

From: *Bertrand Lavier*, curated by I. Gianelli e G. Verzotti, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 17 October 1996 – 12 January 1997), Edizioni Charta, Milano 1996, pp. 38-44.

Lavier Touches Base

Daniel Soutif

The art of Bertrand Lavier proceeds more by addition than by subtraction, more by synthesis than by rupture, more by multiplying meanings than by formalist honing, by the playful enjoyment of form rather than by conceptualist reduction. As with most significant bodies of work, his has both a formal and semantic density which - and so much the better - make it impossible for exhaustive analysis and commentary.

For of course, objects are what Lavier's work is all about - objects and their density, from which derive the various modalities of their artistic destiny. Some of these modalities are now highly familiar, because the artist has been applying them regularly for quite some time: adding broad strokes of impasto, setting one object atop another, cutting them like photographs, and so on. I will not dwell here on these procedures. Suffice to say that Lavier does not employ them in a chronological sequence in the way other artists go through series or periods, but develops them simultaneously in what we can now see is the synchronic system of his oeuvre, a system which he reworks and complexifies as he introduces new modes of intervention which in turn shed fresh light on earlier techniques. In fact, this process has just been illustrated by the addition of a novel type of operation to Lavier's repertoire, that of mounting everyday objects on a base in the manner of African or "primitive" art.

It is this new procedure that I would like to consider here.

It was in 1994 that Lavier started to develop a new family of objects, alongside his superimposed and "cut" objects. These were the "mounted" objects. What, then, was the process that engendered these most singular works? The artist explained it in an interview in the catalogue published for the exhibition of some of these pieces at the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. "Mounting objects on a base is a recent development. They are rather humble objects, junk, which I entrust to a Parisian pedestal maker. He handles them with the same care as he does with 'primitive' artworks he usually mounts."¹ This set of "rather humble" objects now includes a lock (ordinary but new), a part from a racing car (used in *Grand Prix* - off the track, you might say), a breeze-block (are such objects ever new or worn?), a typically 1960s wire magazine rack trimmed with yellow plastic (second-hand, of course: you can only pick up this kind of fetish at a flea market or in specialist galleries), a red and white plastic traffic cone (with a touch of graffiti), a teddy bear (somewhat worn out, no doubt from all the tears it helped dry) an electric guitar (played or unplayed?), a metal milk churn (in good condition, but even brand new, such a utensil seems to emerge from a past so remote that it belongs to a museum of popular arts and traditions), a skateboard (rather battered by all those kilometres on the tarmac and hundreds of jumps on the pavement), a fridge door (patched up so that, in spite of its age, its bottle compartment can still be used), a small kitchen appliance (brand new) and other similar bits and bobs.

¹ Philippe Garcia de la Rosa, "Entretien avec Bertrand Lavier," *Bertrand Lavier*, catalogue, Paris, Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1995, p. 19.

