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AND IT'S ALL TRUE !

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The artist and his work, the curator and his exhibition, the art critic and his text: three emblematic figures of contemporary art, listed in the order of their symbolic value. In this triangular schema, the artist comes in first. He is attributed the exclusivity of creation, and the notion of author associated with it, he who can say "I" and generate fiction. To sum up, it is the artist who provides the latter two with food for thought. The curator gathers works and creates associations between them. The art critic plays the role of referee or judge, mediating between the work and the public. His text is a commentary on the work and the exhibition. Within this theoretical triangle the three poles converge. At times there is even a switching of roles, the artist becoming curator or art critic and vice versa. Overlapping occurs often, but the inversion of roles doesn't invalidate the efficiency of this schematic and the flurry of presuppositions that ensue.

For example, in an interview appearing in the January 21st, 2000 issue of the French daily *Libération* entitled "How a new criticism changed artistic creation in the 90's" curator and art critic Eric Troncy responds to the question "Does this attitude turn the curator into an artist?" by stating that "It requires the curator to say "yes" and defend his choices. The works encourage it. What good would a curator who is not an artist be?"

This affirmation by the curator/artist explicitly underlines the fact that despite the possibility of switching roles, the use of the personal pronoun "I" remains a function attributed first and foremost to the artist. For the curator, making personal choices amounts to overriding his traditional function to transform the exhibition into an artistic act. Worse, it amounts to denying all the objectivity of this work and turning it into an act of authority, subject to the arbitrariness of the "self" and the befuddlement of the others. In order to be able to say "I" and all that goes with it, does a curator or critic have to excuse himself and say "well, yes, I'm an artist myself"? Similarly, when an art critic assumes the responsibility of granting a particular meaning to a work through esthetic and/or political choices, a personal

vocabulary, or even his reveries and sensitivity, he does so at his own risk. He affirms himself as the author of his text without however having to excuse himself for having played at being a writer. It is here, simply a matter of knowing which position he who uses writing to invent his own proper relation to art allows himself.

Criticism is mediated by a specific language, the critic's writing. The American curator and critic Robert Nickas describes his practice in the following manner: "Art criticism is a literary activity sprung out of visual culture"¹. With the notion of writing as it applies to the critical text comes the question concerning the place of fiction in critical analysis. For just as criticism's place is neither exclusively in the text nor in the discourse that surrounds it, fiction's is not exclusively in the work of art. The question is not so much to understand whether the critical text comes before or after the work, but to read it for what it is, to envision it as an autonomous production that contains a part of commentary on what already exists and a part of propositions. Within the diversity of critical production, one type of text situates itself more clearly between analysis and writing: the type written about artists' works. In this case the critic's position is that of someone who writes with the constraint of an external object in view. Once the art critic has left behind the simplified schematic of the art world's triangular relations, once he has put aside his position as peddler between the work and the public or as the "layer" of works on paper, he can begin measuring the extent of his creative abilities through texts that possess an object of study and use it to create a specific world.

To define this relation between commentary and writing, Nathalie Quintane associated two words: "critique-fiction"². Applied to the genre of the critical text, this expression designates a criticism that fictionalizes, that is a text that analyzes a work and at the same time, cuts itself off and deviates from its object of study, a text that could also suffice unto itself. In this pairing of words "fiction" is the noun and "critique" the adjective. But the two terms hopelessly overlap. Once the critical analysis is associated with fiction, the latter analyzes just as much as it fictionalizes, and inversely, the criticism fictionalizes at the same time it analyzes. Every text that plays on these two motifs, critical analysis and fictional composition, can be considered under the angle of "critique-fiction". This expression allows one to conceive an indissociable relation between the work of criticism and the work of writing, the strangest path undoubtedly being the use of fiction within the work of art criticism.

