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## *Îles flottantes*

### *Notes on the Statute of the Aesthetic Object Starting from Bertrand Lavier*

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In 1969 Bertrand Lavier created his first work of art when he took white paint and covered the leaves of a climbing plant in the garden of his house in Aignay-Le-Duc, in Burgundy. This work showed two intersecting diagonal lines upon the broad mantle of leaves and served as a reference to a type of Land Art with a human, everyday face, rather than a titanic and disruptive opposition to pictorial tradition.

Lavier probably meant this to be a somewhat ironic farewell to his horticultural background and an announcement of his decision to become an artist. In fact, at this point he was already using painting to reproduce reality, literally covering it according to an obviously paradoxical principle that would later be seen in his most significant work.

The paradox of literalism in the consideration of artistic language naturally derives from an awareness of the ungluing of words from things, signs from referents - an awareness that pervades much of the culture of our century. Lavier's work is a complex reflection on the consequences of a similar ungluing which pushes him to create works of art that function as logical traps, dispensers of perceptual deceptions or devices for engulfing meaning. To do this, he employs the widest range of materials, indiscriminately belonging either to the realm of the artistic, or more generally to the world of communication or even more generically to everyday life. It is as if he is saying that the elusiveness of reality, for the language that gives it appellation, is an experience that brings together, more than it differentiates, the realms of art and life.

Many of the works from his 1971 debut in the art world use photography to articulate a play on appearances allowed by technical reproducibility. The works entitled *Dessin (Drawing, 1974)* and followed by a progressive number, have one or more vertical strokes in pastel, along with the photographic reproduction of one of the strokes repeated as many times as the real drawings. In the same fashion, *Arcades des Palais des Doges 1 x 8 - 8 x 1 (Arcades of the Doges Palace 1 x 8 - 8 x 1, 1975)*, shown at the 1976 Venice Biennale, reproduces sixteen arches of the Doges Palace, which, only upon closer look, prove to be the image of eight arches and the eight-time repetition of only one of them.

In the passage from a stroke to this stroke, to use Lavier's own phrase, within the principle of individuation that the means allows, the artist introduces an unexpected and opposite principle, using repetition as a factor of indeterminacy, almost as a disturbance of the communicative act.

In works such as *D'après Caton l'Ancien (After Cato the Elder, 1975)* and *Polished (1976)*, verbal language comes directly into play in the details of a translation of one language into another, conveying the actual drift into which original meaning can be swept away. *D'après Caton l'Ancien* is marked by irony, with seven academic versions of a Latin text. But the twelve apparently identical elements of *Polished* really hit the nail on the head. This work stems from a challenge to

the ability of language to define an object and consequently to direct its formation. The artist with the verbal description of a fragment of fire-wood; half of it was painted a luminous green, the end of the other half was covered with gilded yellow paper, and the painted portion was splintered. The fragment had other attributes, carefully listed, and was accompanied by a metal tip. The text was then translated into English, the English in turn translated into Arabic, this new text into Russian, and so on, a chain in which the French and English versions often recurred, allowing to verify the slippages meaning in the various translations.

Closely adhering to the information repeated in each translation, the artist was directly involved in the creation of the different objects. These resulted in a series of elements which never matched up, and where differences abounded through-out - in the chromatic tone of the green, in the dimensions of the fragments of gilded paper, in the nature of the metal tip - due to the unpredictable ambiguities of the terms that emerged in the passage from one language to another. The outcome was exhibited in small Plexiglas boxes, each accompanied by a framed description, forming a single circular installation in the exhibition space. Neither beginning nor end of the process was indicated, thus emphasizing the loss of meaning rather than its institution, a loss that the process itself entailed.

An equally interesting effect is seen in a cycle of monochrome pieces, for which *Rouge geranium par Duco et Ripolin* (*Geranium Red by Duco and Ripolin*) can be considered the archetype. This piece was first executed directly on a wall, in 1974 and in several later occasions, and then in other versions in paint on Plexiglas or oil on canvas. The companies Duco and Ripolin (like others involved in several variations) manufacture industrial paints, and it would be hard to find a colour more widely used than geranium red. Indeed, Lavier exhibited only two paint samples, which covered two long halves of barely touching surfaces, sometimes walls, sometimes canvases. In a formal sense, the resulting pictorial work brings to mind Brice Marden, a resemblance that has been noticed, or else the modernist tradition of the monochrome. But, clearly, an entirely different issue is being addressed, for the painting serves as a mere demonstration of a mental process, centered on discrepancy - obvious, in this case - between things and the words that designate them or that are meant to designate them. *Geranium Red* is a conventional expression that cannot coincide with a reality except in chance fashion, at least as long as geranium is excluded from categories of the spirit. Nonetheless, the expression *Geranium Red* refers to a category, to a generality, and presumes to verify it among various phenomena, although the claim is inevitably contradicted by those same phenomena, in their infinite variety. Each *Rouge Geranium* chosen by Lavier, each *Rouge Bordeaux* (*Bordeaux Red*) or *Coquelicot* (*Poppy*), will always differ from any other red to which it is juxtaposed in the pictorial work; each will always be different, despite the fact that language declares them to be the same.