Each of these objects has been mounted on a base whose characteristics were left to the competence, and therefore the taste, of the craftsman. He chose the material, form and dimensions of the base in the same way as he does when mounting a "primitive" piece. It goes without saying that these choices are the result of judgements based on the formal properties of the object in question. The you might say, is the content of the base. Thus, in order to mutate into the work entitled *J.M.B. Classique* (here, as is usual with Lavier, the title simply restates the brand name of the object), the lock was attached to a small parallelepiped in black wood by means of a short, black-painted metal rod: the unity of colour and balance of the proportions are such that the ensemble can stand up to the most intense aesthetic scrutiny. As for the milk churn (*C.L.B.*), it was given a slightly porous base in beige limestone and a short black metal support, the effect of which is to make us overlook the recipient's humble function and focus on the sculptural quality of its smooth metal surface. Likewise, a polished wooden base and a short bar of the same material greatly heighten the resemblance between the car component (the turbo from a formula 1 Renault) and an anthropomorphic mask. The traffic cone (*Girod*) levitates a few centimetres above a sheet of metal painted matt black, barely raised above the ground to which it was held down by its original function: yet it also seems to be propelled toward the spectator by the angle of the short rectangular fastening supporting it. In contrast, the poor abandoned *Teddy*, its back scraped by a fine and perfectly vertical steel stem, floats at a relatively good distance - about a third of its own height - above its base. The light grace of the magazine rack (*Teppaz*) is heightened by its mimetic support, for the black rod that thrusts it above its small rectangular base is almost identical, tape included, to the object it supports. In contrast, the cement breeze-block (*Doras*) seems to be struggling with its manifest weight. A patinated bronze rod holds it a tiny distance from a plaque of the same material which is well equipped to confer a little of its own dignity on to what it supports. The same patinated bronze is used for the slender bases that carry the electric guitar (*Aria Pro II*) and the skateboard (*Chuck McTruck*). But in these last two examples, the spiralling movement imparted to the squared rods seems to put the two objects through figures that must have been familiar in their past life. Finally, the fridge door (*Bendix*) now seems to rest in a very still, almost monumental manner on two large tabs which are themselves attached to a dual-level base capable of lending it a nobility that is very different from the one it has lost through the rigours of use.

At first glance, the new operation invented by Lavier could be seen as a simple variation on Duchamp's theme of the "assisted" ready-made, or on the procedure superimpositions we have become used to in Lavier's other work; the only difference being that, rather than putting two objects together, he takes the risk of combining an object and a base. In this sense, even if the bases are obviously treated not as self-sufficient objects (which is something another contemporary artist might do) but as objects worthy of being integrated into the work, it could be demonstrated that, just as a refrigerator can become a base, so a base is an object like any other, even when performing its usual function. Although there is obviously a passing allusion here to Duchamp's ready-made, and although the earlier superimpositions obviously shed light on the context in which these mounted objects make their appearance, the fact remains that these are not just a simple variation on either of these two earlier themes. For, as always, Lavier has sought to produce works which have a high degree of autonomy but are also able to enter into a relation with other existing works (both his own and others with varying degrees of affinity). When the effect of the objects is primarily visual, such a result cannot be achieved without some formal elaboration. This does not mean that effects of meaning are short-circuited, however far from it.

A short detour via the theory of so-called "primitive" art should make this point clearer.

A few years ago, on the occasion of the exhibition organized by Susan Vogel under the title *ART/artifact*, in which "primitive" objects of purported artistic value were set alongside other "primitive"

objects considered purely utilitarian², the philosopher and critic Arthur C. Danto presented a number of ideas which may be of great use to us here. In order to establish the general thesis that what is art, is absolutely art, in accordance with its signification and not by chance or in relative terms, depending on the (good) will of beholders,³ Danto proceeded with the inventiveness typical of English and American philosophers. He imagined two "primitive" tribes which had developed in different but symmetrical directions from a common origin. In a nutshell, these picturesque ethnic groups - the Pot People and the Basket Folks - produced identical pots and baskets. Except that the first tribe sees pots as possessing deep meanings and powers (they are used to hold seeds and, as the wise men tell us, seeds are the origin of all things), and, consequently, those that make them as priests, close to the gods. In contrast, they treat baskets as mere utilitarian objects and their producers as simple craftsmen. As you might expect, the Basket Folks have a very different vision. In this tribe, it is baskets that are endowed with supernatural properties (do not the wise men describe the world as a great basket woven from grass and air?) while pots are relegated to the rank of simple utensils. Under such circumstances, it would seem logical that, on returning to Europe, an anthropologist who had discovered and analyzed these ethnic beliefs would, in spite of the physical similarity between the pots and baskets made by each tribe, have no qualms about sending the Pot People's pots and the Basket Folks' baskets to the art museum, for the unfailing admiration of modern aesthetes, while consigning the former's baskets and the latter's pots to the ethnological or natural history museum where they would be integrated into picturesque but highly educational dioramas illustrating the way of life of our "black brothers." From Danto's point of view, this division is perfectly legitimate. As we have seen, he considers that what makes an object an artwork is the thought or theory it contains. Now we know from the hypothesis that, in this respect, and even though they are physically and visually identical, the pots of the Pot People differ radically from those of the Basket Folks. They therefore deserve to be kept and exhibited in the art museum, along with the baskets made by the latter, of course, whereas, by the same token, the former's baskets and the latter's pots cannot hope for any higher destiny than that of humble utensils which are obviously unworthy of such an honour and thus destined to a humble documentary status, only worthy of inclusion in the ethnological or natural history museum⁴.

