleasure and necessity, when it is faced by a contrary drive, one that reveals the vitiated relationship between them, leads one to think that the determined effort by some individuals to insistently expose the mortal fate of human beings is contrary to life, given that any hesitation in the exercise of one's own preservation that can derive from the knowledge, or mere suspicion, of life's futility, puts life in danger: such doubt undermines the necessary determination to successfully carry out the task of survival. The need to re-present the mortal condition of human beings is a component of the "death drive", a counter-drive to the survival instinct, and one that suggests that there is also an effect, in some way pleasurable, in taking actions against the course of life. This pleasure or satisfaction might find a provisional explanation in the fact that a greater awareness of the dangers that threaten life helps one to manage present and future needs more efficiently or suitably. The drives that tend to reveal faults in the world's logical structure, that do away with some certainties, might stem from the intention of finding more consistent realities, serving to achieve a more sophisticated mechanism of self-preservation, and in this way obtaining a greater degree of pleasure.

The extreme case of this counter-drive seeks *absolute certainty*, an elimination of all the imperfections life contains, a complete revision of how they can be experienced and considered. The course of this demand leads to a situation that aspires to a satisfaction, immortality itself, which can only be realized in death.

Institutions have been carefully designed to evade knowledge of this imperfectability, to protect reality as it is (occasionally through the sophistry of showing themselves to be "already perfect"). Thus, the terms in which this debate develops necessarily tend toward a radicalization to the point where often there is no way of showing the finite quality of life other than by directly threatening it, no other possibility exists of weakening institutions but to interrupt the supply of the necessary means for subsistence and to act against the entire functional order of the real. This is the path of the suicide, for whom the drive to reach the absolute enters into a progression of uncontrollable intensity which causes all institutional mechanisms to collapse, until he reaches that sole point in which he can encounter it (the absolute).

05 Transitory Suicides

To the extent that the practice of art seeks a definitive solution to the disturbances of human existence, and a payment that cancels the debt contracted upon birth – a reconciliation -, belongs to this realm marked by the death drive. In art, however, it is a suicidal tendency that does not necessarily end in suicide: the fact of reaching, for a moment, a state in its development in which the individual is in repose, prevents in

some way the consummation of the (un-perfect) suicide. If an individual who advances towards his end experiences this for an instant, *while he is still alive*, he experiences the illusion that the tension inherent in life has vanished, and that process which would have ended in suicide suddenly ceases.

In a suicidal orgy, the individual loses control over the institutional restrictions that, within him, keep such orgies from happening, causing self-destructive drives to strengthen in a loop (the fewer the brakes, the stronger the drive, and the less effective the brakes...) until all means of self-preservation have disappeared, until death. It could be said that suicidal tendencies are the result of the subject's incompetence at maintaining the functioning of the restrictions, at preserving them and thereby preserving the life of the person who contains them.³⁸ Art, in contrast, directs itself toward death: its origins lie in the desire to overcome those brakes, to control its development in order to undo the Gordian knot of life, instead of cutting it in one blow. Art attempts to reach the absolute through technical means and is, therefore, "mediated": paradoxically, the attempt to reach a *sure death* impedes its accomplishment, given that each time the exactness and availability of the instruments art uses in its endeavor decline, the task is abandoned. The artist is like a person determined to hold his breath "until the end", who remains firm in his decision while he is conscious, until his bodily reactions cancel the mind's power of control. Then he breathes, and unconsciousness wins the battle over consciousness; the body and its directive of self-preservation take charge of his unconscious desire.

Artists return to the functional order when the strength to continue with their own destruction vanishes, when they are no longer disposed to face the limpid image of approaching death their practice has propitiated. To see death for an instant, or else the illusion of having seen its truth, is a small death, that temporarily calms the drive for the absolute, which helps to manage the inconveniences of life (those of mortality, above all) and which avoids, in this way, an imminent death.

