

From:  
*The Originality of the Avante-Garde  
and Other Modernist Myths*  
by Rosalind E. Krauss  
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## The Originality of the Avant Garde

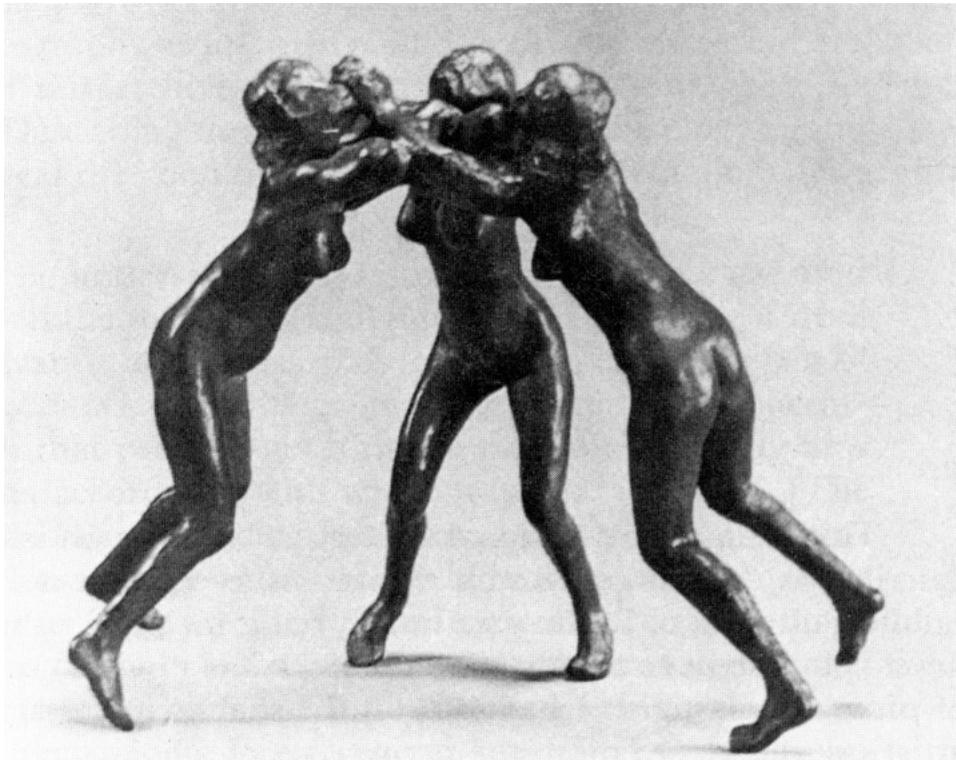
ROSALIND KRAUSS

This summer the National Gallery in Washington installed what it proudly describes as “the largest Rodin exhibition, ever.” Not only was this the greatest public gathering of Rodin’s sculpture, but it included, as well, much of his work never before seen. In certain cases the work had not been seen because it consisted of pieces in plaster that had lain on the shelves in storage at Meudon since the artist’s death, closed off to the prying eyes of scholars and public alike. In other instances the work had not been seen because it had only just been made. The National Gallery’s exhibition included, for example, a brand new cast of *The Gates of Hell*, so absolutely recent that visitors to the exhibition were able to sit down in a little theater provided for the occasion to view a just completed movie of the casting and finishing of this new version.

To some—though hardly all—of the people sitting in that theater watching the casting of *The Gates of Hell*, it must have occurred that they were witnessing the making of a fake. After all, Rodin has been dead since 1918, and surely a work of his produced more than sixty years after his death cannot be the genuine article, cannot, that is, be an original. The answer to this is more interesting than one would think; for the answer is neither yes nor no.

When Rodin died he left the French nation his entire estate, which consisted not only of all the work in his possession, but also all of the rights of its reproduction, that is, the right to make bronze editions from the estate’s plasters. The Chambre des Deputes, in accepting this gift, decided to limit the posthumous editions to twelve casts of any given plaster. Thus *The Gates of Hell*, cast in 1978 by perfect right of the State, is a legitimate work: a real original we might say.

But once we leave the lawyer’s office and the terms of Rodin’s will, we fall immediately into a quagmire. In what sense is the new cast an original? At the time of Rodin’s death *The Gates of Hell* stood in his studio like a mammoth plaster chessboard with all the pieces removed and scattered on the floor. The arrangement of the figures on *The Gates* as we know it reflects the most current notion the sculptor had about its composition, an arrangement documented by numbers penciled on the plasters corresponding to numbers located at various stations on *The Gates*. But these numbers were regularly changed as Rodin played with and recomposed the surface of the doors; and so, at the time of his death, *The Gates* were very much unfinished. They were also uncast. Since they had originally been commissioned and paid for by the State, they were, of course, not Rodin’s to issue in bronze, even had he chosen to do so. But the building for which they had been commissioned had been cancelled; *The Gates* were never



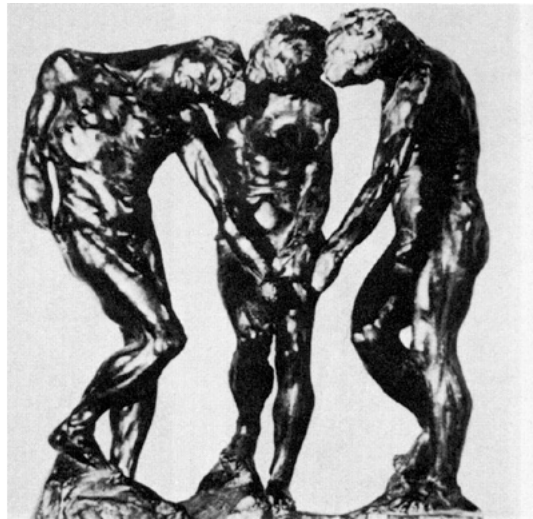
Auguste Rodin. *The Three Nymphs*.

called for, hence never finished, and thus never cast. The first bronze was made in 1921, three years after the artist's death.

So, in finishing and patinating the new cast there is no example completed during Rodin's lifetime to use for a guide to the artist's intentions about how the finished piece was to look. Due to the double circumstance of there being no lifetime cast *and*, at time of death, of there existing a plaster model still in flux, we could say that *all* the casts of *The Gates of Hell* are examples of multiple copies that exist in the absence of an original. The issue of authenticity is equally problematic for each of the existing casts; it is only more conspicuously so for the most recent.

But, as we have constantly been reminding ourselves ever since Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," authenticity empties out as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple. "From a photographic negative, for example," Benjamin argued, "one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."

For Rodin, the concept of the "authentic bronze cast" seems to have made as little sense as it has for many photographers. Like Atget's thousands of glass negatives for which, in some cases, no lifetime prints exist, Rodin left many of

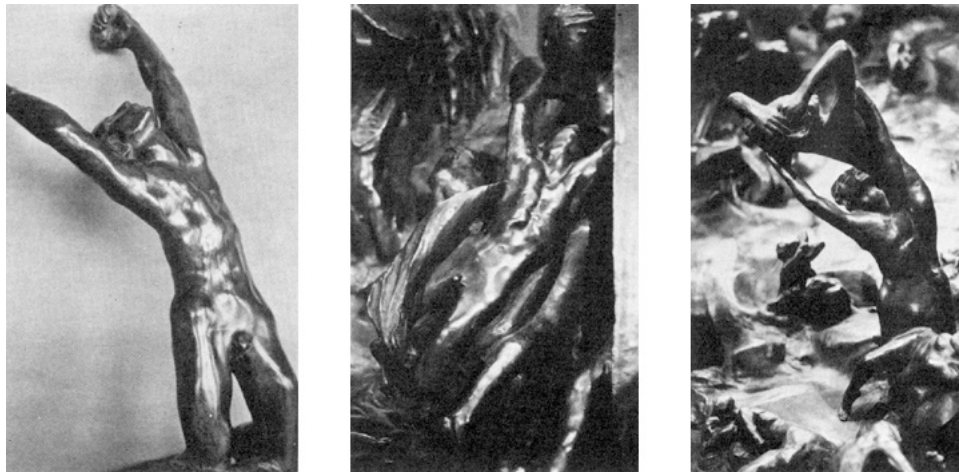


Auguste Rodin. *The Two Dancers* (left). *The Three Shades* (right).

his plaster figures unrealized in any permanent material, either bronze or marble. Like Cartier-Bresson, who never printed his own photographs, Rodin's relation to the casting of his sculpture could only be called remote. Much of it was done in foundries to which Rodin never went while the production was in progress; he never worked on or retouched the waxes from which the final bronzes were cast, never supervised or regulated either the finishing or the patination, and in the end never checked the pieces before they were crated to be shipped to the client or dealer who had bought them. From his position deep in the ethos of mechanical reproduction, it was not as odd for Rodin as we might have thought to have willed his country posthumous authorial rights over his own work.

The ethos of reproduction in which Rodin was immersed was not limited, of course, to the relatively technical question of what went on at the foundry. It was installed within the very walls, heavy with plaster dust—the blinding snow of Rilke's description—of Rodin's studio. For the plasters that form the core of Rodin's work are, themselves, casts. They are thus potential multiples. And at the core of Rodin's massive output is the structural proliferation born of this multiplicity.

In the tremulousness of their balance, *The Three Nymphs* compose a figure of spontaneity—a figure somewhat discomposed by the realization that these three are identical casts of the same model; just as the magnificent sense of improvisatory gesture is strangely bracketed by the recognition that *The Two Dancers* are not simply spiritual, but mechanical twins. *The Three Shades*, the composition that crowns *The Gates of Hell*, is likewise a production of multiples, three identical figures, triple-cast, in the face of which it would make no sense—as little as with the nymphs or dancers—to ask which of the three is the original. *The Gates*



Auguste Rodin. *The Prodigal Son* (left). *Gates of Hell* (center and right).

themselves are another example of the modular working of Rodin's imagination, with the same figure compulsively repeated, repositioned, recoupled, recombined.<sup>1</sup> If bronze casting is that end of the sculptural spectrum which is inherently multiple, the forming of the figurative originals is, we would have thought, at the *other* end—the pole consecrated to uniqueness. But Rodin's working procedures force the fact of reproduction to traverse the *full length* of this spectrum.

Now, nothing in the myth of Rodin as the prodigious form giver prepares us for the reality of these arrangements of multiple clones. For the form giver is the maker of originals, exultant in his own originality. Rilke had long ago composed that incantatory hymn to Rodin's originality in describing the profusion of bodies invented for *The Gates*:

. . . bodies that listen like faces, and lift themselves like arms; chains of bodies, garlands and single organisms; bodies that listen like faces and lift tendrils and heavy clusters of bodies into which sin's sweetness rises out of the roots of pain. . . . The army of these figures became much too numerous to fit into the frame and wings of *The Gates of Hell*. Rodin made choice after choice and eliminated everything that was too solitary to subject itself to the great totality; everything that was not necessary was rejected.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Rodin's figural repetitions, see my *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, Viking, 1977, chapter 1; and Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 322-403.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rodin*, trans. Jessie Lemont and Hans Frausil, London, Grey Walls Press, 1946, p. 32.

This swarm of figures that Rilke evokes is, we are led to believe, composed of *different* figures. And we are encouraged in this belief by the cult of originality that grew up around Rodin, one that he himself invited. From the kind of reflexively intended hand-of-God imagery of Rodin's own work, to his carefully staged publicity—as in his famous portrait as genius progenitor by Edward Steichen—Rodin courted the notion of himself as form giver, creator, crucible of originality. Rilke chants,

One walks among these thousand forms, overwhelmed with the imagination and the craftsmanship which they represent, and involuntarily one looks for the two hands out of which this world has risen. . . . One asks for the man who directs these hands.<sup>3</sup>

Henry James, in *The Ambassadors*, had added,

With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honors and rewards all round, the great artist affected our friend as a dizzying prodigy of type . . . with a personal lustre almost violent, he shone in a constellation.

