

Act and Image

New York, October 27, 2012

Psychoanalysis has underlined the specificity of the human relationship to need. Thus, anorexia, rumination syndrome, severe sleeping disturbances etc. all attest to the human transformation of need into desire.

Something emerges from the virtually uniform real surrounding the baby and manages to calm the inner discomfort it is experiencing. A rise in tension, hunger for instance, leads the baby to look for possible discharge, which shows itself by its bodily movements and crying. And something emerges from the real that relieves this unease – this is the first instance of satisfaction, the first enjoyment. This enjoyment will then become associated with certain words and, on the side of the Other - the mother - with the first interpretation of the baby's crying as a call. Through this interpretation, the mother introduces the baby into language and most importantly to the demand. From now on and throughout his entire life, the subject is never going to do anything else but demand. In the first experience of satisfaction, something of the first Thing will be grasped and remembered – this is the constitution of the first mnesic trace. However, another part will not be remembered, and in subsequent instances of satisfaction something will never again be found – this something corresponds to what was not remembered. The returning satisfaction is therefore always partial. The lacking, non-remembered part is what left over, once a few traces and qualities have been grasped during the first time and confined to memory. From now on, the subject is never going to stop looking for this lost part. This is why the object is always inadequate and desire can never be satisfied. The subject is always brought back to his search, which he tries to resolve by the demand. What is found can never match this first encounter – a part of enjoyment is lost forever. The subsequent satisfactions will depend on the remembered traits, the mnesic traces used as a support for language, into which the subject was introduced by the mother: “The Word fixates the Thing,” Freud writes in his *Project*. This Thing is *das Ding*, what is radically lost – an emptiness. “Art is characterized,” Lacan will later say, “by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness,” around the void of the Thing.

Any new encounter with the object is therefore always its rediscovery and at the same time, “it is never it.” Nevertheless, artistic creation is somehow connected to this void.

The objects circulating between the mother and the child will become valued as gifts. These so-called “partial” objects – not a very good term – will become part of the exchange with the Other, they will connect the subject with the Other. They will become gifts, proofs of love. In this way, all demand is fundamentally a demand for love. However, lack remains. Is the object that you are asking for really the one you want? Something beyond the demand questions this lack - and that is desire. In trying to identify them, we produce myths and other discourse, yet both lack and desire remain enigmatic. We therefore have the object of need, essential for survival, the object of demand as a proof of love – am I loved or not? – and the object of desire, which questions the lack that causes it.

Lack appears on all levels of the subject’s structure. Hence, in the Mirror Stage, there is an act of assuming the mirror image through a nomination, and the Other’s desire remains enigmatic. Rather than simply being its aim, this object is therefore what *causes* desire. The first source of the link between the act and the image is no doubt to be found here, in the image conferred upon the child by the act of the Other’s nomination. There is an element of something new and surprising, but we also see that the image acts as a screen against a fundamental lack.

Like psychoanalysis, art questions what lies behind the various presentations, embodiments and representations of the object. There is only one vicissitude of the drive which enables satisfaction without repression, and that is sublimation, which Lacan defines as a way of raising the object to the place of the Thing, that is to say of the void. Hence, in every work of art there is a void that the work is trying to capture or define, while simultaneously producing an object to block it, to patch it up. Of course there are many different ways of patching it up – by hiding it or by showing it; this is what is at stake in the creative act. This shows us the difference between art and psychoanalytic treatment, where the object *a* separates itself from the Thing and the absence of the object eventually comes into light.

The artist therefore questions us. We all must sacrifice something in order to come into being as subjects. The artist wants to know nothing about this sacrifice. It has been said that the artist gives in to his desire in a moment of “suspension,” where what is temporarily suspended is precisely the demand of the Superego.



SLIDE 1: MICHALANGELO - MOSES

Freud takes issue with the common interpretation of this work, namely that Moses is looking at his apostate people, who are dancing around an idol, and in the next moment he will rise, break the Tables and accomplish his work of vengeance.

In Freud's view, Michelangelo's work depicts "not the inception of a violent action but the remains of a movement that has already taken place. In his first transport of fury, Moses desired to act, to spring up and take vengeance and forget the Tables; but he has overcome the temptation, and he will now remain seated and still, in his frozen wrath and in his pain mingled with contempt. Nor will he throw away the Tables so that they will break on the stones, *for it is on their especial account that he has controlled his anger.*"

Ernest Jones thinks that Freud might have been led to this analysis on the basis of his own attitude to Jung's and Adler's rebellion. However, it seems to me that what is important here is the position of the artist, which, according to Freud, combines the violent force of the drive with its radical mastery.

Lacan will nevertheless distinguish between

- Art, which represses the Thing (here we can draw a parallel with hysteria);
- Religion, which displaces it (similarly to obsessional neurosis) and
- Science, which forecloses the Thing, while promoting an ideal of absolute knowledge without lack (in a parallel to psychosis).

This distinction may seem contradictory. We can only understand it on the basis of what the artist is trying to delimit, i.e. the void, while at the same time blocking it with the help of an object – the simultaneous action of repression and the return of the repressed.