Here's a bad example of critical fiction, because it's not a critical text, nor really a work, but rather one of these linguistic productions that accompany the presentation of an artist: his biography. The biography in question is Ad Reinhardt's as described by Felix Gonzalez-Torreès: " I read the book Ad Reinhardt made for his exhibition at the Jewish Museum. I was very impressed by his biography, by the way in which he mixed historical events with those from his own life. I had never seen that done in such a meticulous way. I was really moved by this because I think that social, political and historical questions should find their place in the studio, in the same way that

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they determine who we are." A biography traversed by elements of a collective nature places the artist in an existential relation to his historical context. It is simultaneously a political position of his work in the world and a way of playing with the convention of self-presentation through the biography. This is a kind of critical fiction.³

The critic confronts the work of art in two steps. First, there is the analysis that deconstructs and decomposes the work's constitutive elements into blocks: those concerning its origins, ties to the past and present, form, cultural references, the invented and imported parts, the assemblages... There is undoubtedly a list of blocks somewhere that simplifies cutting the work into slices, labels them and stores them in efficient way on the shelves. Then, in an inverse process, these cut elements are recomposed into a synthesis. The critic searches the shelves, chooses the cuts and reassembles such and such aspect of the work according to the needs of his own work. It is at this moment of re-composition that a certain mixture appears between the work's own reality and the critic's written work. It is also at this moment that the work becomes foreign to the person who made it and takes root elsewhere. Following these manipulations, what counts most is to maintain a certain demand for a coherent field of references. When a work (the work of art) is imported into another (the critic's text, one world's conditions of existence are matched with another's. In 1966's *Critique et Vérité*, Roland Barthes lays down a rule of coherence and exhaustiveness for this phenomenon, which he calls *anamorphosis*: "The critic multiplies meanings, he sets a second language, that is a coherent group of signs, hovering above the first language of the work. A form of anamorphosis occurs. This is because the work, on one hand, never lends itself to a simple reflection (it is not a specular object like an apple or a box) but also because, on the other, anamorphosis itself is a supervised transformation subject to optical constraints of what it reflects. It must transform everything, it must transform only according to certain rules and it must always transform in the same manner".⁴ All the critic's objectivity is thus not determined by the choice of a code, but by the rigor with which he applies the chosen model to the work, basing the objectivity of his descriptions on their coherence. For the analogy to be perfect, the only necessity is that it apply the same rules, whatever they may be, to all the parts of its object. Even the most arbitrary rules, provided they are enunciated, evaluated and applied systematically...

The critic today undoubtedly allows himself a poetic relation to his object of study. Freed from the idea of truth, he creates rules spawned from his own jurisprudence, his own experience in the field... And as far as that goes, everything can be true.

*La leçon de Stains (Pour une esthétique de la reconstitution)*⁵ is a text by Jean-Charles Massera about Pierre Huyghe's film *The Third Memory* written as a palimpsest of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.

The Third Memory is the reconstitution of Sydney Lumet's 1975 film entitled *Dog Day Afternoon*, in which the lead role, Al Pacino, is replaced by the character he

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portrayed, John Wojtowicz. Sydney Lumet's scenario is inspired by a news item that made headlines at the time: Wojtowicz's failed bank hold-up in Brooklyn on the afternoon of August 22nd 1972. The poster bears the phrase "And it's all true". During his incarceration John Wojtowicz denounced the interpretation of the facts and the deformation of the characters by the ideological romanticism of Hollywood. He attempted to reestablish the true story through the media.

Realized in 2000, Pierre Huyghe's film is an act of appropriation, 25 years later, by John Wojtowicz, of his personal and mediatized story, using the very means that stripped him of his voice, cinema.

In the society of the Spectacle, published in 1967, Guy Debord describes a phenomenon of "accomplished separation" between the thing and its image. The means of representation produced by the society of the spectacle strip modern man of the means to create his own image. These means of de-realization alienate him in a one-sided social relationship with the world.

Jean-Charles Massera is a writer. For this text he chose an extremely restricting position between two well-defined entities: Pierre Huyghe's film and Guy Debord's book. However, his re-writing imports one into the other, according to rules applied in a reciprocal sense.

La leçon de Stains reproduces *The Society of the Spectacle's* chapter order and paragraph form, as well as its grammatical structure and a part of the vocabulary. *The Society of the Spectacle* shows through in *La leçon de Stains*. Within this framework, the *Third Memory* is introduced through concrete descriptive elements. Instead of Guy Debord's general statement, "All that was directly experienced has been placed at a distance by representation", Jean-Charles Massera introduces the story of a living man. He writes, "All that was directly experienced by John Wojtowicz on August 22nd 1972 in a Brooklyn bank has been placed at a distance through a fictionalized, media representation". As the text continues, the terms that describe Huyghe's film replace those of Debord's text, and the initially excluded story of a specific subject progressively assumes a growing importance through increasingly detailed segments.