What are we to make of this little chapter of the *comédie humaine*, in which the artist of the last century most driven to the celebration of his own originality and of the autographic character of his own kneading of matter into formal life, *that* artist, should have given his own work over to an afterlife of mechanical reproduction? Are we to think that in this peculiar last testimony Rodin acknowledged the extent to which his was an art of reproduction, of multiples without originals?

But at a second remove, what are we to make of our own squeamishness at the thought of the future of posthumous casting that awaits Rodin's work? Are we not involved here in clinging to a culture of originals which has no place among the reproductive mediums? Within the current photography market this culture of the original—the vintage print—is hard at work. The vintage print is specified as one made “close to the aesthetic moment”—and thus an object made not only by the photographer himself, but produced, as well, contemporaneously with the taking of the image. This is of course a mechanical view of authorship—one that does not acknowledge that some photographers are less good printers than the printers they hire; or that years after the fact photographers reedit and recrop older images, sometimes vastly improving them; or that it is possible to re-create old papers and old chemical compounds and thus to resurrect the look

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

of the nineteenth-century vintage print, so that authenticity need not be a function of the history of technology.

But the formula that specifies a photographic original as a print made “close to the aesthetic moment” is obviously a formula dictated by the art historical notion of period style and applied to the practice of connoisseurship. A period style is a special form of coherence that cannot be fraudulently breached. The authenticity folded into the concept of *style* is a product of the way style is conceived as having been generated: that is, collectively and unconsciously. Thus an individual could not, by definition, consciously will a style. Later copies will be exposed precisely because they are not of the period; it is exactly that shift in sensibility that will get the chiaroscuro wrong, make the outlines too harsh or too muddy, disrupt the older patterns of coherence. It is this concept of period style that we feel the 1978 cast of *The Gates of Hell* will violate. We do not care if the copyright papers are all in order; for what is at stake are the aesthetic rights of style based on a culture of originals. Sitting in the little theater, watching the newest *Gates* being cast, watching this violation, we want to call out, “Fraud.”

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Now why would one begin a discussion of avant-garde art with this story about Rodin and casts and copyrights? Particularly since Rodin strikes one as the very last artist to introduce to the subject, so popular was he during his lifetime, so celebrated, and so quickly induced to participate in the transformation of his own work into kitsch.

The avant-garde artist has worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic. He has also preached a variety of creeds. One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality. By originality, here, I mean more than just the kind of revolt against tradition that echoes in Ezra Pound’s “Make it new!” or sounds in the futurists’ promise to destroy the museums that cover Italy as though “with countless cemeteries.” More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. Marinetti, thrown from his automobile one evening in 1909 into a factory ditch filled with water, emerges as if from amniotic fluid to be born—without ancestors—a futurist. This parable of absolute self-creation that begins the first *Futurist Manifesto* functions as a model for what is meant by originality among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté. Hence Brancusi’s dictum, “When we are no longer children, we are already dead.” Or again, the self as origin has the potential for continual acts of regeneration, a perpetua-

tion of self-birth. Hence Malevich's pronouncement, "Only he is alive who rejects his convictions of yesterday." The self as origin is the way an absolute distinction can be made between a present experienced *de novo* and a tradition-laden past. The claims of the avant-garde are precisely these claims to originality.

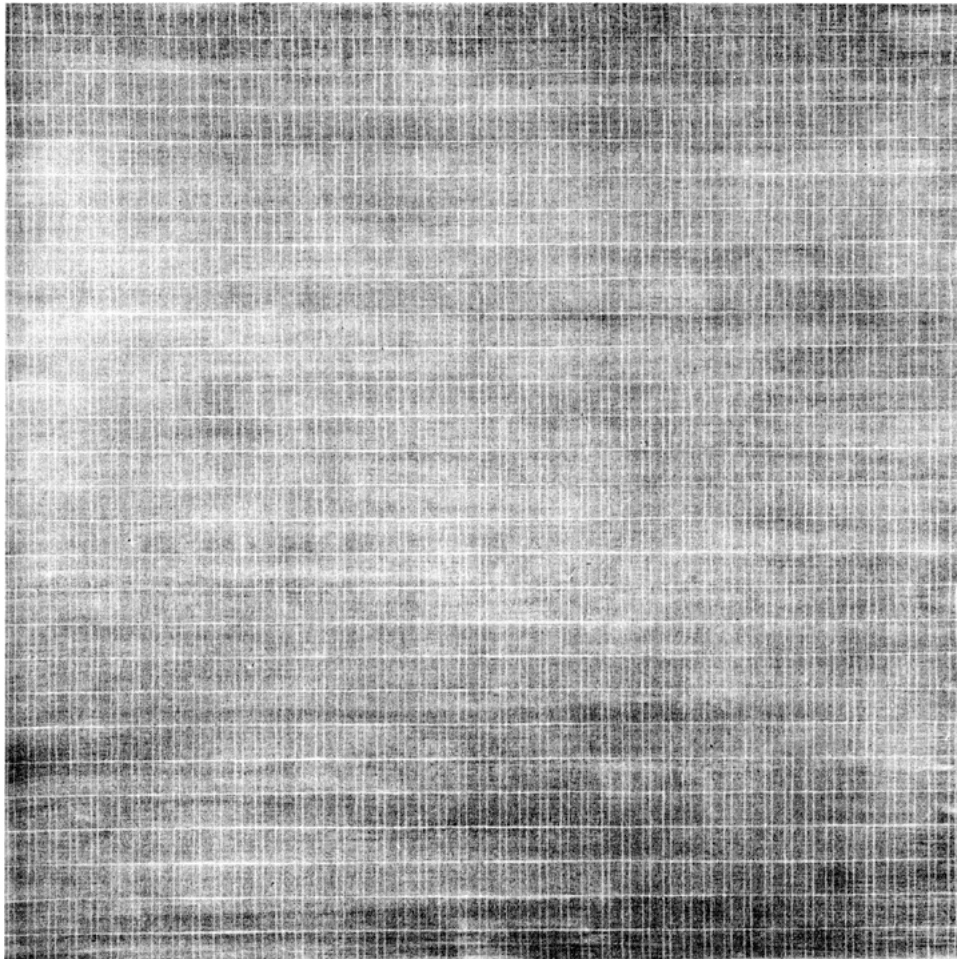
Now, if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that "originality" is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence. One figure, drawn from avant-garde practice in the visual arts, provides an example. This figure is the grid.

Aside from its near ubiquity in the work of those artists who thought of themselves as avant-garde—their numbers include Malevich as well as Mondrian, Leger as well as Picasso, Schwitters, Cornell, Reinhardt and Johns as well as Andre, LeWitt, Hesse, and Ryman—the grid possesses several structural properties which make it inherently susceptible to vanguard appropriation. One of these is the grid's imperviousness to language. "Silence, exile, and cunning," were Stephen Dedalus's passwords: commands that in Paul Goodman's view express the self-imposed code of the avant-garde artist. The grid promotes this silence, expressing it moreover as a refusal of speech. The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but—more importantly—its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence.

This silence is not due simply to the extreme effectiveness of the grid as a barricade against speech, but to the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusions from outside. No echoes of footsteps in empty rooms, no scream of birds across open skies, no rush of distant water—for the grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature onto the bounded surface of a purely cultural object. With its proscription of nature as well as of speech, the result is still more silence. And in this new-found quiet, what many artists thought they could hear was the beginning, the origins of Art.

For those for whom art begins in a kind of originary purity, the grid was emblematic of the sheer disinterestedness of the work of art, its absolute purposelessness, from which it derived the promise of its autonomy. We hear this sense of the originary essence of art when Schwitters insists, "Art is a primordial concept, exalted as the godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and without purpose." And the grid facilitated this sense of being born into the newly evacuated space of an aesthetic purity and freedom.

While for those for whom the origins of art are not to be found in the idea of pure disinterest so much as in an empirically grounded unity, the grid's power lies in its capacity to figure forth the material ground of the pictorial object, simultaneously inscribing and depicting it, so that the image of the pictorial surface



*Agnes Martin. Play, 1966.*

can be seen to be born out of the organization of pictorial matter. For these artists, the grid-scored surface is the image of an absolute beginning.

Perhaps it is because of this sense of a beginning, a fresh start, a ground zero, that artist after artist has taken up the grid as the medium within which to work, always taking it up as though he were just discovering it, as though the origin he had found by peeling back layer after layer of representation to come at last to this schematized reduction, this graph-paper ground, were *his* origin, and his finding it an act of originality. Waves of abstract artists “discover” the grid; part of its structure one could say is that in its revelatory character it is always a new, a unique discovery.



And just as the grid is a stereotype that is constantly being paradoxically re-discovered, it is, as a further paradox, a prison in which the caged artist feels at liberty. For what is striking about the grid is that while it is most effective as a badge of freedom, it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom. Without doubt the most formulaic construction that could possibly be mapped on a plane surface, the grid is also highly inflexible. Thus just as no one could claim to have invented it, so once one is involved in deploying it, the grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention. And thus when we examine the careers of those artists who have been most committed to the grid, we could say that from the time they submit themselves to this structure their work virtually ceases to develop and becomes involved, instead, in repetition. Exemplary artists in this respect are Mondrian, Albers, Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin.

But in saying that the grid condemns these artists not to originality but to repetition, I am not suggesting a negative description of their work. I am trying instead to focus on a pair of terms—originality and repetition—and to look at their coupling unprejudicially; for within the instance we are examining, these two terms seem bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy, interdependent and mutually sustaining, although the one—originality—is the valorized term and the other—repetition or copy or reduplication—is discredited.

We have already seen that the avant-garde artist above all claims originality as his right—his birthright, so to speak. With his own self as the origin of his work, that production will have the same uniqueness as he; the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes. Having given himself this warrant, he goes on, in the example we are looking at, to enact his originality in the creation of grids. Yet as we have seen, not only is he—artist *x*, *y*, or *z*—*not* the inventor of the grid, but *no one* can claim this patent: the copyright expired sometime in antiquity and for many centuries this figure has been in the public domain.

Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid *can only be repeated*. And, with an act of repetition or replication as the “original” occasion of its usage within the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation. That so many generations of twentieth century artists should have maneuvered themselves into this particular position of paradox—where they are condemned to repeating, as if by compulsion, the logically fraudulent original—is truly compelling.

But it is no more compelling than that other, complementary fiction: the illusion not of the originality of the artist, but of the originary status of the pictorial surface. This origin is what the genius of the grid is supposed to manifest to us as viewers: an indisputable zero-ground beyond which there is no further model, or referent, or text. Except that this experience of originariness, felt by generations of artists, critics, and viewers is itself false, a fiction. The canvas surface and the

grid that scores it do not fuse into that absolute unity necessary to the notion of an origin. For the grid *follows* the canvas surface, doubles it. It is a representation of the surface, mapped, it is true, onto the same surface it represents, but even so, the grid remains a figure, picturing various aspects of the “originary” object: through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas; through its network of coordinates it organizes a metaphor for the plane geometry of the field; through its repetition it configures the spread of lateral continuity. The grid thus does not reveal the surface, laying it bare at last; rather it veils it through a repetition.

As I have said, this repetition performed by the grid must follow, or come after, the actual, empirical surface of a given painting. The representational text of the grid however also precedes the surface, comes *before* it, preventing even that literal surface from being anything like an origin. For behind it, logically prior to it, are all those visual texts through which the bounded plane was collectively organized as a pictorial field. The grid summarizes all these texts: the grid-ded overlays on cartoons, for example, used for the mechanical transfer from drawing to fresco; or the perspective lattice meant to contain the perceptual transfer from three dimensions to two; or the matrix on which to chart harmonic relationships, like proportion; or the millions of acts of enframing by which the picture was reaffirmed as a regular quadrilateral. All these are the texts which the “original” ground plane of a Mondrian, for example, repeats—and, by repeating, represents. Thus the very ground that the grid is thought to reveal is already riven from within by a process of repetition and representation; it is always already divided and multiple.

