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Raymonde Moulin

The Genesis of the Rarity of Art

**Translated by
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Abstract

Moulin examines the ideological, economic, and legal implications of “rarity” and “uniqueness” in relation to the work of art and the art market. From the Renaissance onward, artists distinguished their works from those of industry and of handcraft by rejecting the utilitarian project and by making the uniqueness of every work an essential predicate of art, a process that was entrenched by the market and by the law. In the case of folk art and ethnographical objects, “rarity” can be promoted by the expert community, while the “rarity” of new objects, such as prints or photographs, has to be “produced” so that they conform to the model of the unique artwork.

KEYWORDS: artistic rarity, status of art, artistic value, ethnology, high art, popular art, folklore, art market, reproducibility, multiples, Duchamp, avant-garde, Dada, Surrealism, ready-made, photography

Introduction by Dario Gamboni (University of Geneva)

*Born in 1924, Raymonde Moulin founded the Centre de sociologie des arts at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, in 1983. She played an important role in the development of the sociology of art in France and beyond, organizing in 1985 a major international conference in Marseille. Her first book, *Le marché de la peinture en France* (Paris 1967; English *The French Art Market*, New Brunswick 1987), was a pioneering study of the interactions between artists, dealers, and collectors. One of the questions she raised was how artistic value is constituted, and this is the topic of the 1978 essay translated here.*

It was prompted in part by the ways in which artists challenged the art market and the traditional conception of art in the 1960s and 1970s, either by refraining entirely from producing material objects or by editing multiples. Both moves underlined the centrality of uniqueness in the definition of the work of art, and Moulin observed that “the trap of rarity” closed on these protesters in two ways: on one hand, anything that was incorporated in a limited edition could function as a substitute for an artwork, while on the other hand, rarity was conferred through the uniqueness of the author. Moulin proposed a genealogy of the current conception of art, including its legal definition as “the unique product of the undivided labor of a unique creator,” a genealogy in which the Renaissance and, most importantly, the first industrial revolution are crucial steps. From then on, artists had to defend the specificity of their productions against those of industry and of handicraft, and they did so by rejecting the utilitarian project and by making the uniqueness of every work an essential predicate of art, a process that was entrenched by the market and by the law. The “residual” rarity of older objects—Moulin discusses the examples of folk art and ethnography—could be promoted but the “original rarity” of new objects had to be “produced” or “manipulated.” This is particularly illuminating in the case of arts or techniques such as printmaking and photography, the products of which are inherently multipliable, and Moulin shows how they were shaped so as to conform to the model of the unique artwork.

Moulin’s brilliant analysis offers a corrective to Walter Benjamin’s famous 1936 essay on “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” which has been more often quoted than critically reflected upon. Its account of the specificity of the economic status of artworks is of great interest in an age where contemporary art, on the

globalized scene, is impacted upon even more—a subject of Moulin’s later work—by its relation to the market. And its examination of the ideological, economic, and legal implications of rarity and multiplicity should prompt renewed empirical and theoretical studies of the ways in which the “new media” are used by artists, dealers, collectors, curators, conservators, and the public at large.

The Genesis of the Rarity of Art

Raymonde Moulin

The difficulty of attainment which determines value is not always the same kind of difficulty. It sometimes consists in an absolute limitation of the supply. There are things of which it is physically impossible to increase the quantity beyond certain narrow limits. Such are those wines that can be grown only in peculiar circumstances of soil, climate and exposure. Such also are ancient sculptures; pictures by old masters, rare books or coins or other articles of antiquarian curiosity.

John Stuart Mill¹

It is rarity that bestows the artistic guarantee.

Marcel Duchamp²

The socio-cultural status and the economic status of a work of art, in the accepted definition of the term, are impossible to dissociate from the idea of rarity. Given their interdependence, the artistic ideology of the unique, the culturally and socially status-enhancing manipulation of artistic rarity, and the “particular nature” of works of art as merchandise³ must be challenged as one. At the present time, when old masterpieces have become exceptionally rare and technical progress has driven artwork production in the direction of reproducibility; and when the challenge to art has been expressed both in and through art itself, the moment seems right to consider the new socio-economic factors that somehow constitute artistic rarity.