Massera's text therefore pulls *The Society of the Spectacle* towards conclusions other than Debord's. Take Paragraph 121's initial radicality: "Revolutionary organization can be none other than the unified critique of society, that is a critique that accepts the terms of no form whatsoever of separate power, nowhere in the world, and a critique pronounced in general against all the aspects of alienated social life. In the battle which pits revolutionary organization against class society, the weapons are none other than the essence of the combatants themselves". Massera's version integrates the "arms" into the "battle" waged against them because they are mastered by a specific individual (Pierre Huyghe) in favor of an individual who can finally speak in his own name (John Wojtowicz). He writes, "An image comprised of one's desires and demands must assume a form other than the unified critique of dominant representations, a construct that can come to terms with certain forms of dominant representation as long as it appropriates or uses them in a way that suits us. In the attempt to construct an image of one's desires and demands against the dominant representations and the behavior they imply, the arms are none other than the subjectivity of the combatants themselves". Jean-Charles Massera

activates the observation made by *The Society of the Spectacle* through the introduction of a subject (John Wojtowicz) placed in front of his media image.

Pierre Huyghe's version brings together the true story of John Wojtowicz and the fictionalized, media story by Sydney Lumet. It is a "third memory" that allows for the superimposition of the two versions as one. The rewriting of Debord's text represents a means of verifying this hypothesis by introducing Huyghe's film inside it. This is why chapter 1 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, "Separation accomplished" becomes "Separation critiqued" in Jean-Charles Massera's text. The separation between the thing and its image, critiqued in Pierre Huyghe's film, undergoes the same treatment in the *The Society of the Spectacle* as it appears in Jean-Charles Massera's palimpsest.

Yet, for Massera, rewriting Debord is not just a means to describe a cinematic attempt to reconcile the separate representations of one man, but also a process that allows for a literary response to Debord. Rewriting Debord's text, means allowing oneself to sharpen it. Sharpening a text that represents a dead end for the being who lives in the "societies ruled by the modern conditions of production". This "critique" of *The Society of the Spectacle* succeeds thanks to the increasingly detailed introduction of "fiction" elements: John Wojtowicz's life and Pierre Huyghe's film. Massera's text associates the critical analysis of a film and a text, thanks to the introduction of a man's true story: and its all true, might he add.

The relation that Massera describes between Pierre Huyghe with Lumet's film and the cinema can be compared to the relation Massera entertains with Debord's book. For this book also has a story, and can be quite easily envisioned as an authoritarian form or as one that imposes itself as such for all that concerns the critique of spectacular society, a society to which art today undoubtedly belongs. Guy Debord's text and the history that came after it, are brought together in Jean-Charles Massera's new version 37 years after its publication.

Therefore, just as Jean Charles Massera says that "Pierre Huyghe has perhaps chosen a path where the esthetics of appropriating an alienating form of culture (cinema) give way to an endeavor (an attempt) of re-appropriating the representations that speak in our name and place, an attempt where the represented subject is invited to reassume his place at the very heart of the spectacular mechanism that stripped him of his identity..." one might say that Massera himself has perhaps chosen a path where the literary form of the palimpsest applied to an authoritarian form of revolutionary culture (Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*) gives way to an endeavor (an attempt) of re-appropriating the text that prevented one from conceiving a subject reconciled with his social image, and even the existence of a film (*The Third Memory*).

The critique of *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La Leçon de Stains*) thus takes a form different from the unitary critique of this authoritarian representation, but comes to terms with this form of dominant representation in that it uses it in its own way (a "critique-fiction"). It thus proves that it is today possible to associate Debord's text with forms of representation that use forms of production from the dominant

culture, under the condition that it appropriates them and introduces a part of fiction.