This anthropological fable is of course not without bearing on certain episodes in the history of modern and contemporary art. The physical identity of objects of which some are considered to be "art" (thus partaking, as Danto has it, of what Hegel calls "absolute spirit") and others simple utilitarian objects (part of the ordinary "prose of the world") is, according to our philosopher, the

² This exhibition was organized in 1988 by The Center for African Art, New York.

³ "Because of the dilating substance of individual artworks in the backward illuminations of present art, the belief that art itself must lack a stable identity becomes irresistible, that anything can be a work of art even though it may not have had that exalted status when it was first made, and that the boundaries of art are themselves philosophically indeterminate. One chief purpose of the present essay is to resist this belief. It does not follow from the facts with which I began, namely that works of art have latencies that become actual when released by other, later works of art, that art itself, as a concept and category, has a corresponding openness. It is one thing to say that what a work of art is, is a function of what other works of art show it to be. It is quite another thing to say that whether something is a work of art at all is a function of what other things are works of art. The population of artworks is a mutually self-enriching system of objects, any given member of which is considerably richer because of the existence of other artworks than it would have been if it alone existed (it is an interesting question whether there could be only one artwork in the world). But something must already be an artwork to benefit from this enrichment. The boundary between art and the rest of reality is, on the other hand, philosophically inflexible. It is of course possible to *discover* something to be a work of art, even a great work of art, which before then was regarded as having occupied a vastly less exalted, vastly more dubious status. [...] To be a work of art, is to embody a thought, to have a content, to express a meaning..." Arthur C. Danto, "Artifact and Art," in *ART/artifact. African Art in Anthropology Collections*, New York, The Center for African Art, and Munich, Prestel, 1988, pp. 18 and 32. Reprinted in Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box. The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1992).

⁴ Cf. Danto, op. cit., pp. 23-26.

mystery highlighted by both Duchamp's ready-mades and Warhol's famous Brillo boxes. The way Danto dissolves this mystery which he calls the "transfiguration of the commonplace" is well known. Indeed, it has already been alluded to in this essay. Art is about content, that is to say, signification. Art objects incorporate ideas and even theories in such a way that two objects that seem radically similar to the eye can be radically different to thought, so that one belongs to the art world and the other to the ordinary world.

However, things could turn out to be not quite so clear-cut. We can see this from certain details (or the lack thereof) in the fable of the Pot People and the Basket Folks. Not the least of these concerns the visual effects of dividing up the pots and baskets between the art and ethnology museums. Danto himself emphasizes that in the ethnological or natural history museum, the pots and baskets are presented in a certain way. They are, he tells us, included in dioramas illustrating their everyday use by these imaginary tribes. He even points out that an "artistic" basket and pot (both of course on loan from the art museum) have been put into the dioramas representing their respective tribes. They occupy a privileged position apart from the ordinary objects, and everything indicates that they are given special attention - one very different, at any rate, from the indifference surrounding the utilitarian pots and baskets. However, Danto provides no details concerning art museum's presentation of the "sacred" pots and baskets. To make the fable more real, he simply makes a passing reference to two pairs of famous museums; Kunsthistorisches and the Naturhistorisches museums, which face each other across Marie Theresien Platz in Vienna, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and American Museum of Natural History, each located on one of the two avenues run alongside Central Park. Without describing the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan, it is worth recalling that the way the "primitive" objects are displayed there as art amply justifies Susan Vogel's judgement that "the museum exhibition is not a transparent lens through which to view art, however neutral the presentation may seem."⁵ Each object exists in splendid isolation on its pedestal or allotted piece of picture wall, and the subtle (or, perhaps, magical?) lighting produces that effect of "the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be" to which Walter Benjamin gave the name "aura."⁶ This type of presentation regularly gives rise to polemics between admirers of "primitive" art (all of them aesthetes, of course) and anthropologists or ethnographers who see it as a colonialist annexation of objects which, according to them, have nothing to do with our notion of art and therefore should not be presented with the honours that our civilization reserves for the objects it locates in that category. It is true that, as Susan Vogel observes, "the category of African objects defined as art has steadily expanded throughout the century," and that "virtually all of the African artworks we now know were once classified as artifacts." Not surprisingly, then, "the problem of distinguishing between the two categories has proven remarkably resistant to clear-cut solutions, and continues to bedevil those who collect and exhibit African art and other 'primitive' art."⁷