The full realization of art (or that of death) is never achieved in the realm of language. Artistic experiences are inaugural expeditions that enter, step by step, into unexplored territory. Each attempt is merely an approximation, an advance toward a point a bit further beyond the last one experienced, a bit closer to death, which is at an unknown distance and is uninhabitable. In this sense, just as "near death experiences" are not "death", artworks are not art, but rather the results of *experiences near art*, souvenirs of a visit to the vicinity of art and death. Nothing lies beyond that limit until a later time, when a new space is opened as the result of a consecutive artistic

³⁸ In this sense, it is possible to think that death always arrives when suicidal tendencies have vanished, once the process has advanced and the means of stopping it are no longer available. This would mean that suicides die in the attempt to survive.

experience. The reach of the experience cannot be measured beyond the distance now traveled, by the circumstance that certainly, in this measurement, art is nearer than it was in previous attempts, but that measurement can never be established in absolute terms in respect to either art or death. One never knows how close one has been to dying. Again, in the approach to death, as William Blake wrote, the only way to know when it is enough, is to know when it is more than enough.³⁹

The artist needs to live repeatedly through this confrontation, to attempt over and over again to achieve a new experience of *limited totality*, even if it is merely to escape the fraud of a profane, incomplete reality. Thus, art exists in an alternating balance between the reality principle and the death drive, in the back-and-forth between actions taken to preserve life and counter-actions whose goal is to reach truth and objectivity. More sophisticated techniques are necessary in each cycle to be able to confront a reality with an *improved design*, more resistant to the blows of absurdity. No other practice reaches a degree of sophistication similar to what art requires if it wishes to complete its task of shaking the world's logical structure down to its foundations, and no reality is as broad and *unquestionable* as the one experienced through art.

06 Fallen by Default

Human beings are born, to the extent they are human, in an institutional world. In a certain way, humanity is preceded by institutionalization or even, simply, constituted by it. Institutions are never accepted explicitly, but rather, on the contrary, the reality they shape exists in a self-evident way around individuals from the moment they *appear* in consciousness as something that cannot be otherwise. All the rules are already arranged and human beings can only accept them without thinking, follow them instinctively, without distinction according to race, place of birth, or the character of the person subjected to them. No situation ever appears in which one questions why one must be nourished, one is never put in the dilemma of either satisfying one's own needs or dying. Implicitly, however, this question is always answered in the affirmative upon eating.

These institutions are not only a structure outside the individual, into which he fits upon his arrival like a piece of Lego. The individual is in fact much more similar to a piece of Lego than that and, to the extent he exists as an individual, he is intimately structured by this network of relations that make up reality, he is *structured to fit*.

³⁹ The repeatedly announced "death of art" is a good metaphor for this experience. Art dies and returns, each time it seems to have reached a limit, but in reality it has only reached "a bit beyond where we are".

The development of art consists, in a certain way, in revealing and undoing this thick network of facts, which, in their interminable references between each other, make up the fabric of the real world. For his part, the task of the artist consists of questioning that reality's suitability with the structure of his self. Artists cannot ignore the arbitrariness of the rituals and beliefs of the institutional world, and they repeatedly need to take measures to de-legitimize it. Undoing the strategies of signification by which reality imposes itself is a patient undertaking that involves the mastery of many techniques and of control over one's own immediate drives and desires: the most important and urgent matter is that the artist must confront the violence exerted against him by each of the branches of the sure world that is put in crisis, given that, in fact, what the artist unravels in the process is a part of himself, that part molded according to the reality that is being discredited.

This disassembling is not done with the intention of constructing a new, more sophisticated structure, an artwork of exceptional delicacy and subtlety, but rather to begin a line of action that manages to counterweigh those existing structures responsible for maintaining the illusion of a reassuring reality (the one that reassures in the face of the intuition of death), which finds and denounces the specific premise on which each artistic experience is generated in order to destroy the certainties on which that premise is based and which were indistinguishable from art (from the artist) at the moment the experience began through objective reasoning. As always, one must begin with a premise and, by definition, premises are prior to reasoning, which is to say, they are outside of the awareness of that reasoning and exempt from scrutiny. One might say that each artwork concerns itself with revealing its own inconsistency, as it recedes a bit to acquire a broader perspective.