The first aspect: what is blocked reveals the blocking object and points out to the void:



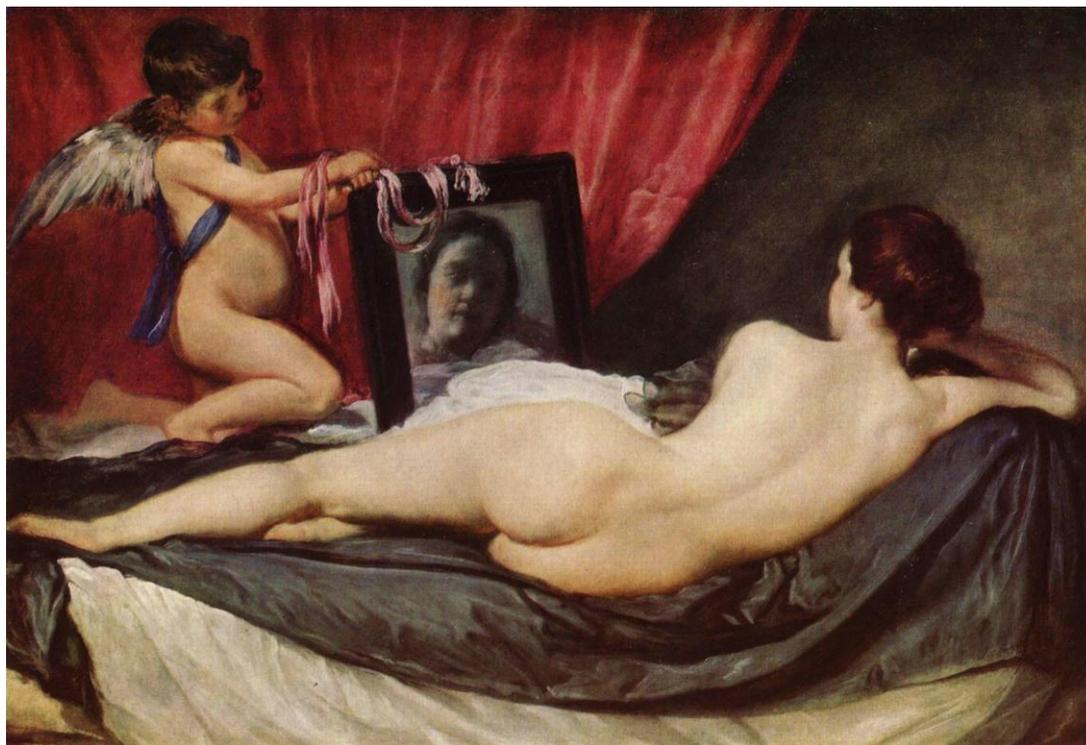
SLIDE 2: VELASQUEZ – LAS MENINAS

I won't go back to what we discussed last time. I would only like to remind you that

- the representation of these characters is structured around the two royal figures reflected in the mirror, exactly as court etiquette would dictate, and that
- we have *two* voids here, two lacks: at the center of the painting, the –obviously veiled – “Infanta’s slit,” and the painting that is facing away from us – which was added later – and which we cannot see.

Moustapha Safouan has argued that the woman is the perfect embodiment of this enigmatic point, this lack. “Language makes pure difference into the very definition of the female sex - she is defined by what she does not have; she becomes *heteros* by definition.” And we remember Lacan’s definition: “Whoever loves a woman is a heterosexual.”

What’s more, in everyday speech, when a child is born you can either see his sex, and then it’s a boy, or you cannot see it, and then it’s a girl, and this is still true with today’s ultrasound scanning. This is the first spontaneous – and very crude – relation to the question of sexual difference. Truth, which is always only half-said because it cannot be expressed entirely and includes a part that is nothing, is therefore on the side of the woman, because as the male sexual organ the penis incarnates the imaginary phallus, in other words incarnates an illusion. Safouan gives us the example of Velasquez’s *Venus*:



SLIDE 3: VELASQUEZ – THE TOILET OF VENUS

This is said to be the most beautiful nude in the history of painting. Like in *Las Meninas* (where the depicted reflection of the royal figures is in fact impossible), here too, if you would restage the scene of this painting, the mirror could never possibly reflect the face in this way. What it reflects is then something invisible, something that cannot be said, while at the same time, the face in the mirror acts as a screen to this absence.

For the ordinary neurotic, the gaze is elided while one is awake. But in both dreams and art, *it is looking back at us, and also showing us something.*

We see this explicitly in psychotic surveillance delusions. I remember a young girl at Maud Mannoni's Experimental School in Bonneuil, who would write and say things like "Ca sent du montre" – which we could translate as "It smells like showing."

Hence there is a screen between the image and the gaze. What it is showing to us is that something is missing from the image. In the dream, the central, brightest shining element is a distraction. It points us elsewhere than where we should be looking, namely at details. This is why Freud was so interested in Giovanni Morelli, a physician who developed an analytic method of identifying paintings. In dreams, it is details that lead us to interpretation and its limits, in other words to what Freud calls the dream's *navel*, through which the dream communicates with the unknown. Art shows something – but it does not demonstrate. The artist's act is to show something beyond what can be said. Here, it may be useful to recall the last sentence from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – "Whereof one *cannot* speak, thereof one must be silent" now becomes "whereof one cannot speak, one must show."

Yet all of this leaves unanswered the question of the subject's – including the artist's – relationship to discourse. Has art always been the same? Doesn't it ever change? According to Arasse, modern art is characterized by a change in the spectator's position, which took place in the eighteenth century. Today's works of art – whether we think of Serra's monumental sculptures or Boltanski's immense installations, or any number of other works – are open "to the spectator's action. The spectator becomes a co-author (...). The process of creation is preferred to the work itself." We must remember that in the past, the great works of art were those that would hide the brushstrokes, those that concealed the traces necessary to the work's production.

Is *showing* an act?

Psychoanalysis has a large vocabulary related to acting: *acting-out*, which is an action under transference and a way of showing something; *passing to the act*, which is not addressed to anybody in particular, and instead constitutes an exit from the scene, etc., and especially the *bungled action*, which is in fact a successful one because it expresses something of the subject's unconscious desire. Like in the case of taking the wrong train or missing a stop on one's way to an appointment, where unconsciously one does not wish to go.