The key players inside cultural institutions and the art market employ strategies that manage to combine two types of manipulation: the manipulation of legitimacy markers of rarity and rarity itself. The extension of the artistic label, which in the past has moved outside the area of skilled production and which currently goes beyond the usual definition of a unique artwork, has led to a demand for methods of production of new artistic rarities. Those interested in analyzing the *crossed strategies* employed in new artistic markets—*on one hand, designating a certain type of rarity as artistic; and on the other, creating*

rarity artificially out of that which is designated artistic—will find various examples. Put differently, one must perhaps ask how objects selected simply by an effect of temporal rarity then become integrated into the category of “works of art”? Or again, how does one arbitrarily define the size of a print-run beyond which a work of art ceases to be original?

The Social Definition of Art and The Economic Value of a Work of Art

The disputed, but predominant, definition our society accords to art and the artist is the result of a process of differentiation in human activity that began in the Renaissance. First in Italy, as early as the end of the fifteenth century, work produced by painters, sculptors, and architects (which had long been viewed as distinct from manual labor) acquired the prestigious title of “liberal arts.” The artist was not a craftsman, but a creator, a kind of *alter deus* at one remove from common values; thus the charismatic image of the artist merged with the aristocratic image of an artwork as being something unique and irreplaceable. These views marked the starting point of modern thought with respect to the creator and the object created.

The second stage of the differentiation process coincided with the first Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century. From that moment on, an artistic product tended to define itself through opposition to a product of industry. Work created at man’s hand was seen as in opposition to machinery, as was joint labor to the division of labor and serial production of identical objects to the particular nature of a unique object. The industrial experience—in moral humanist terms expressed as alienation from the production line—culminated on an economic level in the loss of uniqueness: the foundation of rarity. At that point, in order to distinguish their work from craft and industrial produce, artists sought to rid their practice of the element common to the rest—the utilitarian purpose; the philosophical theory of finality without end justified their survival. By according themselves the production monopoly of sublime gratuity and essential difference (as opposed to the similarity of serially produced objects, or the minute differences that enable objects from the same craft series to be distinguished from one another), nineteenth-century artists protected rarity and, through rarity, the opportunity to increase the social and economic value of the symbolic goods they produced.⁴

The work of art, as a unique, un-substitutable, yet nevertheless alienable, and virtually indestructible possession (it remains unaltered by the contemplative gaze); as unproductive as gold and, like gold, situated in the category of speculative or refuge investments, *the work of art is the*

ideal model of rare goods at an agreed price whose value is determined by demand. From Ricardo to Marx and by way of John Stuart Mill, economists have recognized that the particular economic status of a work of art stands in strict relationship to its unique nature. Its price has no other limit than the potential purchaser's desire and his or her ability to buy. In the Marxist understanding of the term, it is a question of a monopoly price.

The price of objects in itself not having any value (...), being unable to be reproduced through work, like antiques, or masterpieces by certain artists, the price can be determined by highly fortuitous combinations of factors. To sell an object, it must simply be able to be monopolized and alienable.⁵

When we speak of the monopoly price, we understand a price determined solely by the desire and the purchasing ability of clients, quite independent of the price determined by general production costs and the value of the goods.⁶

Even if modern economists have been able to show that monopoly situations are rarely free from all elements of competition,⁷ it can still be said that no sector of the artistic market, except perhaps that of "chromos," is free from a fascination with difference: the basic principle of rarity and economic monopoly.⁸

Extra-economic factors determining demand for rare artistic works arise from socio-analytical interpretations (desire for the material acquisition, quasi-esoteric, of symbolic goods) and sociological interpretations (Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic distinction). The demand for rare goods assumes that rarity represents value, and, in the case which concerns us here, artistic value. From that moment on, it will represent an object not only of investment, but also of enjoyment, and/or distinction.

The Historical Genesis of Rarity

The rarity of high and popular works inherited from the past is at least partially an effect of time. We can say, using a simple opposition, that the rarity of high art is *historically* constituted—in both senses of the term—and that time, with respect to them, is the creator of value (at least for as long as succeeding cultures ensure that earlier values are maintained). Rarity of traditional popular objects is a residual rarity. Produced outside the artistic domain, they are not protected from time's destructive nature, be it material wearing, or technical obsolescence.

1. The Paradigm of Rarity: The Price of an Ancient Masterpiece

Rarity exists and is socially valorized as artistic in its originating society. The work, whether painting or sculpture, is unique. A command for work issues from within the highest social ranks and artistic excellence is at least partially defined by the judgment of authorities outside the producing group: the Church, the King, the Great. This kind of historical work—in the sense of an “Historical Monument”—which results from a particular means of artistic production, belongs to the body of high art, work which claims high cultural legitimacy.