Art does not seek complexity, but it requires the use of complex techniques to disarm the strategies that keep meaning from appearing. What institutions are hiding, ultimately, is death, and this term is a container of meaning for something that is well known for its simplicity (during the instant in which it can be thought). To learn is to go backward, to expose as contingent aspects of the world that had been taken for fundamental, to reveal the equivalences between sequences of premises and their respective results. The artist is committed to the task, over and over again, of improving ever-simpler versions of himself, even if to achieve this he must build complex structures and make masterly use of specific skills, and also – as much as this may lead to establishing new (false) certainties – ones that are more sophisticated and resistant. Afterwards, he will have to destroy them using an even more demanding and precise use of techniques. It does not matter how many layers of reality these successive changes of perspective reveal, because a bit more institution always lies below, which must be uncovered and clarified. Indeed, each level that is removed leaves, in a fractal logic, a new one underneath, which is structurally linked to the recently born truth.

Any artistic experience, and any artwork that results from it, is born in an atmosphere that already contains a certain amount of ritual and liturgy, it appears under the pressure of a specific degree of *beauty* with which it must negotiate and which *obscures* the meaning that emerges from the artistic experience. For art to happen it is necessary to cancel that demand and there is no other way to do so but to go beyond the requirement, to learn the graceful execution of technical procedures to such a degree of perfection that the fascination beauty subjects the artist to, as well as any other viewer, is deactivated.

After ending each work, the artist will attempt to achieve that which precedes the one he has just finished, and not the one that follows it in a progression toward complexity. The artist does not advance toward additional improvements of the liturgy in which he grew, but rather moves backwards and rejects the trap of representation. He aspires to the creation of an *ex nihilo* artwork (precisely, an artwork without creation), but that is not strictly possible, given that it is a requisite of any artwork to have its origin in the one he will do next.

07 Art and Technology

Art must comply with the demand imposed by that fluctuation of priorities: to satisfy suicidal tendencies, or obey the directives of self-preservation, while also simultaneously being the object of a desire for the absolute, the satisfaction of which is found only in the disciplined development of specific techniques. This condition leads to an artistic practice that embodies a reconciliation between the death drive and the pleasure principle, but only for an instant that returns over and over again and which articulates the indefinite postponement, in its escalation, of that confrontation.

The attempts to escape an imminent death, although ultimately doomed to failure, are easy to consummate while *alive*. Most of the time, only a bit of air, water, food or medicine is enough for a return to normality. Reality is structured to facilitate the support of life, and offers many incentives to those who rejoin it. All actions in this sense are favored and praised, and when a small opportunity for recovery appears, everyone grasps firmly onto it.

Movement consciously pointing toward death encounters, on the contrary, all forms of resistance. To submerge oneself in the awareness of one's own mortality, it is not enough to desire it, to lessen control and let oneself go. Artists need to use precise techniques to bring *the truth* of reality to the fore, and thus reveal a different background, an image that, in its impacting and inconceivable novelty, momentarily

creates the illusion of a *finite totality*. The mastery of technique does not have the intention of negating the world, or life; on the contrary, its aim is to explain the significance of the structure of reality in such detail that it reveals its inconsistency, its incongruence. The tricks and gifts of reality must be explored and understood systematically. By way of this detailed narration of itself, it is reality that loses control and, through it, likewise the artist.

The artist himself is part of this sure structure of the world he perceives, and he must also, or especially, learn the logic of his own desires in order to acquire this (in)ability to *lose control*. The questioning of the artist's own biases (ultimately, of his attachment to life) is the function specific to the practice of art, in contrast, for example, to science, whose activity also consists of revealing underlying reality through systematic investigation, but which assumes, in its conception, that an objective reality exists, which the observer examines and that remains outside the equation.