Indeed, Lavier's work is a continuous, multiform and always surprising attempt to subject language to its widely varying articulations or specializations. Works such as *Or not to be* (1978), or, *Socle de peinture rouge* (*Base for red painting*, 1986) are, as the artist himself stated, words placed against each other, in a logical short circuit that forces them to function as anomalies, once they have been inserted into a context of meaning (the language of art).

*Or not to be* is a double piece, consisting of a block of green acrylic paint in the shape of a parallelepiped, with the word "painting" carved into its surface. The paradox here lies in the introduction of the name itself along with its abstraction. A block of acrylic paint can easily filch the name of painting, since its materiality assigns it to a similar expressive protocol, but it is the block of material, which obviously recalls the full relief of sculpture, that pushes its presentation beyond the realm of painting. Thus, there is a contradiction with the sculpture itself, the canonical bronze casting, incongruously originated by painting.

Similar observations can be made about *Socle de peinture rouge*, since a *socle*, a base, enters the art

world by right only as a vicarious tool, used to exhibit a work of art, not to be identified with it, and, in any case, the aforementioned work is a piece of sculpture. The titles seem to emphasize a desire to fluctuate in ambiguity, refusing (theatrically, one might say, in the former case) to embody a precise identity. This is true for much of Lavier's work, and his choices make him stand out among those who have re-elaborated the modernist tradition of the ready-made. Unlike Alighiero e Boetti's *Rosso Guzzi* (*Guzzi Red*) or *Rosso Gilera* (*Gilera Red*), which become tautologically exhausted, Lavier's industrial paints, exhibited and named by brand, are not depleted in their pronouncement. Nor is it the artist's intention to restore to the observer of the finished work the same tone and shading of the colour that might be found in its original state, namely in the tube, as Frank Stella has stated. Lavier does not share the subtle provocation of Boetti's undertakings, because he has no need to, painting already being for him a weakened text of authority, to the point where it is expressed through paradoxes.

Lavier employs painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, installations - all the processes that characterize artistic expression - to deflect emphasis from the work's very artistic nature, either stressing opposite and complementary illusions of the representation of reality or allowing the work to aristocratically suffice on its own. It is significant that the artist's personal use of the ready-made, expressed in the choice of industrial paints as well as in his choice of objects, implies as a consequence a reorganization of the subjectivity of the artist, the decentralization of the artist, a stance that has few historical precedents. On the contrary, beginning with Duchamp, artists usually embodied the extreme version of the artist demiurge, who with a touch of the hand transforms everything into gold, every object into a work of art, and consequently assigned the subject a central, essential role as dispenser of meaning.

Think of the telegram Robert Rauschenberg sent to the Parisian art dealer, Iris Clert; the telegram itself can be interpreted as a portrait of Iris Clert, if the artist states this to be the case. Lavier looks at this sort of proof of identity and its fully significant function, which gives new life to things, and he comes up with *Or not to be*, a work that entails one's questioning on identity, created out of a suspension of meaning, and which fluctuates in a sea of indeterminacy.

Beginning in 1981, Lavier's equally indeterminate objects fluctuate as well, as if suspended in a parallel universe. The artist subjects them to a strange make-over: he covers them entirely with a layer of acrylic paint applied in thick, tangible brushstrokes, taking the greatest possible care that the colour of the paint faithfully respects the colour of the surfaces it is concealing. Black on black, white on and transparent paint on transparent surface in the case of glass. The first object chosen was a transistor radio, in perfect working order. The first exhibition entirely dedicated to this sort of work included five elements: a file cabinet, a grand piano, two wardrobes, a refrigerator. Shortly thereafter, he applied this principle to a metal ladder, cardboard boxes and medicine, bathroom or dressing room cabinets. From this point on, Lavier's painted objects have multiplied indefinitely. They are presented as new plastic facts, as the artist defines them, which originate at the juncture point of two linguistic systems, painting and sculpture, two traditions, that of the Duchampian ready-made and that of modern painting, once the systems and traditions have passed through the sieve of disenchanting criticism. The way in which his objects are conceived and take shape represents one of the most radical critiques directed at the very statute of the aesthetic object, or, to better state it, at the mechanisms of legitimization of its artistic value, as established over the course of modernity.