There is also the *analytic act* theorized by Lacan. Firstly, it is an interpretation in the sense of a cut rather than a hermeneutics, the highest dimension of an act. It is a cut because an act is properly speaking something that changes things, so that they are no longer the same as before. This is why Lacan speaks about the act of foundation as a model act. Analysis always begins with an act, which founds the hypothesis of the unconscious in the framework of the cure. However, the analytic act is impossible unless the analyst can bear the fact of eventually being rejected, deposed. However, this dimension is already present, in advance, in his act. Interpretation, provided that it does not simply confirm the knowledge that the analyst is supposed to have, therefore implies this perspective. This is why Lacan puts such emphasis on equivocation, as a means of implying, echoing the dimension of outside-meaning [*hors-sens*], i.e. as precisely something that knowledge cannot grasp.

In order to go further, it is useful to return once again to Benjamin, in order to question the artist's act – is there such a thing? – as well as its link with history. As an aside, I would like to point out that what I see as the quintessence of the artistic act are Duchamp's *Readymades*.



SLIDE 4: DUCHAMP'S FOUNTAIN

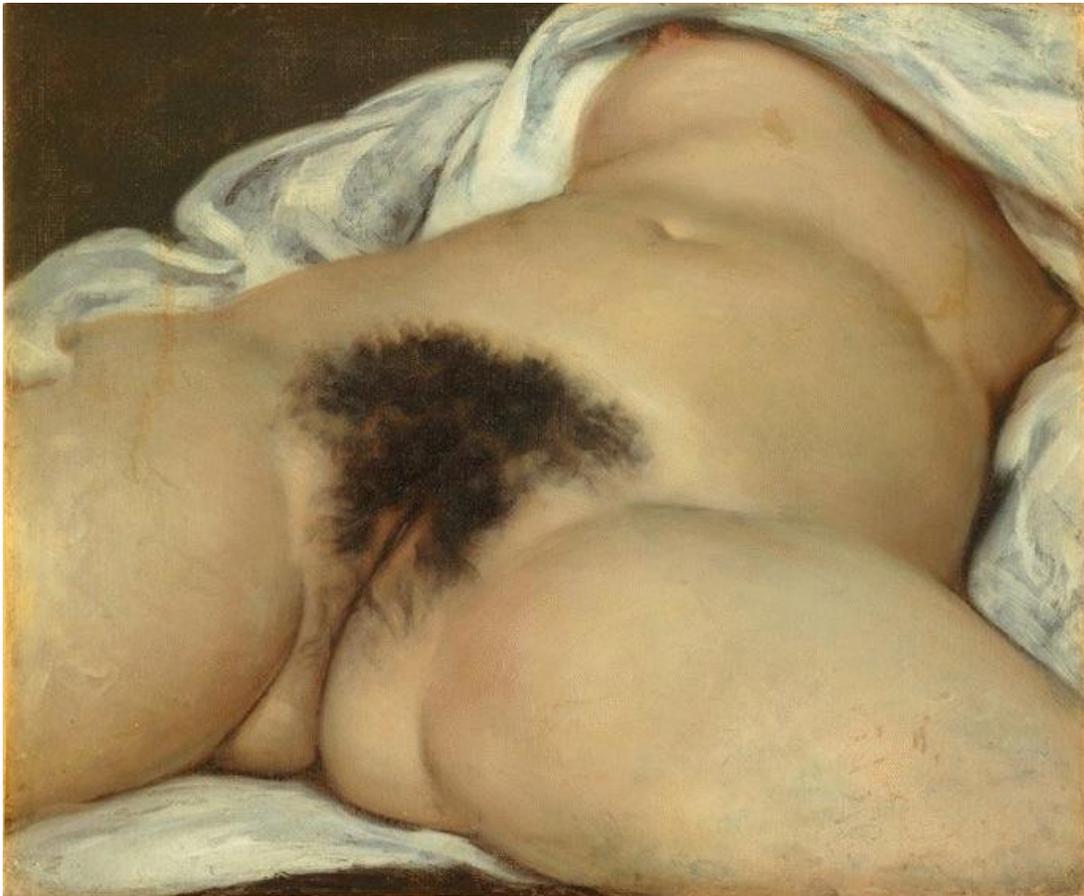
Duchamp pulls the object away from its use, separates it from its production series, signs it – using the pseudonym “R. Mutt” – and dates it – 1917 – and the result is a work of art. This is a creative act in its pure state – a displacement of the gaze. By isolating it, he gives the object another status, a different value from that which was conferred on it by the circuit of market exchange. However, at the same time a urinal is a void, it's a hole (in fact it has several holes), a celibate object.

What psychoanalysis has told us about sublimation and artistic creation seems timeless. However, art is closely linked to its historical, social and cultural conditions. How should we understand this? Here, Benjamin can be very useful to us.

Benjamin is in fact interested in *producing a theory of art* that would avoid traditional concepts - such as creation, the artistic genius, eternal value or mystery - while inventing concepts “completely useless for the purposes of Fascism.” The reason is Benjamin’s concern about what he calls the “aestheticization of politics” and what he sees as an emerging trend during the years he spends writing the different versions of his text, from 1935 to 1938 or 1939, including a French version, translated by Pierre Klossowski in 1936. For our purposes, we will