What I have been calling the fiction of the originary status of the picture surface is what art criticism proudly names the opacity of the modernist picture plane, only in so terming it, the critic does not think of this opacity as fictitious. Within the discursive space of modernist art, the putative opacity of the pictorial field must be maintained as a fundamental concept. For it is the bedrock on which a whole structure of related terms can be built. All those terms—singularity, authenticity, uniqueness, originality, original—depend on the originary moment of which this surface is both the empirical and the semiological instance. If modernism’s domain of pleasure is the space of auto-referentiality, this pleasure dome is erected on the semiological possibility of the pictorial sign as nonrepresentational and nontransparent, so that the signified becomes the redundant condition of a reified signifier. But from *our* perspective, the one from which we see that the signifier cannot be reified; that its objecthood, its quiddity, is only a fiction; that every signifier is itself the transparent signified of an already-given decision to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign—from *this* perspective there is no opacity, but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.

This is the perspective from which the grid that signifies the pictorial surface, by representing it, only succeeds in locating the signifier of another, prior system of grids, which have beyond them, yet another, even earlier system. This is the perspective in which the modernist grid is, like the Rodin casts, logically multiple: a system of reproductions without an original. This is the perspective from which the real condition of one of the major vehicles of modernist aesthetic practice is seen to derive not from the valorized term of that couple which I invoked earlier—the doublet, *originality/repetition*—but from the discredited half of the pair, the one that opposes the multiple to the singular, the reproducible to the unique, the fraudulent to the authentic, the copy to the original. But this is the negative half of the set of terms that the critical practice of modernism seeks to repress, *has* repressed.

From this perspective we can see that modernism and the avant-garde are functions of what we could call the discourse of originality, and that that discourse serves much wider interests—and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions—than the restricted circle of professional art-making. The theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art. And throughout the nineteenth century all of these institutions were concerted, together, to find the mark, the warrant, the certification of the original.<sup>4</sup>

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That this would be done despite the ever-present reality of the copy as the *underlying condition of the original* was much closer to the surface of consciousness in the early years of the nineteenth century than it would later be permitted to be. Thus, in *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen sends Catherine, her sweetly provincial young heroine, out for a walk with two new, rather more sophisticated friends; these friends soon embark on viewing the countryside, as Austen says, “with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste.” What begins to dawn on Catherine is that her countrified notions of the natural—“that a clear blue sky” is for instance “proof of a fine day”—are entirely false and that the natural, which is to say, the landscape, is about to be constructed for her by her more highly educated companions:

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<sup>4</sup> On the discourse of origins and originals, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon, 1970, pp. 328-335: “But this thin surface of the original, which accompanies our entire existence . . . is not the immediacy of a birth; it is populated entirely by those complex mediations formed and laid down as a sediment in their own history by labor, life and language so that . . . what man is reviving without knowing it, is all the intermediaries of a time that governs him almost to infinity.”

. . . a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every thing admired by him. . . . He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades;—and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape.<sup>5</sup>

To read any text on the picturesque is instantly to fall prey to that amused irony with which Austen watches her young charge discover that nature itself is constituted in relation to its “capability of being formed into pictures.” For it is perfectly obvious that through the action of the picturesque the very notion of landscape is constructed as a second term of which the first is a representation. Landscape becomes a reduplication of a picture which preceded it. Thus when we eavesdrop on a conversation between one of the leading practitioners of the picturesque, the Reverend William Gilpin, and his son, who is visiting the Lake District, we hear very clearly the order of priorities.

In a letter to his father, the young man describes his disappointment in the first day’s ascent into the mountains, for the perfectly clear weather insured a total absence of what the elder Gilpin constantly refers to in his writings as effect. But the second day, his son assures him, there was a rainstorm followed by a break in the clouds.

Then what effects of gloom and effulgence. I can’t describe [them]—nor need I—for you have only to look into your own store house [of sketches] to take a view of them—It gave me however a very singular pleasure to see your system of effects so compleatly confirmed as it was by the observations of that day—wherever I turned my eyes, I beheld a drawing of yours.<sup>6</sup>

In this discussion, it is the drawing—with its own prior set of decisions about *effect*—that stands behind the landscape authenticating its claim to represent nature.

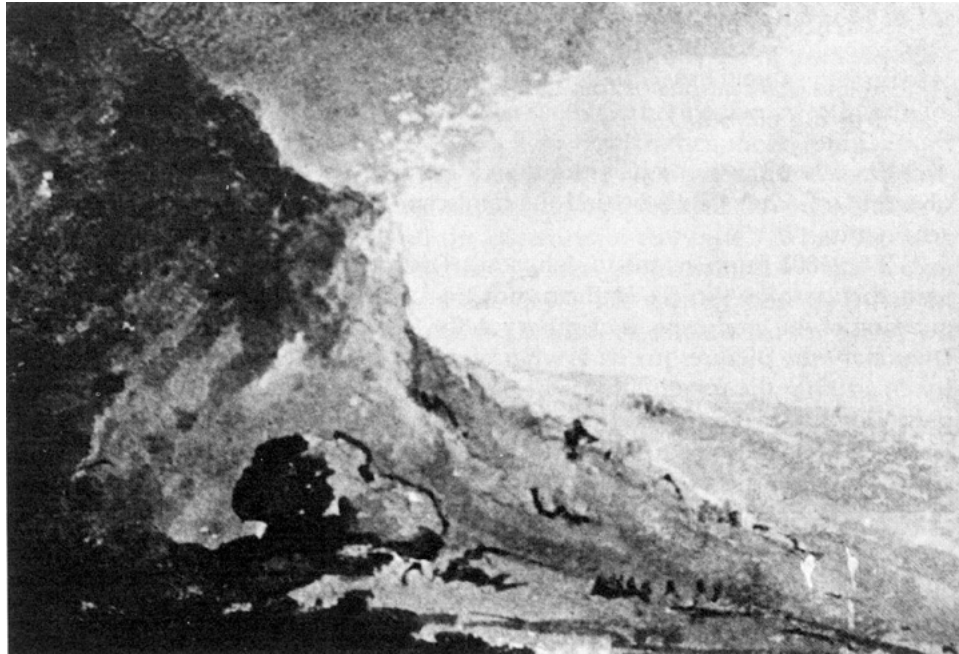
The 1801 Supplement to Johnson’s Dictionary gives six definitions for the term *picturesque*, the six of them moving in a kind of figure eight around the question of the landscape as originary to the experience of itself. According to the Dictionary the picturesque is: 1) what pleases the eye; 2) remarkable for singularity; 3) striking the imagination with the force of paintings; 4) to be expressed in painting; 5) affording a good subject for a landscape; 6) proper to take a landscape from.<sup>7</sup> It should not be necessary to say that the concept of singular-

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 1818, Vol. 1, Chapter XIV.

<sup>6</sup> In Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> See Barbier, p. 98.



William Gilpin. *Sketch for A Fragment. 1764.*

ity, as in the part of the definition that reads, “remarkable for singularity,” is at odds semantically with other parts of the definition, such as “affording a good subject for a landscape,” in which a *landscape* is understood to mean a type of painting. Because that pictorial type—in all the formulaic condition of Gilpin’s “effects”—is not single (or singular) but multiple, conventional, a series of recipes about roughness, chiaroscuro, ruins and abbeys, and therefore, when the effect is found in the world at large, that natural array is simply felt to be repeating another work—a “landscape”—that already exists elsewhere.

But the *singularity* of the Dictionary’s definition deserves even further examination. Gilpin’s *Observations on Cumberland and Westmorland* addresses this question of singularity by making it a function of the beholder and the array of singular moments of his perception. The landscape’s singularity is thus not something which a bit of topography does or does not possess; it is rather a function of the images it figures forth at any moment in time and the way these pictures register in the imagination. That the landscape is not static but constantly recomposing itself into different, separate, or singular pictures, Gilpin advances as follows:

He, who should see any one scene, as it is differently affected by the lowering sky, or a bright one, might probably see two very different landscapes. He might not only see distances blotted out; or splendidly exhibited; but he



William Gilpin. *The Waterfall*. 1774.

might even see variations produced in the very objects themselves; and that merely from the different times of the day, in which they were examined.<sup>8</sup>

With this description of the notion of singularity as the perceptual-empirical unity of a moment of time coalesced in the experience of a subject, we feel ourselves entering the nineteenth-century discussion of landscape and the belief in the fundamental, originary power of nature dilated through subjectivity. That is, in Gilpin's two-different-landscapes-because-two-different-times-of-day, we feel that the prior condition of landscape as being already a picture is being let go of. But Gilpin then continues, "In a warm sunshine the purple hills may skirt the horizon, and appear broken into numberless pleasing forms; but under a sullen sky a total change may be produced," in which case, he insists, "the distant mountains, and all their beautiful projection may disappear, and their place be occupied by a dead flat." Gilpin thus reassures us that the patent to the "pleasing forms" as opposed to the "dead flat" has already been taken out by painting.

Thus what Austen's, Gilpin's, and the Dictionary's picturesque reveals to us is that although the *singular* and the *formulaic* or repetitive may be semantically opposed, they are nonetheless conditions of each other: the two logical halves of

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<sup>8</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations on Cumberland and Westmorland*, Richmond, The Richmond Publishing Co., 1973, p. vii. The book was written in 1772 and first published in 1786.

the concept *landscape*. The priorness and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the picturesque, because for the beholder singularity depends on being recognized as such, a re-cognition made possible only by a prior example. If the definition of the picturesque is beautifully circular, that is because what allows a given moment of the perceptual array to be seen as singular is precisely its conformation to a multiple.

Now this economy of the paired opposition—singular and multiple—can easily be examined within the aesthetic episode that is termed *the Picturesque*, an episode that was crucial to the rise of a new class of audience for art, one that was focused on the practice of taste as an exercise in the recognition of singularity, or—in its application within the language of romanticism—originality. Several decades later into the nineteenth century, however, it is harder to see these terms still performing in mutual interdependence, since aesthetic discourse—both official and nonofficial—gives priority to the term originality and tends to suppress the notion of repetition or copy. But harder to see or not, the notion of the copy is still fundamental to the conception of the original. And nineteenth-century practice was concerted towards the exercise of copies and copying in the creation of that same possibility of recognition that Jane Austen and William Gilpin call taste. Thiers, the ardent Republican who honored Delacroix's originality to the point of having worked on his behalf in the awarding of important government commissions, had nevertheless set up a museum of copies in 1834. And forty years later in the very year of the first impressionist exhibition, a huge Musée des Copies was opened under the direction of Charles Blanc, then the Director of Fine Arts. In nine rooms the museum housed 156 newly commissioned full-scale oil copies of the most important masterpieces from foreign museums as well as replicas of the Vatican Stanze frescoes of Raphael. So urgent was the need for this museum, in Blanc's opinion, that in the first three years of the Third Republic, *all* monies for official commissions made by the Ministry of Fine Arts went to pay for copyists.<sup>9</sup> Yet, this insistence on the priority of copies in the formation of taste hardly prevented Charles Blanc, no less than Thiers, from deeply admiring Delacroix, or from providing the most accessible explanation of advanced color theory then available in print. I am referring to the *Grammar of the Arts of Design*, published in 1867, and certainly the obvious text in which the budding impressionists could read about simultaneous contrast, complementarity, or achromatism, and be introduced to the theories and diagrams of Chevreul and Goethe.