Danto's fable is designed both to solve this thorny problem and to prove that it is structurally identical to the one raised by ready-mades and the other supposed transfigurations of the commonplace that abound in modern and contemporary art. Indeed, one would not expect it to be otherwise since, whether "civilized" or "primitive," the commonplace is always commonplace. Judging by a parenthetical remark in his famous interviews with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp surely would not have disagreed. Arguing one of his favourite points, that "there is no society without art because art is in the eye of the beholder," the artist added, by way of proof: "I am sure that the

⁵ Susan Vogel, "Introduction," in *ART/artifact*, op. cit., p. 12.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, Glasgow, Fontana/Collins, 1977, p. 224.

⁷ Vogel, op. cit., *ibid.*

people in the Congo who made those wooden spoons which we so admire in the Musée de l'homme, did not make them to be admired by the Congolese."⁸

This conviction also suggests, however, that Duchamp might not have been in full agreement with the solution to the problem suggested by the American philosopher's fable. As we have seen, this assumes that an object is an artwork in some constitutive sense. Even if in certain situations people may not have been aware of it. The whole of African art was the object of just such a misclassification. A change of beholder was certainly required in order to redress the situation, but this would not have been enough if the properties for which this art is now appreciated as such had not always been there. Thus, the movement of an object from the world of non-art ("the prose of the world") to that of art ("absolute spirit") is always the result of a discovery which, in the final analysis, reveals an intellectual, theoretical content whose invisible presence had not been noticed before. This solution may well satisfy a philosopher who, ultimately, may see art as a way of pursuing philosophy by other means (to coin a phrase). But it does have one major drawback, that of purely and simply cancelling out the visible - in which respect it takes us back to Duchamp, insofar as he considered that his ready-mades became things "that one doesn't even look at"⁹ - whereas the recognition of this visible element as art is always accompanied, or even produced, by formal constructions or developments which it would be difficult to ignore. This applies both to "primitive" objects and to those annexed by modern or contemporary art. In other words, it may be that Danto is trying to find a theoretical solution for a problem that he can only raise because he has already found the solution in the practice of museums and exhibitions, and that it is here that the real theoretical problem lies. Blinded by the speculative dimension of the question, the philosopher is no different from the most ordinary visitors who, as Susan Vogel reminds us, "are unaware of the degree to which their experience of any art in a museum is conditioned by the way it is installed."¹⁰ In contrast, the way the work is installed is clearly central to Lavier's work. His aim is not just to make what is called an installation but to incorporate into the work - to better control it - the question of its installation so that it can function as a work independently of its context, including that of the museum. This was true of his painted objects, of his superimpositions and also of his photographic cut pieces. It is perhaps even more valid for his mounted objects because a part of the work's content (not the only one) is indeed constituted precisely by the integration into the work itself of that which normally acts as a device for installing (and indexing) it. By moving the bar art/non-art so that it traverses the actual artwork, Lavier succeeds in the paradoxical enterprise of producing a family of objects in a sense incorporates the museum or, more generally, the indexing devices art, and can by the same token do without them for the simple reason that they no longer designate the work from outside, but have become an integral part of it.