In the same way that Pierre Huyghe proposes that John Wojtowicz take the place of Al Pacino, Jean-Charles Massera appropriates Debord's text and proposes that Huyghe act as a possible experience of interpretation. What takes place here is an enterprise of de-familiarization with Debord's text and at the same time a point by point "mise-en-abyme" of Huyghe's undertaking in cinema.

In this text by Jean-Charles Massera where *The Third memory* and *The Society of the Spectacle* are crossed, both become something else. They have both undergone anamorphosis and are now intrinsically combined. The turn of events is complete.

Very Well. In another genre, there is the artist Eric Duyckaerts who asks the critic Jeff Rian to write a text for his monographic catalog. So Jeff says, "Wow, great! I like Eric!..." Jeff is American and he loves his country's countless jokes. So Jeff says to himself: "Okay, I'm an art critic, I'm going to write a text for Eric with whom I love to joke around". That's where Jeff invents a situation from which everything takes off. His text is called "The Joke at the end of the road"⁶. Jeff sees himself as a salesman. He shows off his boss' "le Magister" (Eric) objects. He says that they're "things that allow people to think, that make them happy..." They all appear in an illustrated catalogue called "La Maison des Objets", and he also has some video tapes in his case.

And there Jeff performs Nathalie's critique-fiction and Roland's anamorphosis because he respects the play of connections in a world of American jokes. It's here, a salesman gone astray, mixes up his jokes, screws up the punch line, gets kicked out of the house by the farmer's pretty daughter and finds himself on the street out of gas. The next morning, we find him in the coffee shop of a service station. He talks about his job to a waitress and tries yet again to sell his wares. A long conversation ensues between himself, the waitress, and a client, the professor. They leaf through "La Maison des Objets" and see a hand with six fingers and two thumbs, Hopscotch boards made up of 0's and 1's, a puppet who looks like the Magister...The salesman explains how these "objects of reflection" are to be used, their instructions, the quality of their crafting...Jeff learned everything he knows from the boss, "The Magister says...". He gave him hints to sell the objects. The salesman admits to not entirely understanding everything, but that he loves his job: "and the truth is I like selling this stuff. I love it. It's the most honest stuff you can sell...I don't understand it in the same way as you, but I believe in it". He sees the magic in the stuff and that's good enough for him. He tells about how the magister makes him think, even without speaking, about simple yet important things like the ten fingers of the hands, or the logic of numbers...Luckily the professor who is there knows about the "Boolean Operators". He also has something to say about the hopscotch boards. Things the salesman hadn't thought about. The waitress says that the hand with two thumbs is a big problem for making change...They test the hypotheses contained in the catalog's objects. Each speaks about the objects in his or her own way, according to his concerns, desires, and abilities.

Through these dialogs, Jeff Rian activates different possible readings of the works. The objects spoken about during the conversation each adapt to the salesman's, waitresses', or professor's interrogations. Like all salesmen, an art critic has a specific language he must transmit in order to communicate. That's why Jeff Rian summons several discourses at once and mulls over Duyckaert's works the way someone can tell the same joke over and over again. "The critical insight passes here by way of the comic arm", writes the Magister himself about one of his videos. The mixture of an intellectual sense and of a wry sense of humor allow Jeff Rian, like Druyckaerts, to tackle metaphysical questions about the world, humanity, language and logic, in a naive and simple way. In this text a certain complexity is expressed in simple language. It operates in the trivial and metaphysical manner of the best jokes, based on a heap of cultural presuppositions.

Jeff Rian thus consciously plays the part of the peddler, that of an art critic who explains and peddles the artist's work. The text's fictitious situation articulates the relation between the critic and the artist, and places the reader in the role of the potential client who holds, in his hands, the catalog of the artist's objects. Here's an example of critical fiction that takes the artist's work along with it. In a certain sense, this text is a "What-If" touted by Jeff Rian, a simulation scenario, that is a possible variation based on Duyckaert's work.

With the "critical fiction" method, one proudly achieves a form of equality, a re-equilibrium of the hierarchies between the thing and its commentary, and a practically equitable exchange between the artist and the critic, a just response to one and the other's work. Robert Nicklas puts it in a very pragmatic way: "I've written a great deal about artists whose work allows mine to exist".