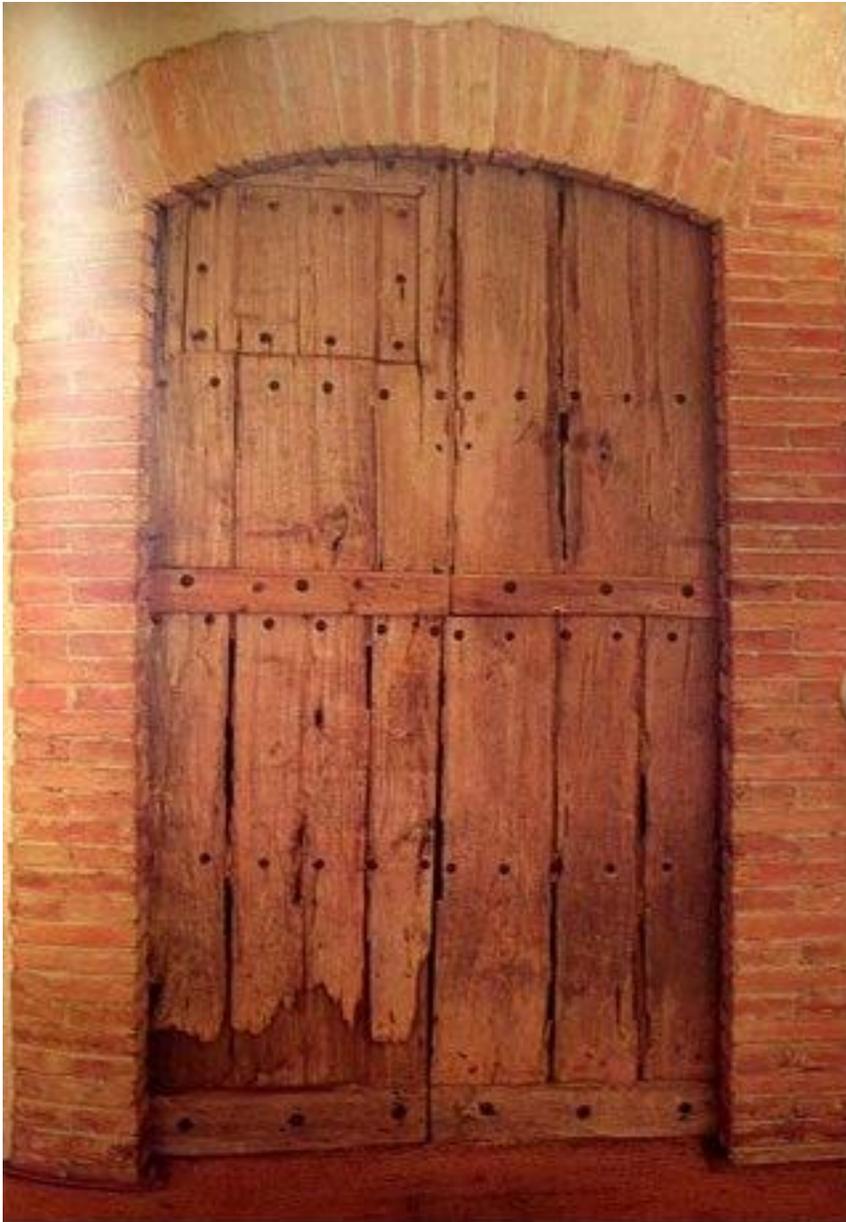
stick to the last version. We should remember that together with Freud's nephew Edward Bernays it was in fact Goebbels who invented modern propaganda, including advertising. Think of the grand theatrics of Nuremberg and so on. In terms of advertising, propaganda and *story-telling* Fascists were genuine pioneers.

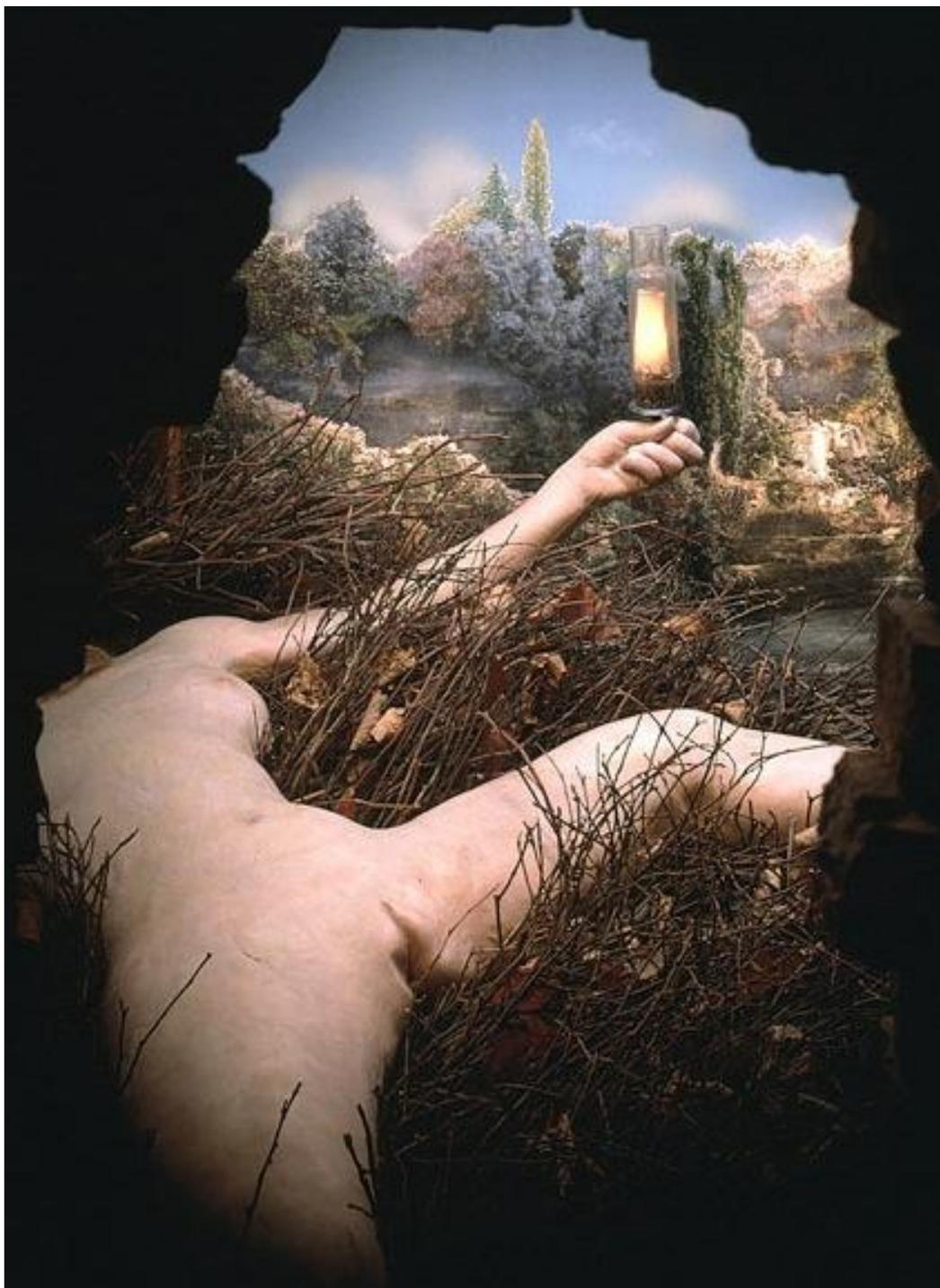
This is why Lacan (but not Freud) was able to argue that esthetic pleasure was an illusion satisfying the eye's appetite. "The beauty mirage indicates the place of desire inasmuch as it desires for nothing, the relationship of man with his lack-of-being." Is modern art beautiful? In what way does it question beauty? The idea of beauty as a screen could not in fact have arisen in just any historical period. Here, we should think of the step already taken by Courbet – what we call realism – and the radical move he accomplishes in *The Origin of the World*.