Lavier states that his brushstroke, the pictorial touch he uses to cover his objects, comes directly from Van Gogh, a sign which, among the many left to us as a legacy of modernism, mostly signifies inner torment, existential drama, tragedy. At this point this stroke has become a cliché, a stylistic element in which the public at large sees and recognizes, as in a metonymic figure, modern painting

as such. Van Gogh's reduction to cliché is not indicative of any personal cynicism on the artist's part. If anything, it stems from the observation of the exhaustion of the modernist utopias cultivated within artistic circles which were meant to change the world, starting from changing forms within the world and ending up with the production of forms that were merely tangential to the world and, in terms of style, were reduced to a stereotype.

Lavier debates this very stereotype, where one might say that utopia encounters its unhappy conscience, and he transforms the pictorial act into the almost derisive practice of the painting of common objects, moreover following instructions predetermined by the object itself. This reduction of painting to vicarious functions, its descent from the realm of the artist to that of the artisan, had already been expressed in a cycle of works called *Landscape Painting and Beyond*, dating back to the late 1970s. In those works the dignified tradition of landscape painting was compared with another series of clichés. The artist presented a large-scale colour photograph of a landscape, using at times posters similar to the ones which decorate offices or analogous environments. He asked a painter to spread paint over the right half of the photograph, in order to cover its images, respecting forms and colours so that the reality and its pictorial representation would coexist on the same level. Finally, the painter was asked to paint a fantasy landscape on the adjacent wall, finishing off the landscape. But it was not only the pathos of painting that was reversed into its seemingly parodistic contradiction; the ready-made itself, brought up-to-date, can also be seen as subject to new debate. Indeed, the treatment to which the object is subjected differs somewhat from Duchamp's process. Duchamp's ready-made is identified in the dislocation of an object (any object) from its usual context, to the context of art, and this new location becomes the principal agent of the object's attribution as art. In contrast, Lavier's objects stand outside this sort of identification. As Daniel Soutif has written, Lavier's objects owe their transformation into works of art only to their formal properties, which determine the creation of a new form that doesn't depend on any particular context to be recognized as such. According to Soutif, the object in and of itself demeure formellement, strictement identique lui-même (is formally, rigorously identical to itself). Soutif then concludes: *Si la frontière qui sépare l'objet de série du l'hyperfétiche, autrement dit la fameuse barre qui sépare l'Art du Non-Art, passe quelque part, c'est cette fois dans l'objet lui-même, et non plus entre l'objet et son contexte ou entre l'objet et ce qu'il représente* (If the boundary that separates the mass-produced object from the hyper-fetish, in other words the famous line that separates Art from Non-Art, is shifted, then it lies within the object itself and no longer between the object and its context or between the object and that which it represents)<sup>1</sup>.

On the representation level, Lavier's objects also differ from some Duchampian ready-mades. For example, Duchamp's urinal was shown upside down and entitled *Fountain*, while the wood and metal hatrack, screwed down to the floor, became a *Trap*. Clearly, these are still within the realm of representation, and there are numerous cases where the attribution of the title or the dislocation of the object assumes an evocative function. Rarely, perhaps only in the case of the bottlerack, do the title and display simply present the object in its pure essence. Lavier focuses his attention entirely on the object, on its nature as a found entity extracted from the everyday, and this is the point of departure for all the disturbing potential of his work. The paradoxical literalism with which Lavier pushes the limits of language reaches an extreme position, where a piece of reality is identical to its representation, and an object is wrapped, as it were, in its own tautological definition. On the other hand the painting, in a process of exhibition that faithfully replicates the structure of the object and apparently aims at an hyper-real effect, alienates the object from itself. The space that the work carves out is thus the interstice between two dimensions, where it remains suspended in the

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Soutif, "L'Objet et l'art contemporain", in *Qu'est-ce qui est contemporain, Transversalité I*, cape Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux, 1990, p. 46.

indecisiveness of a short circuit: a functional object (the wall clocks continue to tell time, objects can be placed in wardrobes and file cabinets, the piano can be played and the fire extinguisher can be used in case of fire) has become a work of art, but without resorting to the most common processes of artistic attribution. Having become art, the object still fluctuates in the uncertain territory between sculpture and painting, connecting to these traditions in transgressive terms. The statute of the work of art, that is, the abstraction of artistic value, has been achieved, but it is then compared to another abstraction, that of the commodity into whose universe it returns, without ever having ceased to belong there. Indeed, a far cry from being titled *Fountain* or *Trap*, the work also rejects appellations like Piano, Refrigerator, the common names of things, and instead reiterates the brand name, which transforms the things into products: *Gabriel Caveau*, *Westinghouse*, *Fast*, *Ignis*, *Quarz*. And even *Peinture (Painting)*, a framed canvas covered with paint like all the other products, enters this world of abstraction, where criteria of objectivity and functionality, like differences of function, are lost in the objects-sign marketplace.