This is not the place to develop the truly fascinating theme of the role of the copy within nineteenth-century pictorial practice and what is emerging as its ne-

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<sup>9</sup> For details, see Albert Boime, "Le Musée des Copies," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXIV (1964), 237-247.

cessity to the concept of the original, the spontaneous, the new.<sup>10</sup> I will simply say that the copy served as the ground for the development of an increasingly organized and codified sign or some of spontaneity—one that Gilpin had called roughness, Constable had termed “the chiaroscuro of nature”—by which he was referring to a completely conventionalized overlay of broken touches and flicks of pure white laid in with a palette knife—and Monet later called instantaneity, linking its appearance to the conventionalized pictorial language of the sketch or *pochade*. *Pochade* is the technical term for a rapidly made sketch, a shorthand notation. As such, it is codifiable, recognizable. So it was both the rapidity of the *pochade* and its abbreviated language that a critic like Chesnaud saw in Monet’s work and referred to by the way it was produced: “the chaos of palette scrapings,” he called it.<sup>11</sup> But as recent studies of Monet’s impressionism have made explicit, the sketchlike mark, which functioned as the *sign* of spontaneity, had to be prepared for through the utmost calculation, and in this sense spontaneity was the most fakable of signifieds. Through layers of underpainting by which Monet developed the thick corrugations of what Robert Herbert calls his texture-strokes, Monet patiently laid the mesh of rough encrustation and directional swathes that would signify speed of execution, and from this speed, mark both the singularity of the perceptual moment and uniqueness of the empirical array.<sup>12</sup> On top of this constructed “instant,” thin, careful washes of pigment establish the actual relations of color. Needless to say, these operations took—with the necessary drying time—many days to perform. But the illusion of spontaneity—the burst of an instantaneous and originary act—is the unshakable result. Remy de Gourmont falls prey to this illusion when he speaks in 1901 of canvases by Monet as “the work of an instant,” the specific instant being “that flash” in which “genius collaborated with the eye and the hand” to forge “a personal work of absolute originality.”<sup>13</sup> The illusion of unrepeatable, separate instants is the product of a fully calculated procedure that was necessarily divided up into stages and sections and worked on piecemeal on a variety of canvases at the same time, assembly-line style. Visitors to Monet’s studio in the last decades of his life were startled to find the master of instantaneity at work on a line-up of a dozen or more canvases. The production of spontaneity through the constant overpainting of canvases (Monet kept back the Rouen Cathedral series from his dealer, for example, for three years of reworking) employs the same aesthetic economy of the pairing of singularity and multiplicity, of uniqueness and reproduction, that we saw at the

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the institutionalization of copying within nineteenth-century artistic training, see Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the 19th Century*, London, Phaidon, 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Steven Z. Levine, “The ‘Instant’ of Criticism and Monet’s Critical Instant,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55, no. 7 (March 1981), 118.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Herbert, “Method and Meaning in Monet,” *Art in America*, vol. 67, no. 5, September 1979), 90-108.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Levine, p. 118.



outset in Rodin's method. In addition, it involves that fracturing of the empirical origin that operates through the example of the modernist grid. But as was true in those other cases as well, the discourse of originality in which impressionism participates represses and discredits the complementary discourse of the copy. Both the avant-garde and modernism depend on this repression.

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What would it look like not to repress the concept of the copy? What would it look like to produce a work that acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals, that discourse which could only operate in Mondrian's work as the inevitable subversion of his purpose, the residue of representationality that he could not sufficiently purge from the domain of his painting? The answer to this, or at least one answer, is that it would look like a certain kind of play with the notions of photographic reproduction that begins in the silkscreen canvases of Robert Rauschenberg and has recently flowered in the work of a group of younger artists whose production has been identified by the critical term *pictures*.<sup>14</sup> I will focus on the example of Sherrie Levine, because it seems most radically to question the concept of origin and with it the notion of originality.

Levine's medium is the pirated print, as in the series of photographs she made by taking images by Edward Weston of his young son Neil and simply re-photographing them, in violation of Weston's copyright. But as has been pointed out about Weston's "originals," these are already taken from models provided by others; they are given in that long series of Greek kouroi by which the nude male torso has long ago been processed and multiplied within our culture.<sup>15</sup> Levine's act of theft, which takes place, so to speak, in front of the surface of Weston's print, opens the print from behind to the series of models from which it, in turn, has stolen, of which it is itself the reproduction. The discourse of the copy, within which Levine's act must be located has, of course, been developed by a variety of writers, among them Roland Barthes. I am thinking of his characterization, in *S/Z*, of the realist as certainly not a copyist from nature, but rather a "pasticher," or someone who makes copies of copies. As Barthes says:

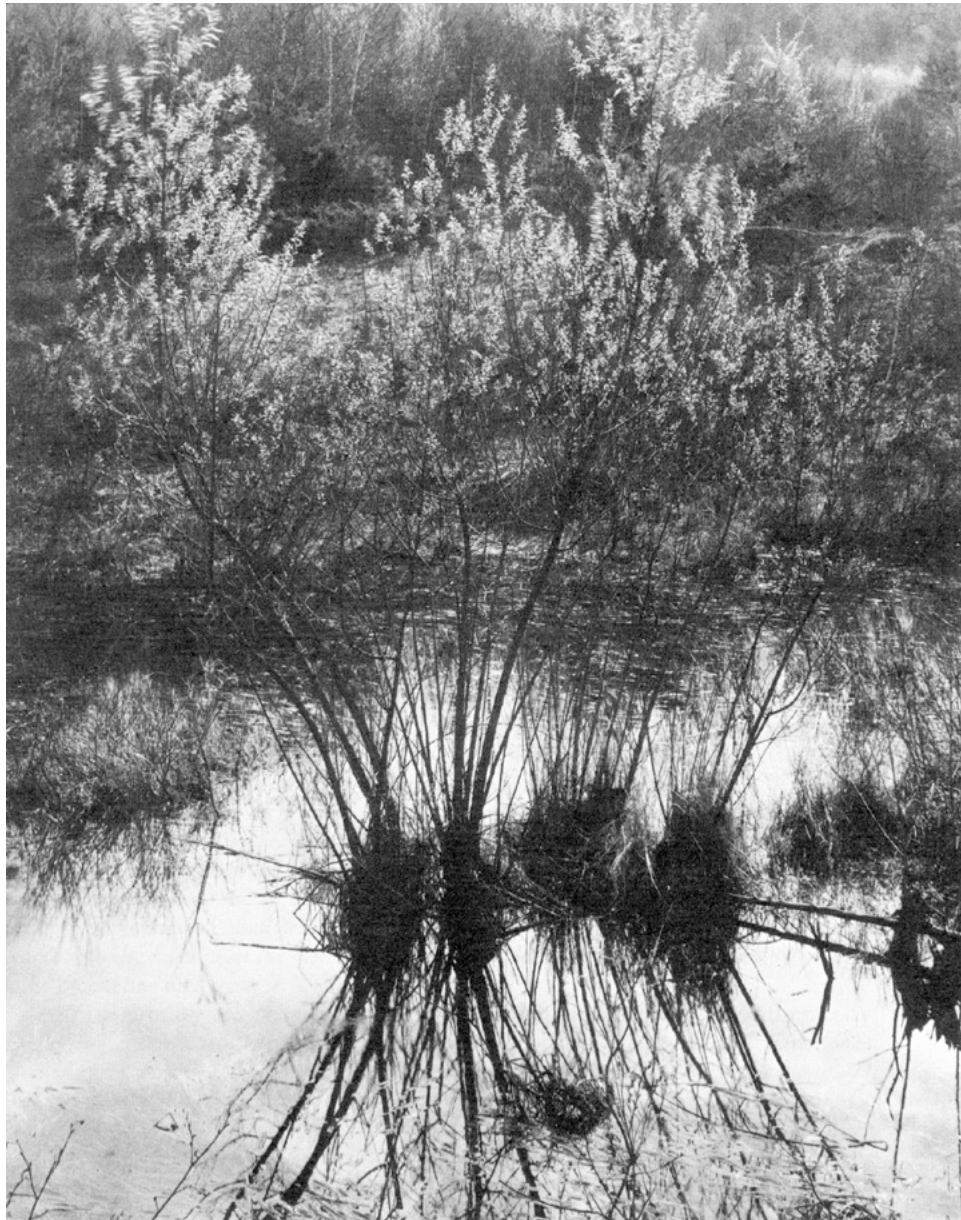
To depict is to . . . refer not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another. Thus realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy. . . . Through secondary mimesis [realism] copies what is already a copy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The relevant texts are by Douglas Crimp; see his exhibition catalogue *Pictures*, New York, Artists Space, 1977; and "Pictures," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979), 75-88.

<sup>15</sup> See Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October*, no. 15 (Winter 1980), 98-99.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York, Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 55.



*Sherrie Levine. Photograph by Eliot Porter. 1981.*

In another series by Levine in which the lush, colored landscapes of Eliot Porter are reproduced, we again move through the “original” print, back to the origin in nature and—as in the model of the picturesque—through another trap

door at the back wall of “nature” into the purely textual construction of the sublime and its history of degeneration into ever more lurid copies.

Now, insofar as Levine’s work explicitly deconstructs the modernist notion of origin, her effort cannot be seen as an *extension* of modernism. It is, like the discourse of the copy, postmodernist. Which means that it cannot be seen as avant-garde either.

Because of the critical attack it launches on the tradition that precedes it, we might want to see the move made in Levine’s work as yet another step in the forward march of the avant-garde. But this would be mistaken. In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide. The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact. What makes it more than a journalistic one is a conception of the discourse that has brought it to a close. This is a complex of cultural practices, among them a demythologizing criticism and a truly postmodernist art, both of them acting now to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition. It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication.

*Washington, D. C., 1981*

## Introductory Note to **Sincerely Yours**

*After its initial publication, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" drew an immediate response from Professor Albert Elsen, the organizer of the National Gallery of Art's Rodin Rediscovered. In a four-page letter to the editors of October, Elsen attacked the essay's discussion of Rodin's relation to the question of originals and originality, dismissing any possibility that the status of these concepts might be problematic. Writing that my text seemed to have ignored the exhibition's catalogue, "which includes essays by the former director of the Louvre on 'An Original in Sculpture,' Dan Rosenfeld's on 'Rodin's Carved Sculpture,' and my own on 'The Gates of Hell,'" Elsen went on to repeat what he feels should by now be obvious. "Jean Chatelain shows that in France editions of bronzes have been traditionally considered original. One could add that just as with prints, then and now, bronze editions were and are originals. To speak of an original Rembrandt print is no different from speaking of an original Rodin bronze. "*

*Having decided that for me originality "means unique, one of a kind, "Elsen was anxious to counter this definition with Rodin's own. "Rodin's view of originality lay in his conceptions," Elsen insists, "such as his interpretation of the story of the Burgheers of Calais or his ideas of what a public monument could be, such as his Balzac. . . . In his time, Rodin's acclaim as an original artist did not rest on making one-of-a-kind sculptures. He considered his authorized bronzes and carvings, reproduced by others, as 'authograph' works, because they were his conceptions carried out to his standards. If a client wanted a totally distinctive marble, he would stipulate to Rodin that the commissioned work must differ in some visible, unalterable way from any subsequent carvings of the same theme. Rodin's public knew well the system of a division of labor that he inherited and relied upon to be productive and creative."*

*If originality can be rendered entirely unproblematic for us, so can authenticity. Describing Rodin's relation to Jean Limet, the sculptor's "favorite patienteur," Elsen adds. "Contrary to Krauss, Rodin had very strong and consistent views on authenticity. He recognized as authentic only those bronze casts he had authorized. All others he condemned as counterfeit. "*

*Equally unproblematic, within this context of reproduction, is the question of repetition. Thus, "Contrary to Krauss, Rodin's contemporaries were aware of his reutilization of the same figure, not only in The Gates, but in his free-standing work. In 1900, reviewing Rodin's retrospective and The Gates of Hell, a critic named Jean E. Schmitt wrote about The Gates, 'The same figure, the same group, inverted, modified, accentuated, simplified, combined with others arranged in a shadow, placed in the light, revealed to their author the secrets of sculpture, the mysteries of composition, the beauties of which he had only confused dreamed.' Krauss would have us believe that she and not Rilke, who as*