SLIDE 5: COURBET – THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD

Realism aims to show this enigmatic point by describing reality as closely as possible. But in the case of this pubic hair, technical perfection and mastery also function as a veil.





SLIDES 6 & 7: MARCEL DUCHAMP – GIVENS (ÉTANT DONNÉS)

This is a kind of installation. You arrive, you see this door with two holes in it, and you need to look through these holes to see this kitschy painting, with a naked female body slayed across the foreground, the surroundings are rather ugly and the woman's figure offers an

unpleasant view of her sex, reduced to an almost abstract slit – which cannot be recognized as even a wound. Completely without affect; not even a sense of horror. Not even the kind of the terror which grips the psychotic at the encounter with the Thing, an encounter that is completely unmediated, without a screen, or even for a neurotic, when an image shows to him what cannot and does not want to see.

It seems to me that this screen of the *Origin of the World*, the vision of the female sex as, despite all, a screen, is revealed by this Duchamp's installation, which is called *Givens: 1) The Waterfall, 2) The Illuminating Gas*. This is Duchamp's very last work, produced in the years between 1946 and 1968, the year of his death. It is a sculpture-construction, as he himself called it, which was only shown after his passing. Here, Duchamp materializes the veil – the door – and reveals the genitals. There is nothing here to see anymore, it is only an orifice. It is almost like a zip – like the closure of a purse, an envelope that should remain sealed. Perhaps I am mistaken in thinking that the woman's position as we see it in this kitschy and ugly picture, which we must look at through the two holes in the door, is the reverse of that of *The Origin of the World*; it reminds us of Courbet's painting. Saying that, I don't know if Marcel Duchamp had seen *The Origin of the World*, or if, on the contrary, he had only heard about it. Lacan, who owned Courbet's painting, speaks about Duchamp as his friend.



SLIDE 8: JEAN-LUC MOULENE – AURA

At the extreme position we have this image by Jean-Luc Moulène - which, in an echo of Benjamin, is called *aura* - where what forms the screen of beauty par excellence – we may think of Velazquez's *Venus* – is revealed as pure flesh, as obscenity, as a collapse of the screen of the beautiful in the tradition of Duchamp, as too real ... and yet it is still an image, which has a value on the art market.

Benjamin explains how mechanical reproduction modifies former modes of action. The two examples he gives us are photography and cinema. I will of course only give you a quick summary of his argument and I will focus on what can be useful to my presentation.

According to Benjamin, modern mechanical reproduction deprives an artwork of its *uniqueness*, of its existence in a particular *hic et nunc*, in other words of its *authenticity*, the direct trace of the creative *act*. We should remember that there were times when the act of painting had to remain unperceived – the stroke of the brush had to be effaced – and only later it appeared clearly, long before the 19th century. “Authenticity cannot be reproduced,” Benjamin writes, “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history it has experienced (...). What is jeopardized is the authority of the thing.” What withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the “aura” of the work, Benjamin thinks, in other words its value as a symptom. He contrasts authenticity with reactualization, reactivation: “The poorest provincial staging of Faust is superior to a Faust film in that, ideally, it competes with the first performance at Weimar. Before the screen it is unprofitable to remember traditional contents which might come to mind before the stage—for instance, that Goethe’s friend Johann Heinrich Merck is hidden in Mephisto, and the like.”

But we should not be mistaken – Benjamin is opposed to neither photography nor cinema as such. Contrary to Heidegger’s attitude to technology, he always maintains the same position, namely that technology is a double-edged sword, or rather that technology in itself has no value but the problem is our relationship to it. We only have to think of one of his texts, where he asks us to rectify our approach to technology. In short, in Benjamin’s view, film brings the artwork into the spectator’s own particular situation and by doing this, it reactivates the reproduced object. The traditional value of cultural heritage is therefore eliminated.

For psychoanalysis, the event of the rise of the scientific discourse essentially had the effect of undoing meaning, previously provided by the tradition, without offering anything in exchange. This is how Benjamin defines the *aura* of an artwork: “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” Thus, everyday life itself is also put at a distance by means of re-presentation. An artwork “returns the gaze.” We could connect this phrase to Lacan’s idea of the painting as a “trap for the gaze.”