The demand expressed by art for a situation to repeat itself in which a *more real* reality appears, has the immediate effect of discrediting that reality in which one blindly believed a short while ago. Each artistic experience is a new instance of a series of definitions of death, which seem to overlap with death, which seem to be death itself at the moment in which they occur (and only at that moment), and which, through a growing complexity in the mastery of techniques, of a greater sophistication in the handling of meanings, can reach over and over again that *simple* result: the impression of understanding the simplicity of death.⁴⁰

Thus, just as art refines its techniques of representation and in so doing increases the power of the tools with which the death drive exercises its pressure, to the same extent the administration methods of palliative treatments are perfected that prevent possible re-awakenings of awareness, by creating routines suitable to the effects of other definitions that might be formulated, by disarming other expressions through which death could be invoked. The persistence of artistic styles in history, or in the sum of an artist's body of work, derives from the necessary condition of a new form having to contain and substitute all previous ones. These technical procedures, very often repeated and thus fluidly executed, are those that constitute the beauty of the arts. They represent only the *announcement of the terrible* pursued by the artist and which lies beyond beauty, all those dead metaphors *that function*: they tirelessly seek a new, convincing definition that presents death as inevitable, that presents the inevitability of death.

⁴⁰ This repetition brings to mind the tragedy of Prometheus, devoured over and over again. And even more so in the version of him represented in the circus of the Roman coliseum, in which the role of Prometheus was played each day by a different person, whose liver was actually eaten by an eagle during the performance and who died as a result.

As strong as the artistic drive may be, life cannot be organized around death itself, and for this reason each of the sudden irruptions of death incited by the artist's capacity to simulate it is necessarily followed by a more convincing ritualization of death and of its representation. This ritual consists of an aesthetic enjoyment of horror, an appreciation of the skill shown in its representation, of the beauty generated by technical expertise, and which unleashes a new sort of horror, one of self-loathing at being able to enjoy the objectification of the real, which one might say is a less intense horror, but one that is again a delegation of the last horror represented by the word "death" (or which it had once represented). And the fact of being conscious of that repugnance, aware of being aware, brings even greater satisfaction, sedation and pleasure. This involves a guilty conscience and thus things continue, successively, in an infinite sequence of alternation, between what is said and what is shown. The victor in the chess game between horror (death) and its ritualization (its representation) is the one who can see more moves in advance.⁴¹

The characteristic that makes this process specific to the practice of art is its self-referentiality, which consists of an always renewed demand for the recognition of a simple fact: that the direction and force of each step are affected by the character of the person who decides to execute it, by the decision itself, by the position he was in before and by the change of perspective and character obtained by the new position. There is no one who thinks and writes about death who will not also die and who has no knowledge of it, as intuitive as this may be, and so all speculations are subject to the effect that these biases produce. The relative value of each step is measured by the number of movements that person is aware of in advance.

The tragedy of art is based on two unavoidable circumstances: firstly, the artist acknowledges that the means he needs to achieve his experience are the conditions that initially constituted and thus enslaved human beings (basically an awareness of time and language), and that the use art makes of them, in the long run, increases this dependency; that only by exacerbating time and technical thought, in other words, by submission to the structure of the chain of cause and effect, does immanence (animality) occur. In a certain way, this also represents art's failure, because if the apparatus of knowledge of art continues to grow endlessly it is because it has not entirely grasped its own enigma and will never do so (which is the same as saying it already has). Any and all operations occur within time and language, which are their condition. As a result, and secondly, art is tragic because its practice implies that its

⁴¹ In respect to the much quoted observation by Adorno about Auschwitz and in relation to poetry, it can be said that writing poetry after Auschwitz is only a barbarous act depending on which of these movements it takes place in.

impossible triumph would also mean its own annihilation (as well as the annihilation of the human aspect that gives art its meaning).