*Rodin's secretary was in the studio daily for seven months, has recognized the same figure in The Three Shades."*

*Having set the historical record straight by this series of inversions ("contrary to Krauss"), Elsen then attacked two more recent issues. One was my account of the film documenting the casting of The Gates of Hell, which had been scheduled for the exhibition but was not finished in time to be shown within the context of Rodin Rediscovered, invalidating my reference to it in "The Originality of the Avant-Garde." The other was my position in the essay "Julio Gonzalez: This New Art: To Draw in Space," which he saw as failing to "condemn the posthumous casting of Julio Gonzalez's unique welded iron works. " Regarding this as an evasion of the very issues I had raised in relation to Rodin, Elsen went on to present as my position on Gonzalez, "that since the use of found materials by Gonzalez was not metaphoric as in Picasso's work, and what he did with welded iron was 'a process,' many of the issues of direct metal working that would theoretically prohibit translation into bronze are also irrelevant." Expressing his indignation over this idea, as well as everything else to be found in "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," Elsen demands, "Just what do we call out when a critic invents issues, makes up contradictions, promotes a double standard, and reviews an event that has not yet happened?"*

*It was, presumably, this sense of outrage that directed the close of his letter. After a postscript to the readers of October, directing them to the "view of experts" registered in the "Standards for Sculptural Reproduction and Preventive Measures Against Unethical Casting," a view "adopted by the Art Museum Directors Association, Artists Equity, the Art Dealers Association, and the College Art Association," Elsen then gave notice to October's editors as follows. "cc: Leo Steinberg, Kirk Varnedoe, Henry Millon, Arthur Danto." Somewhat puzzled, the editors printed his letter in full, with the exception of that final, censorious, tag. Published in October, no. 20 (Spring 1982), Elsen's letter was followed by my "Sincerely Yours."*



*National Gallery installation of Rodin Rediscovered, Section VII: "The Gates of Hell and Their Offspring." (Photo: James Pipkin.)*

Sincerely Yours

Where to begin? Perhaps contrarywise: at the end. We could begin with the final paragraph of Professor Elsen's discussion of "Rodin's 'Perfect Collaborator,' Henri Lebossé," published in the catalogue for *Rodin Rediscovered*:

Why did Lebossé accept Bénédite's commission to make the huge posthumous version of *The Defense*? *Did pride vanquish prudence?* . . . Lebossé's decision is more understandable, *if not condonable*, when one reads of his problems just after the war in putting his business back on its feet, even with the help of his son who had been demobilized. Finally, Bénédite had the *le-*

*gal, if not ethical authority* as director of the Musée Rodin, and Lebossé had money coming to him after Rodin's death for other unfinished projects.<sup>1</sup>

These questions and their speculative replies cap the episode with which Elsen chooses to close his description of the career of Rodin's favorite *reproducteur*—a man whose letterhead bore the information “that he engaged in reducing and enlarging objects of ‘art and industry’ by a ‘mathematically perfected process’ and employed a ‘special machine’ for making these ‘counterparts’ in ‘editions’”<sup>2</sup> (Throughout this essay Professor Elsen's most frequently used terms for Lebossé's marbles is not *counterpart* but *reproduction*—a term to which we will return.)

The episode was a “scandal” in which Lebossé was “tragically” involved, although with the complicity of the first director of the Musée Rodin, who as beneficiary of Rodin's will had, of course, “the legal, if not ethical authority” in this matter. After Rodin's death Lebossé began an enlargement of *The Defense*, increasing the original scale of the work fourfold, which is to say, beyond that ever commissioned by Rodin himself. This was done at Bénédite's instructions for sale to the Dutch government as a monument to be erected at Verdun. Upon completion, we learn, “there was a storm of criticism directed at Bénédite for undertaking the posthumous enlargement,” and further, “tragically for Rodin's ‘perfect collaborator’, the Verdun enlargement became part of a 1920 scandal involving fake works, marble carvers who continued to turn out sculpture signed with Rodin's name, and unauthorized bronze casts of the Barbedienne foundry.”<sup>3</sup>

Now the major difference between Lebossé and the other “marble carvers who continued to turn out sculpture signed with Rodin's name” seems to be that their “fake” was illegal and his wasn't—by virtue of the authorization of “the artist or his beneficiaries” (General Code of Taxes, Appendix iii, Article 17), in this case the Musée Rodin, which is by law the sole, proper “holder of the artist's rights of authorship,” and thus the source of “legal, if not ethical authority.”<sup>4</sup> The director of the Musée Rodin, no less than Lebossé, approaches this question of authorship with money on his mind; for the museum's endowment is the right of reproduction and its income is derived from the continuing flow of originals.

The “legal if not ethical authority” is, indeed, central to the concept of the original edition and its careful buttressing not only by the Penal Code but also by the General Code of Taxes. For the law interests itself greatly in the question of the way originality opens directly onto the matter of contracts.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert E. Elsen, ed., *Rodin Rediscovered*, Washington, D.C., The National Gallery of Art, 1981, p. 256 (italics added).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Chatelain quotes from the relevant statutes in *Rodin Rediscovered*, p. 281.

As Elsen assures us in his letter, Jean Chatelain is very illuminating on the whole problem of the sculptural original, particularly the issue to which he mainly limits himself, that of “original editions.” “The special worth of an original edition,” Chatelain writes, “does not come from an objective character of its originality, in the etymological meaning of the term, since every edition is in itself an operation of reproducing a model which is really the original, nor does this come about for want of a legal or customary definition. It arises from the agreements made by the edition’s author with the buyers.”<sup>5</sup> The *buyers*? What do they have to do with the matter of authorship or the status of the original?

Linking as it does “the revolutionary upheaval which shattered the traditional workshop system and the advent of an individualistic philosophy, followed by the rise of romanticism and the development of the art market and speculation,”<sup>6</sup> Chatelain’s account of the development of the idea of the “original edition” has everything to do with consumption. The nineteenth-century buyer, he explains, was infected by the notion of originality—by which was understood innovation, creativity, inspiration. And, conflating originality with the condition of the physical original, he desired to possess the object that most directly bore the traces of this spontaneous, unrepeatable process. Because of this new condition of desire, “any reproduction of an artist’s work made by someone else, no matter what the process might be, is without real artistic value and therefore of an inconsequential price, for it no longer gives direct evidence of the creative impulse.”<sup>7</sup>

For the compound arts (such as bronze sculpture), which are “arts of repetition,” this new economy of desire threatened an absolute fall in value and required an immediate response. The “original edition” was the form of that response, a formula that Chatelain is quick to tell us “defies logic and linguistic accuracy [since] originality implies uniqueness; [while] an edition implies diffusion, multiplication, and series.”<sup>8</sup> But as in most economic processes the logic has little to do with semantics, or “etymological meaning,” and is instead a function of supply and demand, of what Chatelain calls “systematic rarefaction.” Again and again Chatelain stresses that the “original edition” is a juridical fiction set up to create what could be called the *originality-effect*: “The effectiveness of this formula remains such in the eyes of the public at large that we can see it used to give greater value to editions which, for want of being originals, will at least have the appearance of being so, by being numbered.”<sup>9</sup> At first, reading this, we feel that Chatelain is being facetious, or perhaps is writing out of a scarcely veiled cynicism. But this is the effect of extracting pieces of his prose from the full context of his presentation, where his discussion is at pains to explain the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.



reasonableness of the system and thus to account for the drift of his argument as it moves inexorably away from “etymological meaning” and into the determinations of the marketplace. Thus, dismissing the possibility of “competent authorities to . . . define what is an original edition at a given moment and for a given art,” and viewing their indecision as something that “only reinforces this feeling of relativism,” this former director of the Louvre throws the question into the arena of commerce:

Once again, as is the usual formula in a liberal rights system, there remains the will of the parties involved: it is up to both sides to define what they mutually agree to. . . . In our field it is quite clear that the bidder, the seller that is to say, eventually the holder of the copyright of a certain work—be he the creating artist or his beneficiaries—he alone is in a position to set the characteristics of an edition about to be undertaken. He decides how many copies are to be made, what the technical characteristics are to be, and which specialists are to be called in. The buyer cannot help but take or leave the conditions thus layed out. The most he can do, aside from simply saying yes or no, is to try to bargain down the price or ask for some special secondary characteristic—in bronze, for example, for a certain type of socle.<sup>10</sup>

The beneficiary is thus truly the holder of the artist’s “authorship,” for he alone, once the artist is dead, “is in a position to set the characteristics of an edition. . . .” And the buyer? Desiring an original—the object of his desire—he must do what he can “to bargain down the price.”

For Chatelain the wholly commercial/conventional nature of the “original edition”—which, in order to stress the oxymoronic quality of the formula, he sometimes changes to “original copy”—raises logical problems such that interpretation of the relevant legal instruments can often pose difficulties. As an example he examines a recent decree bearing on the Tax Code and treating the suppression of frauds in transactions involving works of art. This decree mandates that all reproductions of an original work carry the indelible notation “reproduction”, included in this category are “casts of casts.” Now, the problem, as Chatelain sees it, arises from the fact that the term “casts of casts” seems to limit itself to casts not made from the original matrix—that is, in the case of bronze sculpture, not made from the original plaster. What that would mean is that any cast made from the original plaster *even after* the threshold of the “original edition” had been reached (in the case of Rodin, twelve casts) would *not* be a reproduction, but would be part of an “edition” and in some sense—“legal, if not ethical”?—an original. This possibility does not seem compatible with the principle of “systematic rarefaction,” and so another reading of “casts of casts” is imagined

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

by Chatelain. In *this* interpretation (which he calls “more stringent”) all casts made once the limit of the “original edition” is reached, whether from the original plaster or not, would be considered “reproductions” and would have to be so labeled. Which of these interpretations should we adopt?

Technically, only the first interpretation seems to us to be justified since it rests on a criterion which is itself technical. That which is made from the original plaster is a proof, an edition; that which is not made from the original plaster is a reproduction.

On the other hand, the overall spirit of the decree of 3 March 1981 is evidently *to impose strict limits on the art trade* as to the designation of objects. One can therefore think that the second interpretation, *because it is restrictive*, conforms more than the first to this spirit.<sup>11</sup>

The spirit of this decree is to impose limits on the art trade, which seems among other things to mean shoring up that fallible market for the compound arts by the operations of “systematic rarefaction.” The decrees and codes to which Chatelain refers are of course articles of French law made with particular regard to a French art market that is taken seriously indeed. On this subject no one could suspect Chatelain of being facetious. Nor the French government. In October 1981 a tax on wealth passed by the Socialist controlled parliament was to have included privately held works of art. At the eleventh hour, however, Mitterrand, apparently convinced of the serious blow that would have thereby been dealt to the art market in France, exempted works of art from the bill. The following day the newspaper *Libération* carried the headline: “Vendez vos yachts! Achetez des Picassos!” No one here but the most heterodox left is going to joke about a market’s production of rarefaction, systematic or otherwise.

But Elsen, who distinguishes between “legal” and “ethical authority,” seems to want definitions that go beyond this commercial/conventional notion of the authenticity of “original editions.” In his introduction to *Rodin Rediscovered* he refers to the American *Statement of Standards on the Reproduction of Sculptures* (which he also cites at the end of his letter) for a criterion that goes beyond authenticity: namely, desirability. And there he writes that although “posthumous casts by the Musée Rodin are unquestionably authentic in the terms of the sculptor’s intent and his grant of the right of reproduction to the state,” they are viewed by these *Standards* “as less desirable than those made in Rodin’s lifetime.”<sup>12</sup>

This viewing, with its lessening of desire, is Elsen’s, not mine. Contrary to his notion that I regard the production of posthumous casts through the lens of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282 (italics added).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

condemnation, worry, and dismissal, I welcome the opportunity it affords us (who are we here?) to experience the conundrum posed by the “original”-by convention in cases of the compound arts; because, contrary to Elsen’s reading of my argument, I wish to explore the possibility that this convention is no less operative within the simple arts, thus raising the possibility that all claims to originality are equally conventional/juridical. Contrary to Elsen, this is not a worry, but a welcome: welcoming theory.