Technology brings things closer to the masses because today we feel a pressing need to possess the object. This is different from the world created by God, where the object of enjoyment was constantly referred to a certain beyond, to a life beyond life. Today's "gadgets", as Lacan called them, sustain the promise of immediately regaining the *jouissance* lost. In Lacan's view, technology cannot make these gadgets anything but the subject's symptoms, gizmos that science gives us to chew on. We therefore always remain separated from the lost *jouissance*, as its mere *spectators*. Thus Lacan commented, at the time, on the first moon landing: "You're watching it on TV but others, the chosen ones, are really going there." For Benjamin, *technology standardizes what is unique*, and he gives us as an example the rapid development of statistics.

The aura is based on the origin of a work of art, on its ritual and hence cultural (= religious) value. And in the course of history, cultural value (linked to magic and religion) has been replaced by authenticity (exposition).

Therefore for Benjamin, photography coincides with the beginnings of socialism. I would again like to stress that he does not condemn technology itself. However, "instead of being based on ritual, [the work of art] begins to be based on another practice – politics." Here, we could

think of a great number of modern works:



SLIDE 9: PICASSO – GUERNICA



SLIDE 10: MICHEL FRANCOIS – EXPANDED OFFICE

In the case of *Guernica*, art historians have in fact wondered to what extent not only does history create art but also vice versa, since if it was not for Picasso's painting, would the events at Guernica have necessarily come to symbolize the entire Spanish Civil War?

However, what changes is the movement from religion to exhibition.



SLIDE 11: RAPHAEL – THE SISTINE MADONNA

In Benjamin's view, the movement between uniqueness and authenticity has always been true for all works of art, as an oscillation between the polar opposites. However, in a given historical era, one of these two aspects has always been dominant. As an example, he takes this magnificent painting of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. Firstly, we know that the painting was meant to be exhibited, as attested to the two draperies at the top. They might seem strange to us, if we didn't know that the picture was commissioned for the formal laying out of the body of Pope Sixtus, which took place in a side chapel. In the position where the painting was originally hanging, the Madonna would therefore seem to be coming out of the niche-like background of the chapel. However, a Roman ritual forbade the cult use of images that have been shown during obsequies. Raphael's work therefore immediately lost all its market value and was sent to a provincial church of the Black Friars in Piasenze, where it was exhibited on the high altar. This somewhat restored its value, by conferring on it a certain uniqueness, linked to the religious ritual.

Photography

Benjamin believes that some old photographs retain a certain remainder of the aura, thanks to the cult of remembrance attached to human faces. He was particularly interested in pictures taken by Atget.













SLIDES 12 – 18

This is a series of photos that show deserted Parisian streets. Benjamin says that Atget photographed streets like scenes of crime. There is an absence signified by all of these buildings, streets, houses, etc., which are meant to be inhabited by humans. Absence is linked to visual representation from the very beginning: in rock painting, the point was to depict hunted animals, in other words to find them, and they were represented in order to ward off the possibility of their absence. Atget's photos are "standard evidence for historical occurrences." This is their hidden political meaning – they call for a specific kind of gaze because they are disturbing, they do not inspire quiet contemplation. Thus in this case the intention is not to provide a resting place for the gaze but instead to disrupt it. This disconcerting aspect refers us back to Duchamp or Moulène – these works literally do not leave us at peace. With Atget's photos, Benjamin argues, captions become necessary. We remember the central role of the commentary, the accompanying discourse, in today's visual art. In Benjamin's opinion, it was art itself that had changed.

This change is apparent, for example, in what for Benjamin constitutes the distinction between a stage actor and a cinema star. To put it very briefly, a stage actor presents his artistic performance to the audience personally, in a definitive way. On the contrary, a film actor requires the mediation of camera equipment. The famous French actor Louis Jouvet said that the most important thing in making movies is to have a good seat. The cameraman assumes various positions and these successive positions will structure the completed film. In this case, the audience is no longer in the position of a spectator to whom the actor can adapt, but rather of the critic, undisturbed by any personal contact with the actor. Thus in Pirandello, the cinema actor feels as if he has been exiled. He foregoes his aura because the studio shot substitutes a camera for the audience. This is why the aura is then artificially built up outside the studio, leading to the cult of the movie star, which for Benjamin represents a political problem. In his time, the leading example was of course Rudolf Valentino.







SLIDES 19 – 21: RUDOLF VALENTINO – THE SON OF THE SHEIK

For Benjamin, the cult of the movie star is bad news because he sees the alliance between the return of the aura and technology as the very essence of Fascism. We could compare theatre and cinema on the basis of the implicit agreement which the spectator becomes part of. In theatre this agreement presupposes a denial: “*I know very well*” that the actor who dies on stage is not really dead, “*but still,*” to borrow an expression from Octave Mannoni. In cinema, on the other hand, we are closer to a hypnotic position, as Ronald Barthes called it, or indeed to the position of an expert, if we manage to slightly extricate ourselves from the powerful identification cinema offers us.

Benjamin writes: “Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie.” Benjamin was a big admirer of Chaplin.