This detour via "primitive art" or, more exactly, via the characteristic apparatus of its indexation as

⁸ Marcel Duchamp, *Ingénieur du temps perdu, Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne*, Paris, Belfond, 1967 and 1977, p. 175.

⁹ This formula according to which the ready-made "becomes something one doesn't even look at" appears in an interview with Alain Jouffroy which is to be published in cassette and book form (Paris, Dumerchez and Centre Georges Pompidou). It needs to be read alongside Duchamp's declaration to Pierre Cabanne several years later concerning the aesthetic indifference which presided over his choice of ready-mades. "It is very difficult to choose an object," he said, "because after a fortnight you end up either loving or loathing it. One needs to attain a kind of indifference such that you feel no aesthetic emotions. The choice of the ready-mades is always based on visual indifference and at the same time on the total absence of good or bad taste.", *ibid.*

¹⁰ "Whether the Wum bowl is art, whether the hunting net, or the Lozi needles are art or artifact is strictly our problem. The makers of humble African nets, needles, stools and mats that we term artifacts have not somehow aspired to sophistication and the status of art and failed. They never for a minute lost sight of the fact that these were simply useful wellmade objects. The question and the categories are ours. African cultures do not isolate the category of objects we call art, but they do associate an aesthetic experience with objects having certain qualities. The aesthetic experience is universal - with or without a word that describes it.", Vogel, *op. cit.* p. 11.

(museum - or exhibition-worthy) art, is obviously far from innocent. Reflecting on the forms of construction that participate in the production of artistic valency in the case of "primitive" objects, Lavier, like Vogel, could emphasize that it is perfectly possible for these objects to have been endowed with aesthetic qualities by their producers without for that reason having been designed to enter a category of art which is specific to our culture. Whether or not we place these objects in this category (and, consequently, in its allotted spaces) as Vogel answers Danto, "strictly our problem."¹¹ The same is true, one might add, for the related problem of their presentation. As Lavier sees it, then, "primitive art" and the art of the ready-made both raise the same questions. Both are site-specific, the site on this occasion being not natural but highly cultural (in every sense of that word), i.e., the museum (or its preambles, the art gallery or show). But museums and exhibitions do not only raise theoretical problems, they give rise to a practical one: they have to be built, their forms have to be worked out in practical terms. And these forms will have the particularity of serving to house other forms. The blind spot of the ready-made operation, whether its objects are Western or "primitive," is thus precisely that it depends very directly but also very implicitly (if not to say unconsciously) on that formal construction. The consequence of this dependence is obviously the loss of the work's autonomy: outside the museum, and whether it originates in African craftsmanship or American industry, the ready-made returns to its initial status of ordinary object. Duchamp's gesture, and the general attempt to aestheticize "primitive" objects, both suffer from the same theoretical weakness, which is the failure to see that no object can become art for purely theoretical reasons. In both cases the formal apparatus is indispensable. And in both cases, such apparatus are always effectively present, but they do not interest the theory that considers them not as an integral part of art, but as simple interfaces relating to the other side of the frontier. It is true that it would be unjust to ask theoreticians for more than they can give. In this instance, it was a matter of displacing a frontier, and that is something only an artist and past master in the resolution of paradoxes could do.

We can now see that, by having his objects mounted on bases, without which they would be only ready-mades, Lavier obtains as the result of his addition, not just a simple inscription in the register of art, with the concomitant right of access to its spaces, but a real change of figure, something we in fact have a right to expect from what is called "transfiguration" - even if there is nothing magical or theoretical about the transfiguration in question here, since it is above all the effect of a formal, i.e., visual operation. In this sense, a Dogon lock and one bought in a hardware store both start from the same bases, so to speak. Which, it must be said in passing, is only fair. We know how the West - or, to be precise, the *Président des Brosses*¹² - invented the notions of the fetish and fetishism. In the language of the colonists, the fetish is the image of the colonized people's divinity, an image made by man (this is the exact meaning of the Portuguese word *feitiço*, from which we derive the word

¹¹ Ibid., p. 17.