1984 Bertrand Lavier exhibited a refrigerator on top of a safe, a work that marked a radical turn in his personal use of the object. The title of this work, and all his works constructed on the principle of superimposition, consists of the names of the two objects, written one above the other and separated by a fraction sign: *Brandt / Fichet-Bauche*.

The work no longer bears pictorial traces and obviously refers to sculpture, in particular to the debate on modern sculpture and modalities for its placement in space. In the relationship between a safe that supports a refrigerator, the former constitutes the base, the condition of visibility of the sculptural work, a role that this case falls to the refrigerator. However, this latter element can be seen as relegated to a role of base in cases where it supports a plastic chair or a stone. The legitimacy of similar operations within the artistic sphere is beyond dispute, and indeed, one can see how the artist takes advantage of this legitimacy to carry assumptions to the limit. In fact, he not only introduces two common objects into world of art, but subjects them as well to a hierarchy of functions and therefore of values that ends up being completely arbitrary and, what's more, that risks contradicting itself in the interchangeability of the elements employed (if the safe has never been placed on top of anything else, it is doubtless because nothing else the world is heavier than a safe).

The scandal lies uniquely in the fact that, with the superimposed objects, Lavier debates criteria of attribution of meaning within the linguistic system called art, taking advantage of these criteria to create plastic forms of extreme ambiguity for the observer, who is faced with the hard inexpressiveness of a common object which, with its pure display, recalls and inverts into paradox an entire theoretical working tradition.

However, the paradoxes are productive on a linguistic level, and the principle of super-imposition, applied as a structural constant to the most diverse of objects, opens up an equal number of synthesis of meaning. For example, many sculptures reveal objects that are difficult to recognize and made even more enigmatic by the super-imposition, demonstrating that in the realm of the everyday everything is not always truly familiar (as in *Ikea / Zanussi*, in the mysterious totem *EWT / Jewel*, or in *Knapp-Monarch / Solid Industries*, all works from 1986).

The creation of a pictorial work according to the principle of sculpture is perfectly coherent with Lavier. In this case the artist applies brushstrokes of transparent acrylic to cover (and, at the same time, necessarily reveal) a painting by François Morellet. The title, naturally, is composed of the name of one artist over the other, where the personalities of the two are inflected in the same way as brand names: an amiable but no less effective attack on the centrality of the subject! Thus, in the exchange between subjects and objects, things and words, he achieves a total subversion of distinctions, differences and hierarchies. Not only are chairs placed above refrigerators, but tennis

nets are placed above volley-ball nets, wheat silos above construction site sheds. This leads to a cleverly virtuosic solution, where a Mozart symphony is played in a room where a Calder mobile is exhibited, and a Duke Ellington song is played in a room containing a sculpture by Girardon – Mozart / Calder and Ellington / Girardon, both from 1986.

From the 1980s on and starting with the painted and superimposed objects, Lavier's activity has gone through recurring thematic cycles, which correspond to the different modalities of the aesthetic objects. All these works have been part of the artist's unceasing reflection on the statute of the ready-made as a principal modernist legacy.

In the cycle entitled *Walt Disney Productions 1947-* (the date refers to the creation of the first original Disney object, while Lavier's intervention occurred in 1984), this legacy is coupled with another, equally fundamental one, that of abstraction, understood as the principal language of modernity. Lavier's encounter with a Walt Disney album, illustrating Mickey's and Minnie's visit to a museum of contemporary art, resulted in his application of the logic of the found object to more unpredictable realms. The paintings on the walls and the sculptures that appear in this imaginary museum repeat stylistic elements conveyed by the spread and popularization of abstract art (sinuous lines and stains, biomorphic shapes and geometric armatures) during the late 1940s. They reappear in Lavier's work, which gives life to these virtual works by magnifying them photographically in cibachrome prints and, later, by rendering them in three-dimensional polyester sculptures. Removed from the deliberately ironic atmosphere of the comic strip (Minnie likes abstraction, conservative Mickey of course does not), the works still maintain an indisputable formal elegance, as well as the eccentric aura of finds from another universe.