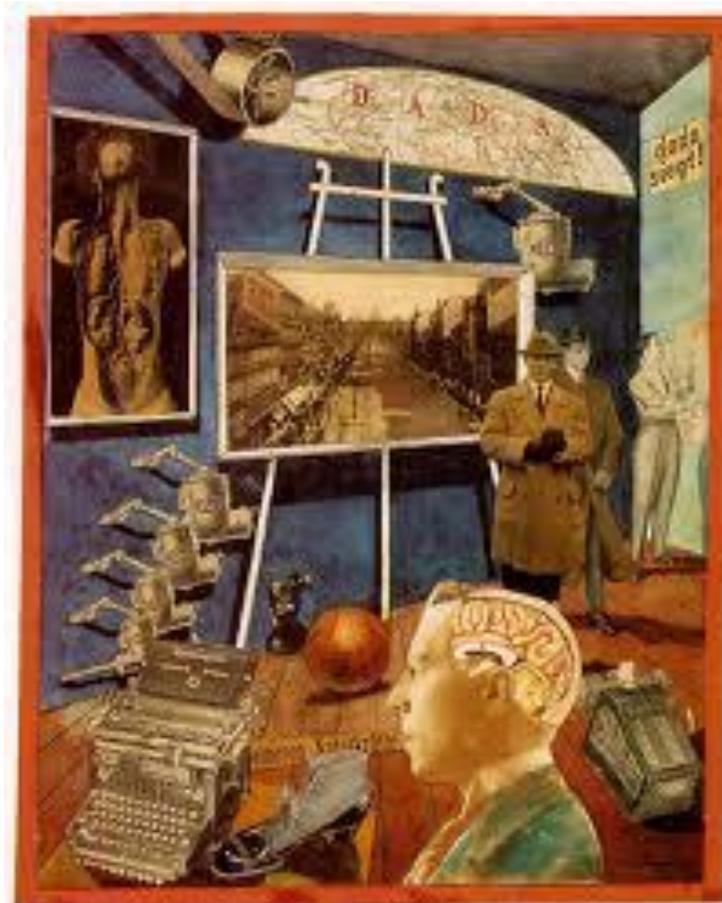
SLIDES 22 – 24: CHAPLIN

He was more critical of Abel Gance, due to the latter's glorification of various historical personalities. We should note that for Benjamin, "the greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined by the mass audience response they are about to produce, and this is nowhere more pronounced than in the film. The moment these responses become manifest they control each other."

The mass versus the individual. Today, it is the question of the multitude and of the feeling of being nothing but a specimen, lost among many billions of human beings. This is how television makes us feel, while simultaneously promoting an impression of complete particularity – as attested to by certain psychotics who think that the TV is speaking directly to them.

Through camera movements, slow motion and close-ups, cinema, Benjamin argues, gives us access to a visual unconscious. Cinema gives visibility to what we cannot see. It is a mutual inter-penetration of art and science. However, there exists a risk of saturation and totalization: hence the emphasis that some of the greatest directors have put on what remains off screen. This aspect is for example used in behavioral psychology. Subjects are filmed and then observed at a pace of 1000 frames per second. Normally we would see someone simply picking up a spoon but cinema can show us what is happening between the hand and the metal, which we would never see in our everyday life.

Dadaism tried to achieve what the audience asks cinema to do – namely to destroy the aura entirely.



SLIDE 25: A PAINTING BY RAOUL HAUSSMANN

Even the machinic dimension of love, or of the love-machine.



SLIDE 26: PICABIA



SLIDE 27: ARP

In Benjamin's view, when we are looking at a painting by Arp or reading a poem by Stramm, we have no time for concentration, as opposed to, for example, a painting by Derain,



SLIDE 28: DERRAIN

or one of Rilke's poems. Benjamin's argument is this: with the arrival of Dadaism, the work of art has become a projectile. Basically, he picks up on a common criticism: the masses are looking for pleasurable distraction, while art requires concentration; it is a shared space. Like the anecdote about a Chinese artist, who, while contemplating his own finished paintings, disappeared into it.

Benjamin nonetheless points out that architecture, the eternal art, has always been consummated in a state of distraction. This type of consumption is particularly favored by cinema. It is a symptom of the great changes that human perception has undergone in modern times. For Benjamin, these changes correspond to the growing proletarianization of the modern man and the increasing development of the mass, which constitute two aspects of the same historical process. "Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate." For Benjamin, the logical

consequence of Fascism is an anesthetization of political life. And “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.” In other words, “war and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system.” In relation to this, Benjamin speaks about Marinetti’s *Manifesto of Futurism* and the glorification of the colonial war in Ethiopia. In the manifesto war appears beautiful because it “initiates the dreamt-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights.”

For Benjamin, modern war and the destruction it causes “shows that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society.”



SLIDE 29: BOCCIONI

And so we come back to the question of the connections between art and history. The issue is still the same: we can perhaps identify it a bit better than at the beginning of this presentation, but it is not quite clear to what extent it is articulated differently during each historical era. This tension with discourse is no longer a displacement but a rejection, even a foreclosure. The term symptom, which features in Benjamin, refers us to one of Lacan's formulations, namely that "to explain art by the unconscious seems suspicious," he says, "to explain art by the symptom seems more serious." This simply means by something that is connected to the real, that has to do with the radical lack, and this is why the technological gadgets of our time remain our symptoms. Otherwise our bodies would become engineered by technology. All that brings the physical act back into painting can be understood as a symptom of this possible deviation.





SLIDES 30 – 31: JACKSON POLLOCK

SLIDES 32 – 34: YVES KLEIN

I would like to say a few words about one of the most emblematic modern artists, Andy Warhol. It seems to me that his art in certain ways embodies the question raised by Benjamin.

As you know, Warhol was an astonishing character. An *applier* – as when we say *to apply* something to or on something else. Remember that he would always say that he completely lacked inspiration, and I think we should believe him. At the beginning he worked for a big department store in Pittsburgh and later for *Glamour Magazine*. “I was getting paid for it, and I did anything they told me to do. If they told me to draw a shoe, I’d do it, and if they told me to correct it, I would - I’d do anything they told me to do, correct it and do it right.” In a documentary I have recently seen, a journalist asks Warhol a question about his work. He claims

not to understand her question – and it is not an affectation – and instead suggests that she answers the question herself and he then repeats her answer.