Two temporal factors add to the original effect of rarity to increase rarity. First, works of art are perishable: it is impossible to draw up the list of works lost though natural disasters or human destruction, and the hazardous posthumous fate of some artists has in some cases clearly reduced the chances of their works’ survival. On the other hand, one must also bear in mind the artistic capital frozen in museums, which assures the conservation of artworks through their removal from circulation.

In the art market as sanctioned by history, potential prices are fixed and rarity increases. The two principal factors that introduce a guarantee of rarity and quality on the level of price are the following: every work put up for sale is unique and irreplaceable—it is the sole product of individual work by a unique creator; its authenticity and originality, as well as its quality, are guaranteed by a body of specialists—a group composed of art historians.

The search for maximum rarity today means that the painting that is entirely executed by the author is more sought after, other things being equal, than the studio or workshop painting. Division of work between master and pupils, usual in studios in the past, effectively contravenes the idea developed in the nineteenth century of a work as a product of undivided effort. A canvas’s state of preservation and any possible restoration work have to be examined according to the same criteria applied to the uniqueness of the painter:

A work does not necessarily lose its characteristic of authenticity as soon as it is found to be not exclusively produced by the hand of the master; the acceptance or denial of this characteristic will depend on the respective levels of authentic or foreign elements, on the persistence, despite them, of all this—in the composition, in the application of color—constitutes the stamp of his talent or genius or—the opposite—the alteration or the denaturalization of these distinctive qualities through retouching or addition.⁹

In a similar manner to rarity, the original work obviously wins over the fake or the copy, but it also trumps the replica.¹⁰ Out of all works by the same artist with exactly the same subject, it is important to identify the first work, or original, from which differences originate. We will

return to the concept of originality, which is key to new legal, social, and economic methods of determining artistic value.

The work of establishing the authenticity of a work—in other words, of attributing it to its true creator—is carried out by a body of specialists consisting of art historians, museum curators, and other experts. The pre-modern picture market deals with works that often have neither date nor signature and whose identification demands a long period of specialist work. “A work by an old master is not a straightforward matter to handle, but something won with difficulty—almost as if it were recreated.”¹¹ It is also up to the experts to distinguish an original from a replica. Whether it is a question of authenticity (which refers to the painter) or originality (which refers to the work) the verdict is heavily loaded with monetary significance, because when it is a question of the prizewinners in the history of art, painters do not share equal places.

Artistic rarity carries degrees of excellence. With respect to a hierarchy of quality of works from the past (at least within a given artistic area) it is possible for experts to achieve a consensus of opinion. No doubt the judgments passed by art historians are not entirely exempt from relativism: they are subject to the current state of historical science, in much the same way that every period holds a different view of the past. Different generations of experts do not shed light on the same areas of art history: rediscoveries and rehabilitations and the revalorization of certain styles and genres frequently result in a shift in the focus of their enquiries.¹² Yet on occasion, given that they all rely on the same methods of classification and employ the same categories of judgment, it is possible for specialists to agree on the criteria for normatively classifying works and even on subsequent results. History of art is the sovereign science and, even if the group concerned (historians and curators) is not and can not be free of social norms, it is the specialists’ judgment that carries the weight of authority.¹³

The degree of rarity is not the same for all works of art from past times: the trajectory between absolute rarity and relative rarity is not separate from either chronological distance, the quantity of an artist’s work, or a painting’s significance and authenticity. Evaluation has been helped to become more rigorous by the progress in historical science, particularly in cataloging. “It was not long ago,” one art dealer has written, “that a prestigious provenance, such as a church, castle, or noble family, together with the favorable opinion of one of the major critics, was enough. Today, documentary credentials take precedence over everything else.”¹⁴ In addition, many changes in attribution have occurred, further emphasizing the rarity of extremely rare works. In the other direction, recent work by art historians has enabled the names of little-known artists with less rare and less well-documented paintings to move to the foreground. Commerce at the highest end of the classified art market rests in the hands of a few dealers of international standing and with the major auction directors. The kinds of prices attained only

permit works by masters to be bought by a minority of would-be buyers: the important collectors who carry out research internationally, museums, and foundations. Whether or not by auction, the painting's seller is the unique seller of a unique painting. In the etymological sense of the term, the seller is the monopolist; the price is the result of competition that takes place between a limited number of buyers.¹⁵ In the classified painting market, where monopolistic elements dominate, in the ideal model case of absolute limitation of the offer,¹⁶ economic heights can be attained, such as, to name just one example from an auction, the sale in 1961 of Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer* for \$2,300,000.¹⁷

The actual rarity of a pre-modern work that occupies a highly distinguished place in the history of art, and whose pedigree guarantees its authenticity, is not an ordinary type of rarity. It cannot be reduced to the archaeological type of rarity that affects every material vestige of a long-gone civilization. Nor should it be confused with the rarity of objects from antiquity that, despite their perfection of design and execution from materials of superior quality, do not belong to the historically and socially constructed category of high art. The rarity of a unique masterpiece of unique genius is the most rare rarity among all rarities socially designated as artistic.