With those three contraries, we move into the series of statements made in Elsen’s letter which often take the form “contrary to Krauss”: for example, “contrary to Krauss, Rodin had very strong and consistent views on authenticity”; or “contrary to Krauss, Rodin’s contemporaries were aware of his reutilization of the same figure.” Indignant at my seeming contrariness, Elsen accuses me of inventing issues, making up contradictions, promoting a double standard, and reviewing an event that has not yet happened, all of this adding up to fraud. But what of the contraries to his contraries? What if his disclaimers make false claims about mine? Would that be fraud? Or would it be argument of the kind that theory often elicits from disciplinary orthodoxy? Let us begin *a contrario*.

Contrary to Elsen, I did not condemn the recent casting of Rodin’s *Gates of Hell* as “fake.” I specifically called it a “legitimate work” and a “real original.” But I also imagined confusion arising in viewers’ minds which would lead them to brand the work as fake or counterfeit. After all, this confusion has, historically, arisen in relation to Rodin’s own standard shop practices. Elsen himself cites instances of it: “There was a storm of criticism directed at Bénédicté for undertaking the posthumous enlargement. Many people misunderstood the enlarging process and did not realize that for Rodin it was not to be strictly mechanical. There was published criticism that Lebossé had betrayed Rodin. . . .”<sup>13</sup> If this misunderstanding could have arisen in Rodin’s day, despite the fact that, as Elsen tells us, “Rodin’s public knew well the system of a division of labor that he inherited and relied upon to be productive and creative,” how could it not occur even more insistently now? That it *does* occur is mentioned over and over by Elsen and his collaborators in the catalogue *Rodin Rediscovered*. They cannot seem to shake off the nag of this (“uninformed”) public doubt. In discussing “Rodin’s Carved Sculpture” Daniel Rosenfeld describes the corps of workmen that surrounded the master in his studio—“between 1900 and 1910 nearly fifty individuals were involved with the execution of Rodin’s marble sculptures”—and begins his account of the atelier with the sentence: “The multiple marble examples of *Eve* [12 or more] raise the question of originality and authenticity in Rodin’s carved sculpture.”<sup>14</sup> Like Elsen, he feels certain that this question is an anachronism and would not have troubled Rodin’s contemporaries. But that it *does* disturb us *now*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

is acknowledged, for example, by asides like “the issue of their authenticity as products of the artist’s hand, so disquieting to some modern critics. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

By imagining the scene of this kind of disquietude and confusion, in which multiple appellations could be appended to an object—could be, and *are*—appellations that range across a wide spectrum: counterfeit . . . legitimate . . . authentic . . . desirable, a scene that is repeated not just by some uninformed member of the public but by art-historical experts, like Jean Chatelain in his arresting indecision about what to call those unfortunate proofs that have been pulled past the legal limit of the “original edition”—are they reproductions? they’re not really *reproductions!*—by imagining this scene in all the intensity of its indecision, I wished to inaugurate a discussion that could not be solved in the confines of a courtroom or even the chambers of the College Art Association or the Art Dealers of America.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> This imaginary scene, with its onset of doubt, could be staged anywhere: in the galleries of a Rodin exhibition, in a darkened room where a movie of the casting of *The Gates* is shown, or in a meeting with the education department of a museum where a discussion about how to explain very late posthumous casts to a possibly dubious public takes place. It was at the last of these three possibilities (but there are many more, of course) that I first learned of the existence of the movie of the casting of *The Gates of Hell*. Professor Elsen was at the National Gallery of Art in the early Spring of 1981 to describe the contents and layout of the forthcoming exhibition to the gallery’s staff. It was he who spoke of the film and the little theater that would be constructed for its screening. (The exhibition was specifically conceived as a suite of separate rooms, or imaginative spaces, in which different aspects of the problem—the atelier, the salon, the photographic dissemination of the work, etc.—could be gathered and collectively projected.)

“The Originality of the Avant-Garde” was written for *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, a conference held at the University of Iowa, April 9-11, 1981. It was therefore conceived and composed months before the opening of *Rodin Rediscovered*. The inclusion in the essay of the film and its screening as the imaginary *mise-en-scene* for the little drama of doubt depended on Professor Elsen’s own earlier description of the show. *October* 18 was going to press at the time of the opening of the exhibition, at which point it was observable that there was no film. But since I knew from other sources about the existence of footage for this film, I assumed that the project was late but that it would be screened in conjunction with *Rodin Rediscovered* later in the course of the exhibition. However, the inclusion of the scene of the “film” in the published essay was, reportorially, journalistically, an error.

And yet . . . and yet . . . “the staging of the film” is part of the staging of *The Gates* as a theoretical entity at the beginning of a general inquiry on originality within the conceptual frame of modernism. As such, “the staging of the film” within the theoretical setting of “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” bounced off someone else’s imaginary “staging of the film,” namely, Professor Elsen’s, as he informed a group of curators of the series of imaginary spaces by means of which Rodin would be rediscovered. These imaginary projections, these settings within which we locate the object of our inquiry, are important, and they are real. The variety of their actualizations is something else. Let us just say that in March 1981 Professor Elsen admitted to looking forward to that little theater and its “technicolor” projection of the forging of *The Gates of Hell* every bit as avidly as I did, although undoubtedly for different reasons.

This is a question of what could be called an “irreducible plurality”—a condition of multiplicity that will *not* reduce to the unit *one*, to the singular or unique—a condition that is inside the very existence of the unique or singular instance, multiplying it. Under this condition the compound arts are, simply, compound and no amount of systematic rarefaction will change this. The transfer of the idea from medium to medium in the production of the final “original” guarantees that inside that ultimate oneness is such a state of fission that the locus of singularity keeps receding from us.

Take, for example, the testimony of George Bernard Shaw. Like everyone else, he was conversant with the facts of Rodin’s production and the paradox that the sculptor with the “inimitable touch” was famous for works that he himself had never laid hands on. (Elsen: “No sculptor in history is more famous for having an inimitable touch than Auguste Rodin. Yet big public works like the *Monument to Balzac* and *The Thinker*, on which much of Rodin’s reputation is based, in fact issued from the hands of Henri Lebossé.’’) <sup>17</sup> Shaw was also aware that Rodin himself firmly located the “original” of a work in the clay model: “People say that all modern sculpture is done by Italian artisans who mechanically reproduce the sculptor’s plaster model in the stone. Rodin himself says so.” But Shaw begged to differ on this point. “The particular qualities that Rodin gets in his marbles are not in the clay models,” Shaw writes, insisting that the magical qualities of “Rodin” are somehow in’ the marbles and not in the other materials: “He gave me three busts of myself: one in bronze, one in plaster, one in marble. The bronze is me . . . The plaster is me. But the marble has quite another sort of life: it glows; and light flows over it. It does not look solid: it looks luminous; and this curious glowing and flowing keeps people’s fingers off it.’” <sup>18</sup> The magic is what Shaw prizes. But it was not put there by Rodin, because it was not *in* Rodin’s model. It is, we could say, the product of a collaborative effort between the artist, the artisan, and the physical properties of the material, but even that is too simple.

If the compound arts are irreducibly compound, that is because at every moment there is the intervention of choices and of skills. The laying on of hands? But even if there is only one hand—Rodin’s from start to finish—there is still the slippage that is inevitable in transfer, the multiplicity inside the choice-repertoire of the single creator. Working in a compound art Rodin had choices about how to produce the final versions of his works, both in terms of scale and material. For many years now critical opinion has been that Rodin’s choices with regard to many of his marbles were a betrayal of his art. “Dulcified replicas made by hired hands,” Leo Steinberg called them in the opening of his extraordinary study of

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<sup>17</sup> Rodin Rediscovered, p. 249.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Rodin, by way of meditating on the reasons for the nearly total eclipse of the artist's fame during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.<sup>19</sup> Even Elsen in those days acknowledged that the marbles were a problem. Writing to Steinberg in 1969 he said, "Admittedly the marbles are not his best. Much of the stone carving is hack work. We know that there has been no editing of his marbles on view in Paris."<sup>20</sup> Would it be an exaggeration to say that inside Rodin there were at least two artists and that one, collaborating with the least exigent tastes of his own time (Shaw's perhaps?), betrayed the other? And in that case would we not speak not only of a divided or compound original, but also of a divided intention: at one end of the scale, the intention determinedly to withhold work from finalization and production, at war with the intention at the other end—the intention toward manufacture? Thus even within the notion of the artist's intention, which Elsen seems to think is so univocal—"Contrary to Krauss, Rodin had very strong and consistent views on authenticity. He recognized as authentic only those bronze casts he had authorized. All others he condemned as counterfeit." But "neither Rodin's nor Gonzalez's intentions<sup>21</sup> count with Krauss"—there may be a multiplicity.

In the war that can develop between divided intentions is there not the possibility of an internal fraudulence, a sense that in doing a certain thing an artist has betrayed aspects of his own work? Informed taste feels this way about the mammoth concrete blowups of little matchbook maquettes that Picasso produced as sculpture during his waning years. This is a kind of fraudulence that is internal to an artist, seeming to be the inescapable result of the fact that an aesthetic idea cannot simply be externalized, as such, from the artist's brain. It (itself a ficti-

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<sup>19</sup> Leo Steinberg, "Rodin," in *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 331. The core of this essay was initially published as a catalogue by the Slatkin Gallery, New York, 1963.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> A word here about my high-handed treatment of Gonzalez's intentions in the catalogue essay for Pace Gallery, 1980: Speaking in his letter of my "evasions" and "double standards" with regard to Gonzalez casts, Elsen gives my position on this issue with a curious elision. He quotes me as saying that what Gonzalez did with welded iron was "a process" and thus "many of the issues of direct metal working that would theoretically prohibit translation into bronze are also irrelevant." What I wrote in the essay concerned the *process of copying* (not the truncated "a process") as it shapes Gonzalez's formal vocabulary—a procedure that involved making life drawings, translating them into more stylized versions of the life-model, and then, through a literal copy, rendering this second two-dimensional representation as a three-dimensional version in metal, a "drawing in space." Gonzalez's access to "abstraction," I argued, was thus a function of a *process of copying* that translates form from one material to another and from one dimensional space to another. On these *conceptual* grounds I think that Gonzalez's work opens itself to further translation and copying in a way that sculptures which enter the conceptual domain of the found object do not. What I think of the actual practice of casting Gonzalezes I did not say, but it would seem to exist in the same "legal, if not ethical" domain as certain of Bénédite's choices, given that French law vests "authorship" in the beneficiaries of an artist's estate.

tious unity) goes through stages and at any one of them it can be betrayed. By the artist himself. By his intentions. By his very notions of authenticity.

It was this kind of internal betrayal that I had in mind when I wrote that Rodin “participated in the transformation of his own work into kitsch.” Contrary to Elsen, I did not use this label for the Musée Rodin casts. I had in mind not only the bulk of the marbles (“dulcified replicas”? “hack work”?), but the kind of output described in *Rodin Rediscovered* in the section devoted to “Rodin and His Founders.” The following concerns the fate of a marble bust titled *Suzon*, which was worked by the Brussels firm Compagnie des Bronzes beginning in 1875:

In 1927, she was still found among the pieces offered by the Compagnie des Bronzes in five sizes, either the original one (0.30 meters) or four mechanical reductions of 0.26, 0.21, 0.16, and 0.12 meters. These bronzes of diverse formats and also the numerous examples in marble, terra cotta, and biscuit instigated many decorative combinations, such as mounting above clocks or on fanciful bases, found most often in Belgian and Dutch private collections.<sup>22</sup>

Did Rodin, we wonder, design the clocks? or the fanciful bases? Did he authorize this unlimited edition? in 1875? in 1927? At some point did it *become* “counterfeit”?