He takes the ideal of the *American Way of Life* quite literally: he wants to become rich and famous. He will keep saying this throughout his life, and when he decides to become an artist, he is interested in what he needs to do in order to become rich and famous. With such degree of application, of focus, his life itself becomes a symptom of the society of the 1960s. There is only one thing he fails at, and this remains a source of grief – his dream about Hollywood. This is what they say about his beginnings: one December evening in 1961, while he was speaking to Muriel Latow, an interior decorator and a gallery owner, Andy shared his uncertainty with her: “It’s too late for the cartoons. I’ve got to do something that will have a lot of impact, that will be different from Lichtenstein and Rosenquist, that will be very personal, that won’t look like I’m doing exactly what they’re doing ...I don’t know what to do. Muriel, you’ve got fabulous ideas. Can’t you give me an idea?” And apparently Muriel said, “Yes, but it’s going to cost you money.” “How much?” Warhol asked. “Fifty dollars,” she said. “What do you like most in the world?” she then asked him, immediately supplying the answer: “Money is what counts for you the most and what you like more than anything in the world.” And she added: “You’ve got to find something that’s recognizable to almost anybody. Something that you see every day that everybody would recognize. Something like a can of Campbell’s Soup.” Andy therefore started painting dollars and Campbell’s soups and got into the habit of asking those around him for ideas on what to do next.

SLIDES 35 – 36: ANDY WARHOL

“On 4 June 1962, Warhol had lunch with Henry Geldzahler, who told him: ‘That’s enough affirmation of life. Maybe everything isn’t so fabulous in America. It’s time for some death. This is what’s really happening.’ He showed him a copy of the *Daily News* carrying the headline ‘129 die in jet.’ Immediately, the artist created *129 Die In Jet*, a reproduction of the newspaper front page.

SLIDE 37: ANDY WARHOL – 129 DIE IN JET

“Most of the victims were members of an art association from Atlanta and they were coming back from a cultural trip to Europe. Simply put, they died for art.” In this way, Andy Warhol supplied an “American” answer to Europe’s call. In 1975, when he published *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, he wrote: “Business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist.” “Being good in Business is the most fascinating kind of art,” he added.

And then there was his Factory, itself part of the age of mechanical reproduction – there is no longer any original. We could compare The Factory to a Renaissance workshop, with silkscreen printing playing a key role.

SLIDES 38 – 40: ANDY WARHOL (PRESLEY, CAR CRASH, ELECTRIC CHAIR, MARILYN MONROE)

In 1968, Warhol was the victim of a near-fatal shooting by Valery Solanas, a feminist who often visited The Factory. She had given Andy a manuscript of a theatre play but he had never read it. Solanas fired three times: she missed twice but the third bullet went through his right lung, spleen, stomach, liver and esophagus. Against expectations, Warhol survived, but had to wear a corset for the rest of his life. From this moment on, his artistic production becomes much more rapidly industrialized. This art does not require concentration. This is no longer an act in the sense of a founding act, but it is nevertheless a successful one because it remains a bungled action: even more so than his work, Warhol’s life best embodies a highly particular relationship between art and politics. This embodiment passes through destruction – it is an act of destruction diluted by infinite repetition. Seloua Luste Boulbina has noted that the body is absent from Warhol’s art, leaving only a fetish, beyond what we know about his sexual practices. He would also play on the term *fetish*, reminding us that it belongs equally to the Marxist vocabulary of the capitalist economy.

About his own art, he would say: “Look at the surface, there is nothing behind it. No inspiration. Inspiration is what comes from other people.” No inspiration erases the trace of the act because the decline of the former comes hand in hand with the increasingly explicit manifestation of the latter. However, by becoming a radical expression of a creative act that is

impossible to situate, it questions the anesthetization of modern life. It seems to me that in Warhol's work, there is a definite political stake.

We should also mention artists who have made the act literally the core of their political action, in other words whose performances are political in the most radical sense of the word. But is this politics in Benjamin's sense? His hesitation towards Dadaism is patent. We could for instance think of the Viennese activists.

SLIDES 41 – 42: GÜNTHER BRUSS

Art plays with the limit between the beautiful and the ugly and modern art is no longer beautiful, or only in Warhol's sense, by imitating manufactured goods.

I would like to conclude by looking at a contemporary performance artist, in whose case the political is really at the heart of her questioning, since she was raised and lived in a society where politics – is this what Benjamin dreamt of, I wonder? – was the essence of a discourse she experienced as a lie and a betrayal. Her entire body of work thus shows what all political discourse both masks and reveals, its other side. The artist is Tania Brugera.

SLIDES 43 – 44:

We could mention her lecture-performance, during which she punctuated each paragraph with an apparent gunshot to her head, a bit like the Russian roulette. Does the speaking subject put his life at stake or not, does speech mean taking a risk and what kind of risk exactly? Similar questions are raised by Brugera's performances at the Tate Modern in London, at the FRAC Lorraine Museum in Metz and in a number of other cities.

You may also remember the conference she pretended to organize in Colombia, with an ex-member of the FARC police, where during a break there was her scantily clad assistant walking through the rows with a tray covered in lines of white powder and straws, offering the participants "Cocaine," so as to point out the significance of drug trafficking in the Colombian economy. Likewise at the Tate Modern, where Brugera hired policemen on horseback, or rather

horsemen dressed as the police, and the piece consisted in simply displacing the audience, channeling them as if they were a dangerous mob that must be controlled. Is this not the biopolitical condition of the modern individual? It seems to me that Brugera achieves something that comes as a conclusion to where we began today.

SLIDE 45: DUCHAMP'S URINAL BY TANIA BRUGERA

For one of her exhibitions, Brugera managed to obtain the permission of a French museum to place one of the eight copies of Duchamp's fountain, with the signature "R. Mutt," back in a men's restroom. This re-installation was to highlight what she considered sexual segregation, and women visitors immediately began to protest the fact that they were not allowed into the men's restroom to see the famous urinal. In addition to this, the next day a team of cleaners came and erased the signature, mistaking it for a graffiti. To this day, Brugera has had problems with the institution that lent her Duchamp's original work.

The most modern artistic act is therefore perhaps to reverse Duchamp's gesture and, by reintroducing the manufactured object into its original place, give a new dimension to its truth.