¹² In a book published in 1760, *Du Culte des dieux fétiches ou parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de la Nigritie*. A short extract from this work was published in a special issue of the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, "Les Objets du fétichisme", no. 2, autumn 1970, pp. 131-132. The complete text (revised and briefly presented by Madeleine V. David) was reprinted in 1988 as part of the corpus des oeuvres de philosophie en langue française, edited by Michel Serres. Here, in honour of the Pot People and Basket Folks, is an excerpt: "The Negroes of the western coast of Africa, and even those as far inland as Nubia, like to worship certain Divinities known by the Europeans as Fetishes, a term coined by our traders in Senegal from the Portuguese word Fétisso, which means *faerie, enchanted, divine thing, or teller of oracles*; from the Latin root *Fatum, Fanum, Fari*. These divine Fetishes are nothing more than the first material object that it pleases each nation to choose and have ritually consecrated by its priests: it may be a tree, a mountain, the sea, a piece of wood, a lion's tail, a stone, a shell, salt, a fish, a plant, a flower, an animal of a certain species, like a cow, elephant or sheep; and anything of the kind one may imagine. These are all Gods, sacred things and talismans for the Negroes, who worship them with exactitude and respect, address wishes to them, offer sacrifices to them, carry them in processions if they are able, or take them upon their persons with great signs of veneration, and consult them on all interesting occasions: generally considering them as tutelary for men and as powerful protectors against all kinds of accidents.", p. 15.

fetishism), and indeed it has to be, since the native's divinity does not exist and therefore cannot produce an acheiropoietic image (one not made by human hands) comparable to the Santa Sindone in Turin, the Vera Icon and other signs produced from time to time by the (real) god of the Christians. In short, the "gods" of the colonized were no more than those humble objects (pots and baskets, for example) to which the "primitives" attributed such powers, but which, as we know, are merely material objects, fetishes. By treating Western industrial objects the same way as the museum aesthetic treats craft or ritual objects from other cultures, Lavier catches the culture in its own web - although it must be said that it had already entangled itself since, as we know, abetted by Marx and Freud, fetishism (both the commodity variety and the sexual substitution kind) soon boomeranged back to lodge in the minds of its inventors. Even so, someone still had to put fetishism on its pedestal, so to speak, in order to show (and not to demonstrate) how it is one of the truths informing Western culture, a truth which can probably help us understand how art after the age of religion, which is to say art in the age of the museum, articulates its social function. Starting from the same bases, the fetishes of each and all begin to live their own perfectly legitimate aesthetic lives. They thus become effective works of art, which is to say, hyperfetishes which illuminate each other and, in doing so, say a great deal about the society that made them what they are¹³. As the artist often says, and as is manifest in the other operations to which he has accustomed us; "here too, forms added to become forms".¹⁴ But the fact of becoming forms does not prevent them from signifying something.

¹³ On this point, see the developments presented in Daniel Soutif, "Du bon et du mauvais usage de l'objet," *Transversalité I*, Bordeaux, Cape Musée d'art contemporain, 1990, pp. 33-38. A slightly different version of the same article appeared in English in *Artforum*, October 1989, pp. 33-38, under the title "Found and Lost: on the Object in Art."

¹⁴ This formula appears in a short text written in 1987 for the Kassel Documenta. This ended as follows: "If in Kassel I have given a three-dimensional geometrical composition the appearance of a grass tennis court, and if, when I put a refrigerator on a safe, some people see in this edifice the appearance of a sculpture on its base, I could also say that this state was not envisaged for those known forms, in other words: FORMS BECOME FORMS." (typed document communicated by the artist). Lavier makes some interesting comments on this same idea in an interview (in English) with Constance Lewallen published under the title *View* in spring 1988 by Point Publications, San Francisco. Cf. *Plus*, no. 3/4, 1988, p. 46.