This authorization, the warrant of Rodin’s intentions with regard to authenticity—his *undivided* intentions—led in certain cases to unlimited permissiveness: “He contracted with bronze editors,” writes Elsen, “for unlimited replicas of popular works such as *The Kiss*, *Eternal Spring*, and *Victor Hugo*. Consistent with his peers, Rodin did not usually cast in limited editions, a practice that seems to have been introduced at the turn of the century by art dealers such as Ambroise Vollard.”<sup>23</sup> In other cases, such as the *Suzon*, it led to the authorized manufacture of objets d’art, sculpture-plus-clocks, the industrialization of the artisanal experience, the corruption of the aesthetics of handicraft by the processes of mechanical reproduction. The commonly used appellation for this corruption is *kitsch*.

But even where we are not talking about the extremes of mechanical reproduction bearing the authorized patent “Rodin,”<sup>24</sup> we have ample evidence of Rodin’s submission to the internal logic of the reproductive mediums, which is indeed, as Elsen tells us, “the division of labor.” This division, which had led one nineteenth-century writer to ask, “Is the artist one man or a collection of people?”

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<sup>22</sup> *Rodin Rediscovered*, p. 286.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> “The study of the handwriting of Rodin’s signatures hardly allows the assignment of a cast to one or another period since the signatures were traced by the founders and not by the artist himself” (*Rodin Rediscovered*, p. 292).

was equally applicable to carving as to casting. “Yet,” we read in *Rodin Rediscovered*, “bronze casting made supervision more difficult since it was done outside of the artist’s studio.”<sup>25</sup> During the course of Rodin’s career at least twenty-eight separate foundries were employed in the business of casting his work, making supervision difficult indeed.

As one of its contributions to our knowledge of nineteenth-century artistic practice, *Rodin Rediscovered* provides us with evidence about the degree to which the master acceded to the logic of divided labor necessary to the reproduction of his art. Elsen is able to report, “To the best of our knowledge Rodin did not actually participate in the casting and finishing of his bronzes. He left that to specialists who knew his high standards. . . . For more than fifteen years, he trusted Jean Limet to patinate most of his important casts and report on their quality.”<sup>26</sup> This report was needed, we learn, because of Rodin’s absence from the foundries particularly after 1900 and thus his ignorance of the state of the casts: “Since the castings were sent directly by the founders to Limet, Rodin, who had not seen them, asked about the quality of the casts as this letter of 3 September 1903 [from Limet] bears witness: ‘I was waiting for the bronzes which Autin sent me to examine the head of Mme. Rodin. The cast is not bad, but the chiseling in my opinion leaves much to be desired. One can judge this piece, which is very simple, with difficulty. . . .’” Having so quoted, the author of this study of Rodin’s casting procedures then adds, “It can be remarked, therefore, that the notion of strict control of the casts and the patinas by Rodin himself needs to be shaded, at least from 1900.”<sup>27</sup>

What, we wonder, then happened to this head of Mme. Rodin, the chiseling of which, in the view of Jean Limet, left “much to be desired”? For Rodin, Limet was one of the specialists “who knew his high standards,” and Limet’s opinion was that the chiseling left much to be desired. Was the work issued anyway? Is this what is meant by the *shading* that is needed for the “notion of strict control of the casts”? Does such shading also need to be applied to the notion of Rodin’s “standards,” Rodin’s “consistent views,” Rodin’s “intentions”?

This shading is required because of the extent to which Rodin participated in what I called (in “The Originality of the Avant-Garde”), “the ethos of reproduction.” Contrary to Elsen, I did not write, *tout court*, that Rodin “never supervised or regulated either the finishing or the patination, and in the end, never checked the pieces before they were shipped to the client. . . .” I said, “Much of it [the casting] was done in foundries to which Rodin never went while the production was in progress; he never. . . (etc.),” a view that is wholly supported by *Rodin*

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.



*Rediscovered* and is only rendered false by omitting the qualifying phrase “much of it.” Why would Elsen wish to misquote?

But Elsen’s contrariness increases as we penetrate more deeply the territory of this ethos of reproduction, which is, we could say, aesthetically trivial with regard to the master’s supervision of casts but formally quite material when we approach Rodin’s “conceptions,” such as his “rethinking how to compose a figure or a group. . . .” At that point Rodin’s frequent practice of composing by what Leo Steinberg has called *multiplication* becomes extremely interesting to consider.<sup>28</sup> The plasters, cast from the clay models, which had before Rodin been the formally neutral vehicle of reproduction, became for him a medium of composition. If there can be, *must* be, one plaster, why not three? And if three. . . . Thus the multiple, we could say, became the medium.

With the recognition of this absorption of multiples into the core of Rodin’s “conceptions,” this representation of the very means of reproduction, we begin to cross the bridge that both separates and links the material/legal/etymological original—Elsen’s one of a kind—and the imaginative/conceptual original, which is to say, originality: a function of the powers of imagination. But we are only beginning to cross the bridge, and still within its structure, we have a view of both sides. We can see the transition as the material aspects shade into the conceptual. We can spot the sublime creative confusion engendered by Rodin’s move to heighten the representation of movement—the breathlessness of each unique, fleeting moment of temporality—through the stutter of mechanical replicas, lined up side by side.

Contrary to Elsen, I never claimed priority in the observation that *The Three Shades* presents us with the same figure in triplicate. My reference to Leo Steinberg’s prior discussion of this phenomenon throughout Rodin’s work makes this obvious.<sup>29</sup> But the recognition of this aspect that Professor Elsen vests in Rodin’s contemporaries is not the same thing as interpretation. And thus the question of what this triplication might mean—with all the variety of its possible answers and possible denials—remains.

Its experience in 1900 by “a critic named Jean E. Schmitt” (did he earn his obscurity? we wonder) is entirely hostage to the nineteenth-century view that artistic greatness is the function of an ecstatic imagination: “The same figure, the same group, inverted, modified, accentuated, simplified, combined with others, arranged in a shadow, placed in the light, revealed to their author the secrets of sculpture, the mysteries of composition, the beauties of which he had only confusedly dreamed.”

In its effort to rescue Rodin’s art from the enthusiasm of sentiment and make it available to the rather sterner assessment of modernism, Leo Steinberg’s read-

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<sup>28</sup> Steinberg, “Rodin,” pp. 353-361.

<sup>29</sup> See “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” *October*, no. 18 (Fall 1981), 50, fn. 1.

ing of this manipulation of sameness regards the phenomenon of multiplication through the lens of process. The revelation of process works to expose the means of representation; in formalist terms, it bares the device. It is the intentional, shocking construction of a surface that will report not on “the secrets of sculpture,” but on the banalities of making: in addition to sheer multiplication, there is the whole panoply of casting “error” courted and magnified by Rodin, as there is also the phenomenon of modeling strategies (like the little clay pellets added to a given plane to further the buildup of the form) left in their most primitive state to be recorded by the final cast.<sup>30</sup> This baring of the device is not discussed by Rilke, nor by Jean E. Schmitt. It was, it would seem, not visible to them. Are we then forced to abandon it as an illegitimate reading, surpassing as it does the critical powers of the viewer of Rodin’s own time? Are we thereby compelled to say that because he didn’t, or couldn’t articulate this view of his art, Rodin didn’t intend these “accidents” that support Steinberg’s reading? But the accidents are too profuse and too stunning in their seeming perversity for us to dismiss them as unintentional. A view of intentionality entirely limited to contemporary documents is, it would seem, an unusable view: too rigid, too narrow to support the evidence of the work. It is also a curiously naive view, insisting that all intentions must be *conscious* causes.

If “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” adds my reading to Steinberg’s, this is because the concept of multiples explored there is not the same as the notion of multiplication (though my conception is not intended to *refute* his).

Multiplication, as I have said, is a feature of a more general revelation of the particularity of the artist’s means. It is this particularity that is welcome to modernist sensibilities and restores an experience of uniqueness to the work. In this experience of uniqueness is married the surprise (the originality) of the strategy by which the material vehicle of the work is manifested and the sensuous immediacy of that revealed physicality. But the notion of multiples does not resolve itself into this revised, modernist experience of the absolute uniqueness of the object. As I said above, it is grounded on a perception of an irreducible plurality, the condition of the multiple without an original.

Multiplication, as Steinberg develops it, opens our perception onto process, or production. Multiples are a function, rather, of *reproduction*. Rodin’s work was continually moving between production (the tiny clay pellets of the master’s modeling) and reproduction (the authorized “Rodin”). If Rodin was able (consciously? unconsciously?)<sup>31</sup> to manifest the processes of production within his

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<sup>30</sup> Steinberg: “The little clay pellets or trial lumps which a sculptor lays down where he considers raising a surface—even if the decision is no, they stay put and, in a dozen portraits of the mature period, get cast in bronze” (“Rodin,” p. 393).

<sup>31</sup> To say that an artist’s intentions may not be conscious is not to claim that they are therefore unconscious. It is to question a notion of causality which an easy recourse to the “unconscious” con-

work, why not equally the terms of reproduction? But these are terms that are deeply disturbing to the art historian because he cannot imagine a situation of irreducible plurality: a multiple without an original.

It is to this failure of imagination that the story of *The Gates of Hell* addresses itself. It is the story that Elsen's letter is so anxious to deny, even though it is, in fact, told by Elsen in the pages of *Rodin Rediscovered*.

For the huge exhibition of Rodin's work in the summer of 1900, *The Gates of Hell* were shipped dismantled, their montage to take place at the time of installation. But this reassembly did not take place; and so, as Judith Cladel reported, "The day of the opening arrived before the master had been able to have placed on the *fronton* and on the panels of his monument the hundreds of great and small figures destined for their ornamentation."<sup>32</sup> And then? *The Gates* were never again reassembled under Rodin's supervision: not during the time of the exhibition nor afterward at Meudon. Cladel believed that the work was not reassembled in 1900 because "he had seen it too much during the twenty years in which it had been before his eyes. He was tired of it, weary of it."<sup>33</sup> But that this weariness should have extended for the next sixteen years does bear some explanation. One of these explanations has been that Rodin never considered the work to be finished, and it was for this reason that visitors to Rodin's studio had to deal with *The Gates* in their disassembled state. Elsen's explanation is different. "Rodin's refusal to reassemble his portal after June first, 1900," he suggests, "may have resulted from the view that as it was, the work had a greater breadth and unity of form."<sup>34</sup> If this is so, then Rodin's "undivided" intention bifurcates, pointing in at least two directions: one of them, *The Gates* as we now know it; the other, the idealized unity wrested from a heaving, nearly barren ground.

Before his death Rodin "presumably" agreed to a new cast of *The Gates* that would be placed in the Rodin Museum in Paris. "This second, full plaster model was not personally assembled or directed by Rodin before his death in November 1917; it was done under the direction of the museum's ambitious first director, Léonce Bénédicté."<sup>35</sup> Elsen continues, "We know that from some time in 1916 until his death, Rodin was physically incapable of doing even the smallest amount of work with his hands, due probably to a stroke." But what Rodin could do with his hands is not really the issue, for the likelihood is that the work of reassembly was not even conducted in his presence. "Bénédicté insisted that the montage was done under 'the master's direction,' but from what we know of Rodin's health, this is extremely doubtful. If the montage was done at the Dépôt

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tinues to serve. See Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, New York, Scribners, 1969, p. 233.