The cycle begun in 1982 with the work entitled *Conforama*, also sets in motion a similar investigation of ready-made abstract forms, in this case the decorative patterns that appear on wallpaper. The artist covered the walls of exhibition spaces (which at times were actual domestic environments, such as the room created for the exhibition *Chambres d'Amis* in Ghent in 1986) and then superimposed a scrap of paper, framed, bearing the same pattern, but in different colours.

In both cycles the logic of the object-sign that is found and presented in an artistic context obviously brings into question the parameters (of good or bad taste, even more than of artistic quality) that traditionally separate high from low and popular culture.

A similar and still complex relationship is investigated in his *Relief-peinture* series dating from 1988, where the work's resolution is often and deliberately ironic. The facade of a prefabricated house made out of aluminum, enameled sheet metal and glass was placed against the wall, its rectangular sections making reference to all constructivist abstraction and to the relationships it established between art and architecture.

Lavier has gone on to identify other modes of presentation of the aesthetic object and its configuration within the artistic realm, as seen in a recent exhibition entitled *Cinq pièces faciles* (*Five easy pieces*). Here, his painted and superimposed objects were shown alongside objects with new characteristics, corresponding to further possibilities for the non-artistic to enter the realm of the artistic - possibilities already explicated over the course of modern art. The artist exhibited a motorcycle, damaged in an accident, a threshing machine cut into some of its parts, and an electric guitar supported on an iron base.

The damaged motorcycle (*Mobymatic*, 1993) fits in the tradition of the object exhibited as itself, without other formal intervention on the part of the artist.

However, it challenges one of the postulates of the Duchampian ready-made, the artist's total indifference to the choice of object, which remains completely insignificant and inexpressive.

In contrast, Lavier's motorcycle insists on being strongly expressive, due to the reality of the drama to which it bears witness, accident, death, violent destruction. The effect is even stronger in the case

of *Giulietta* (1993), an Alfa Romeo automobile damaged in an accident, placed atop a broad white base, like a contemporary *memento mori*. This enables the artist to infuse passion into the ready-made, without paying any debt to the specific language of modern sculpture that transforms a piece of reality into a pure formal value, as in César's compressions or Chamberlain's sculptures. The large threshing machine (*Photo-Relief n. 2*, 1991) is exhibited sawed into various parts, because the artist presents it as if seen through a photographic close-up frame, thus proving how profoundly our usual visual experience, both within and outside the realm of art, is conditioned by prevalent technical means.

The last object exhibited, the electric guitar mounted on an iron base (*Aria Pro II*, 1995) belongs to the most recent cycle of works, created in 1995 and displayed at the first Johannesburg Biennale. In this case Lavier chose a series of objects, many of which were reduced to the state of scrap, and asked an artisan to create bases for each of them, identical to the ones used to support ancient African objects, generally defined as primitive works of art. It was up to the artisan to choose material, colour and shape of the base. For his part, the artist calculated a transvaluation of the principles that underlie the definition of the very idea of primitive art. The African objects, which had no particular value to their original owners, are replaced by the non-value of our everyday world: a plush teddy bear, a well-worn refrigerator door, or the well-known anthropological normality of a brick or a guitar. The superimposition of the different roles carried out by the base, understood as a device for attributing value, necessarily brings together different functions and natures and evokes a sort of phantasm of the common object, as Lavier himself has noted: *Quand vous voyez la porte de frigidaire soclée, symétriquement, en écho, peut apparaître la porte de grenier dogon dans une dimension imaginaire, comme pour rééquilibrer cette chose* (When you see the refrigerator door on a base, symmetrically, like an echo, the granary door of a Dogon tribe can appear in an imaginary dimension, as if to re-balance this thing).

In fact, Lavier's art brings about an imbalance, because it removes the terrain, that is the legitimacy, from the cultural conventions through which we perceive things, differentiating them by genre, function and intended purpose. The first feeling before his works, which are outright attempts at the commonplace, is one consternation, as the artist himself says, for he too has experienced it. Then the work becomes *déclencheur d'émotions et de sensations un peu plus inhabituelles* (unleashes somewhat uncustomary emotions and feelings), and therefore opens up to meaning (to interpretation) through the non-customary, the non-familiar, the disturbing<sup>2</sup>.

It is hardly necessary to state that this destiny of unease irretrievably belongs to the nature of what we call, if words don't deceive us, works of art.

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<sup>2</sup> Philippe Garcia de la Rosa, "Entretien avec Bertrand Lavier," in: *Bertrand Lavier*, Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et de Océanie, Paris, 1995, pp. 20 and 22.

All statements attributed to Bertrand Lavier have been taken from an unpublished conversation with the artist, which took place in Rivoli in June 1996.