08 The Flow of Time

For those committed to the endeavor, any resource can be seized in order to again experience the perplexity that results from the contemplation of death, a feeling that is certainly only an acknowledgement of the impossibility of “thinking death”. No artist in history, not even those who painted the walls of caves, has been left unsurprised by the novelty that each work brings into existence. Because only the achievements that wound, that threaten and sever a part of the person who experiences them can be called “artistic experiences”. The artist who remains on dry land, within the realm of known procedures, will achieve a *beautiful*, convincing portrait of death, which is a contrary result to what was (un)expected (this result being *too* expected). The thickness of the network of representations of death in the mass media are made up of layers of these metaphors in which the ritualization, the progressive application of a set of signs and familiar conventions has disarmed the disturbing power of the idea. These images are *spent death*, fetishistic to the degree they are interested in everything related to death, except death itself.

Artistic experiences aspire to a territory on the far side (near side), where the artist confronts a situation he does not know how to manage and thereby recovers a sort of innocence. In this unique moment of the experience of death in art, a sort of anamnesis occurs: the (temporarily) perfect representation of life and death leads back to the experience of other representations that were perfect in their moment, it compacts that collection of *unique* anterior (and future) moments into a single one, into the original memory that the artist harbors within himself and, as a result, the temporal structure collapses.

The artwork as novelty fascinates the artist (and, sometimes, later, the viewer) when it manages to reveal in a convincing and consistent way the paradox that something well known as corruptible, a word, an idea, an occasional configuration of things, resists time, when the illusion of permanence is created within an uninhabitable condition.⁴²

⁴² Theater in its origins, for example, is, according to Roland Barthes, a situation in which the actors are simultaneously both alive and dead, subjects of an indefinite force in which the qualities of statues and living beings are combined, an illusion made possible thanks to the effects of make up. It suggests they have fooled and escaped death.

Schopenhauer describes the effect in *Manuscript Remains*: “Perhaps the reason why everyday objects seem so transfigured in still lifes and generally whatever is painted appears in a supernatural light is because we do not see things there in the flow of time and in the connection of cause and effect... On the contrary, we are whisked away by that eternal flow of all things and sections to a dead and silent eternity”.⁴³

This is also noted by T.W. Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*: “Artworks were always meant to endure; it is related to their concept, that of objectivation. Through duration art protests against death; the paradoxically transient eternity of artworks is the allegory of an eternity bare of semblance. Art is the semblance of what is beyond death’s reach.”⁴⁴ The genre of *vanitas*, which reached its zenith in the mid-17th century, is the exemplary result of this phenomenon. The painters’ technical proficiency at representing flowers and fruits achieved such perfection in the simulation of the living that the paintings (their permanence contrary to intuition) shook temporal structures and led viewers to an astonishing rupture in the chain of causality, of fact, only to remind them of its inevitability, and thus of the transitory nature of their lives.⁴⁵

The difference between the living and the eternal may be perceived but not named (it is found only “on the verge of being named”), given that when it presents itself it always does so *for the first time* and as something recently discovered. Techniques of representation have invariably been developed in a “beyond”, with the intention of finding new ways for this effect to re-present itself, to show the living and the dead repeatedly in the same light, and to later emphasize their differences in a precise and implacable way. The fascination exercised by the misunderstood and erroneous identification of human beings and machines that has occurred in the sequence of improvements of automatons in history is another result of this effect.

The artist, in his imagination, tries to obtain a formal, unnamable realization that resists any explanation, for this is the condition required by the representation of that void which the experience of death opens. But then, as a result of his own determination to reach that void, inevitably an objectification, a ritualization, occurs. *Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter*

⁴³ *Manuscript Remains*, Vol. I, § 80, Schopenhauer.

⁴⁴ Artworks protest against the death the artist seeks, they protest against that from which they originated. See *Art and the Object*.

⁴⁵ In this sense, embalming can be seen as a technique of representation, and mummies as an example of this effect of “still life”: the accidental discovery of a mummified body must have profoundly affected those who could recognize in it a deceased person, having died, in some instances, many years earlier, thereby making them feel they were in the presence of eternal life.

and betrays its intention, never fully reached, of exhaustively explaining death; it loses its opportunity to overflow the discourse and reveal true astonishment, in silence.