<sup>32</sup> *Rodin Rediscovered*, p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

des Marbres, it is even more doubtful, as Rodin was very much restricted to Meudon the last year of his life.”<sup>36</sup>

Elsen’s scholarship leads him to the conclusion that Bénédicté undertook this assemblage on his own initiative and that he even violated certain of Rodin’s own ideas in the course of the reconstruction. Since Elsen’s letter insists that the posthumous casts—all of which were made from molds taken from this new Musée Rodin plaster—are “of Rodin’s realization of *The Gates of Hell* in 1900,” we can only assume that in his eagerness to argue for the authorized original object of Rodin’s undivided intentions he had forgotten his own description of the “liberties” taken in this “presumably” authorized final cast. Elsen’s presentation of these liberties is worth quoting in full:

Surely, if Rodin had initiated the final assembly, his first director would have so indicated to the world in 1917 rather than in 1921. Bénédicté took a large number of initiatives without Rodin’s knowledge and consent, and, *ethics aside, he seems to have had the legal authority to do so*. Disturbing evidence of Bénédicté’s meddling with Rodin’s arrangement of *The Gates of Hell* is given by Judith Cladel when writing with bitterness during the years 1933-1936 about the last weeks of Rodin’s life and the insensitive removal of the artist’s sculpture from Meudon to Paris: “Some of Rodin’s scandalized assistants who cast his plasters made it known to me that charged with the reassembly of *The Gates of Hell* they received orders to place certain figures in a different arrangement than that which the artist wanted, because ‘that would be better,’ or because the figure of a woman representing a spring (*une source*) ‘must not have the head below.’ ‘The sense of the cube (*la raison cubique*) is the mistress of things and not appearances,’ Rodin used to say. But does a shockingly brusque functionary have the time to meditate on such an axiom?” (*Rodin: Sa Vie Glorieuse et Inconnue*, p. 397.) Cladel’s clear accusation is that Rodin no longer had any say in what happened to his portal and that Bénédicté was taking uncalled for and insensitive liberties with its reconstruction. “La raison cubique” refers to Rodin’s view that one should imagine a well-made sculpture as existing within a cube.<sup>37</sup>

The “uncalled for and insensitive liberties” taken by this “shockingly brusque functionary” (is this what Elsen means by “ambitious”?) create the high probability that the 1917 plaster, the matrix from which all the bronze casts of *The Gates* have been taken, differs in aesthetically material ways from the 1900 plaster. Further, as Elsen himself records, after 1900 Rodin’s own relationship to *The Gates* had become sufficiently complex that he refused to have them reassembled (pre-

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* (italics added).

ferring, perhaps, the “greater breadth and unity of form” of the naked doors?), and may or may not have authorized Bénédite’s actions in 1917. It is this richly multiplex set of doubts raised by the history of The Gates that makes the work so perfect an example, on both a technical and conceptual level, of multiples without an original. As we try to move from the plurality of the casts to the unity of the model, we find this unity, this original, splintering, compounding.

And the *simple*, as distinct from the *compound*, arts? What of them? Jean Chatelain notes the “feeling of relativism” excited by the compound arts’ relation to the notion of the original. This is not the case, he seems to argue, with the simple arts—those with the most immediate, direct relationship between conception and visual mark.

But we have reason to wonder whether this simplicity with its accompanying notions of immediacy and directness is not, itself, a product of that very same shift in desire that made the “original edition” necessary. For just as the compound arts—sculpture, tapestries, marquetry, porcelain, illustrated books, etc.—are the functions of workshops and the collaborative results of many skills and many hands, painting is also the product of workshops. The large decorative cycles demanded by patrons in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries could not be accomplished in any other way. The great studios, of which Rubens’s is only the most well published example, necessitated an experience of the “compound” in the carrying out of the work.

Art history, a discipline which is an intellectual partner of those newly conceived forces of desire that Jean Chatelain sees rising in the nineteenth century—art history is committed to the marks of *simplicity*, to the establishment of the autograph work, and to the sorting out of hands. The existence of the shop can be admitted in the study of painting only as long as the shop itself can be analyzed to produce its elementary components, among them the indisputably autographic *work* of the master. The finding and constituting of this work will in fact be the task of the art historian. For his empirical unity is this unity—which he takes to be irreducibly simple or singular—of the master’s mark.

Thus, for example, the analysis of the Ghent Altarpiece has often turned on the problem of locating the autographic presence of each of its masters, since it was known that both Hubert and Jan van Eyck had been responsible for its making. Even Panofsky understood that his task as art historian would be—given this dual authorship—the sorting out of hands. Two linked assumptions operate within this notion of the scholarly task. The first is that the painting is a physical simple and thus is ideally made by one hand; if it is known in a given case to be the work of more than one author, then it can be somehow analyzed into a set of simples (for this reason, the sorting of hands). The second is that as a simple a painting is what would normally function within a claim to authorship; authorship is part of the grammar of executing a painting as it is not in, say, executing marquetry. It is in relationship to its seeming naturalness as an object of the claim

to authorship (and thus its greater insistency with regard to the experience of authenticity) that painting is taken to be a unitary object, a simple. As such it has clear boundaries: it is everything that is *inside* the frame. (The frame on the other hand is a function of the decorative or compound arts. The frame is what both links and separates the painting from the complex decorative/architectural system that formed its original context. But for the art historian there is no confusion between painting and frame.)<sup>38</sup> Thus, when Lotte Brand Philip undertook to re-orient the analytical task with regard to the Ghent Altarpiece, the resistance was intense. Her argument was that Hubert van Eyck was an author of the alterpiece, only not of its painted surfaces, but rather of its frame.<sup>39</sup>

The idea that authorship might displace itself outward to the frame does terrible things to the system of positivist relationships out of which the art historian works. Because authorship would then be made to flow from the bounded pictorial image into that great sea of anonymous artisanal practice that formed the shop systems of the arts. Authorship, with all its decorum and priorities, would collapse under this weight. Authorship assumes that paintings have an absolute firstness in the hierarchy of the arts and that their frames, which are adjuncts after all, must follow after, being made to fit. But it is perfectly possible to imagine a case where the frame comes first and the painted panel, like so much decorative filler, comes afterward, tailored to the measure of the more opulent, resplendent frame. This situation, with all its implication for a collapse of the notions of a hierarchy “natural” to the arts, is the news that is being delivered to art history with increasing frequency. It is the situation that Creighton Gilbert, for example, has discovered in the relation between panel painters and the carvers of frames in early Renaissance practice in Italy.<sup>40</sup>

The notion of the painting as a function of the frame (and not the reverse) tends to shift our focus from being exclusively, singularly, riveted on the interior field. Our focus must begin to dilate, to spread. As the boundary between inside (painting) and outside (frame . . . ) begins to blur and to break down, room is made for the possibility of experiencing the degree to which painting-as-simple is a constructed category, constructed on the basis of desire, not unlike the “original edition.” Just as we can also catch ourselves in the act of constructing frames in order illicitly to excise an image from the nonsimple context of the obviously compound arts, so as to assert it as pictorial, unitary, framed.

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida contests the possibility of these distinctions which ground the theory of Western art, for which it is assumed that a separation can be made between what is proper to a work and what is improper, extrinsic, outside. See “The Parergon,” *October*, no. 9 (Summer 1979), 3-40.

<sup>39</sup> Lotte Brand Philip, *The Ghent Altarpiece and the Art of Jan van Eyck*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971.

<sup>40</sup> Creighton Gilbert, “Peintres et menuisiers au début de la renaissance en Italie,” *La Revue de l'art*, no. XXXVII (1977), 9-28. My attention to these examples of the problematic of the frame was drawn by Andrée Hayum.



*National Gallery installation of The Search for Alexander, "The Tombs of Derveni."*

A common enough example of this is to be found in the museum displays of ancient seal rings, where photographic enlargements of the impressions made by the seals allow the imagery and forms of the carving to be seen. But by their very transformation of the signet into a framed, enlarged, two-dimensional image, the

photographs pictorialize the object, endowing it with a different kind of presence, investing it with an experience of singularity. Photography used to transform the decorative object into a picture and thus to raise its status occurs with increasing frequency in museums. In the exhibition *The Search for Alexander*, mounted by the National Gallery in Washington, for example, one of the major objects was a bronze krater from Derveni, a vessel over thirty-five inches high with continuous reliefs of extraordinary quality. Set freestanding within a vitrine in the gallery the krater was perfectly visible from all sides. Yet the designers of the exhibition felt the need to supplement this object with photographic enlargements of some of its narrative components, fragmenting and composing aspects of the decorative object into . . . pictures. It would seem that the only experience that could correspond to our sense of the object's value from the point of view of its antiquity and rarity would be an adaptation of it to fit the *aesthetic* measure of singularity, which means to reconstrue it in terms of the frame. Within the exhibition the Derveni krater existed twice, once as a decorative object and once as a series of pictures, larger than itself, framed and mounted on a wall.

This institution of the frame is a function of what could be called the Institution of the Frame. It is an act of excision that simultaneously establishes and reaffirms given conceptual unities—the unity of formal coherence, the unity of the enframed simple, the unity of the artist's personal style, his oeuvre, his intentions—and these turn out to be the very unities on which the institution of art (and its history) presently depends. As research uncovers more and more information about given practices this new data is poured through the slots of old categories to fill the unitary spaces. Thus Elsen can begin his introduction to *Rodin Rediscovered* by declaring, "Our aim in preparing this catalogue was to present the latest Rodin research."<sup>41</sup> He never imagines that this latest research might in fact provide the ammunition to place those unities through which research was formerly collated and valued under fire. All of the information needed to open Rodin's *Gates of Hell* to the experience of the multiple without an original is to be found in *Rodin Rediscovered*. Elsen and his fellow researchers provide it.

Contrary to Elsen, I no more consider myself to be "invent[ing] issues"—in the sense of originating them—than to be laying claim to a first view of Rodin's use of triplication. These issues, through which the physical original along with the originary act are rendered a *problem* for history and criticism and not the goal of their endeavors, have long been the shared concern of scholars and writers in many fields and countries. At the end of the 1960s Michel Foucault described this collective inquiry:

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<sup>41</sup> *Rodin Rediscovered*, p. 11.



What one is seeing, then, is the emergence of a whole field of questions, some of which are already familiar, by which this new form of history is trying to develop its own theory: how is one to specify the different concepts that enable us to conceive of discontinuity (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation)? By what criteria is one to isolate the unities with which one is dealing; what is *a science*? What is an *oeuvre*? What is *a theory*? What is *a concept*? What is *a text*? How is one to diversify the levels at which one may place oneself, each of which possesses its own divisions and form of analysis? What is the legitimate level of formalization? What is that of interpretation? Of structural analysis? Of attributions of causality?<sup>42</sup>

But contemporary practice in the visual arts provides its critics with a special perspective on the problematic of one of these unities, which is that of *a work*, *an aesthetic original*. For we can watch the frantic attempts to reconstitute this unity even as all the activities of late modernism dramatize its dissolution as a mode of experience.

As the work of a depleted modernism becomes increasingly porous, admitting more and more citations from past art to enter the field of the image, this open terrain of eclecticism must be recontained or reunified in some way if it is to retain its “art” value (and thus its market value). Two ways are employed at present. First: frames. The work of Julian Schnabel, for example, resurrects the heavy, ornamented wooden frame of the old-master painting in order to reconstitute the interiority of the objects he makes, to shore up their identity as simples, an identity that would otherwise be contested by his recourse to imitation and pastiche. Second: the authorial mark of emotion—expressionism, psychological depth, sincerity. *Feeling* is the mark of the pictorial original. Much recent painting is both executed and received as though there were nothing problematic about the formulas of feeling and their continual reuse. The critical term *expressionism* is applied to these pictorial objects of manufacture with as little thought for its appropriateness as if it were to be appended to any of those conventions that operate the terms of polite address, like this one with which I will close my reply to Professor Elsen: “sincerely yours.”

New York, 1982

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<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York, Harper & Row, 1972, pp. 5-6.