09 Art, a Therapy

Abstract death, which is evoked by the fading of objects and situations, or the death of others, does not affect art, except to the degree it (re)presents the artist himself, his own death. The relationship between an artist and his artistic practice is as subjective and personal as the one he has with his own death, as personal as the relationship any human being has with his own demise.

The sincerity of an artwork (of an artist) is not something that can be evaluated. The signs the work reveals – the choice of subject, the precision of its execution or the expertise in the techniques used – can be interpreted indistinctly in one way or its opposite, as if they were intended to serve that awareness of death, or on the contrary, to obscure the knowledge the artist might have of his human condition. Thus, when someone criticizes an artist or an artwork, he is only becoming aware of his own understanding of the artist's intentions, of his own knowledge of the techniques used to make the artwork, of his awareness of his own death and of his own desires and intentions.

In fact, the interpretation of those signs by which one might try to establish the value of an artwork, or more exactly, to evaluate whether, in a particular case, it is art or not, must take into consideration such a precise combination of references that a minimum shift of the viewer's perspective, or of the artwork, can invert the perception of what was the intention and knowledge that guided the author when he made it. Each person is only sensitive to his own definition of death, an exact formula that his awareness unleashes at a given moment, and never in the same way. The evaluation of the relevance of an artwork is carried out only partially, without any certainty, by a sort of *family resemblance* to other works, with other people and other situations, in which superimposed similarities exist, even if there is no characteristic common to them all.

All artworks are the result of an experience close to art if the person who has realized them believes, sincerely, that they are so, if, in a constant search to renew awareness, he believes in the sincerity of his intentions. Widely known artists and solitary hermits (even people who are not nominally "artists") are equal in this respect: if their intention was sincere, they have reached their goal. Errors in this area are not due to ignorance, but rather to lack of courage and to the falseness that derives from such a lack.

Many works of the past are representations of death that were created to be experienced specifically by an artist and at a precise moment, and which emerged due to the urgency marked by those particular conditions: they are now mostly interpreted by people in other situations and who see the importance of these works in adherent characteristics, whose sole purpose is the integration of the works into the structure of reality, by suffocating their artistic value. Viewers can exercise their democratic right to enjoy what they like of these works, but by doing so they will find it difficult to grasp what is specific and unique about them.

The technical qualities of artworks may be partly responsible for the difficulty many viewers have in appreciating the uniqueness of these objects. The delicate differences that sophisticated techniques bring to the work aim to resolve certain specific issues and have been progressively developed, in ever more subtle nuances, in order to precisely fit the person and the problem they resolve, in accordance to the configuration of the reality they must disintegrate. The fact that a viewer may not know the subtleties of the techniques used by the artist may mean a complete disposition to surrender to the fascination that these exercise on him. The purpose of acquiring the necessary knowledge to understand the skill with which a technique has been applied is not to make a more accurate evaluation of the quality of the work (the quality of the artist), but rather to allow the viewer to remove the value adherent to the expert use of that technique, to let him experience the void that lies beyond beauty. Techniques are learnt so that their effects lose power over those who use them or contemplate their results.

Art is a personal therapy, but not a therapy that heals, as is often claimed, by offering solace, or by helping one to cope with life's sufferings. Many expressions of religion, science, and philosophy are designed to treat that condition, to facilitate the acceptance of the fact that one is going to die, to make life more livable. Art, on the contrary, is a therapy designed to combat the pains caused by a profane existence. Art exists to recover anguish, to seek unease, to open up space for horror.

Only two options are available to human beings to face the unavoidable latent presence of death in daily life: the solitude of art, which deepens their own subjectivity in order to make death momentarily evident, or the narcotic protocols of the schemas of production. Over the long run, however, even art helps to make life more bearable and to create more sophisticated mechanisms of self-preservation, more powerful narcotics; indeed, it may be that the practice of art is, ultimately, also undertaken with this purpose in mind. Because *this process of comprehension and appropriation neither changes nor transcends the natural fact of death, but rather remains, in the most brutal way, in hopeless submission to it.*⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *The Ideology of Death*.