Other artistic markets draw on the example of social and economic evaluation of this type of extremely rare rarity for their own particular purposes, achieving various degrees of success according to the conditions of concrete rarity.

2. Rarity and Non-Functionality: Popular Art

At the time when stocks of high art had decreased and contemporary artists had placed the stock's renewal in jeopardy through rejecting the craft element in artistic practice, new objects emerged from archaeology and ethnography. By some sort of fortunate coincidence, these were then accorded the "artistic" label. Even some everyday objects, inherited from pre-industrial societies, made their appearance in the field of popular art.

Ethnographical objects produced without artistic intention (at least in the modern sense of the term) and rooted in popular culture—where they were intended for symbolic or actual purposes that they no longer had in present society—were not valued as works of art as such (again in the modern sense of the term) in their countries of origin. We have already mentioned that the autonomization of the artistic field, in Weberian terminology, that of conscious submission to specific values, was datable historically and socially relative. This in no way means that aesthetic sensibility (experiencing something as beautiful) did not exist before it was recognized as such, or that man did not fulfill an aesthetic act before so naming it. Aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic expression existed

before conceptual abstraction and before the idea of the aesthetic object as work of art and the idea of art as finality without end.

Objects from traditional popular culture are not characterized by the rarity of their origins—although distinctions do apply in this respect. The *unica* cannot be confused with the *typica*; the individuality of the unique with the individuality of the type. The former are highly respected and in some cases carry a date, sign, signature, or an inscription that links them to a particular incident in the life of the producer or the recipient. In that particular case, we are dealing with the rarity associated with an object's idiosyncratic features, by which its promotion as "artwork" is aided. We find many non-identical (in the sense where all produce from an industrial series is identical to the prototype) copies of the *typica* that are nonetheless repetitive, in that they are defined by a set of technical traditions, experience, and skills to do with the adaptation of the object to its use. The transmission of these traditions and skills does not happen solely within the family, but also through the intermediary of those in the trade; traditional societies permitted task-sharing and the division of labor more than is often thought to be the case.¹⁸ Current ideology of the return to nature, influenced by Rousseau, and the return to craft, influenced by Ruskin, feeds the myth of undivided craftsmanship. Humanist criticism concerning the alienation of the worker from the production line has obscured the diversity of traditional methods of production and among them, the presence of the division of labor. "All sorts of degrees exist between domestic production and craft production. . . . Equally, all kinds of degrees exist between craft production and manufacturing production . . ." ¹⁹ Through the example of pottery and crib figurines, treated in the work by Jean Cuisenier already cited, we see clearly that a division of labor and specialist task-work can exist in the fabrication of traditional objects. The serial nature of large popular art production demonstrates that the objects in question did not, at the origin, bear the stamp of rarity.

Ethnographical objects do not possess the same durability as intellectual works. Their materials often do not stand up to everyday use, nor to the usage of time.²⁰ Conditions of transport of such objects, which are not socially valuable, have in the past been much worse than those used for works of art. Intended for use, rather than for a connoisseur's pleasure, there was no reason to preserve the objects once they were technically redundant. Furthermore, they have not benefited from the protection offered by collectors' cabinets, in which certain delicate drawings by the Great Masters have managed to be preserved. Finally, objects from traditional popular culture linked to a type of society that has disappeared are definitively unable to be reproduced—unless in the form of fakes, of which their producers are or are not aware.

Popular art prospers while the bodies of producers and users reflect each other, a relationship that takes a thousand different forms and a thousand distinct networks; popular art disappears when social connections enabled by the global society impose themselves on particular societies, thereby destroying the various systems of connection that unite those societies' members and also undermining the foundations of the double potential of tradition and innovation.²¹

Traditional objects that were more or less rare at their origin (albeit less rather than more) are today, to some degree, rarefied.

The artistic development of residual rarity passes by way of a two-fold prerequisite: a (life-saving) cultural recognition and an introduction into the domain of gratuity.

Having suffered a certain lack of cultural dignity over a lengthy period, ethnographical objects have now benefited from an enormous reappraisal by anthropologists. The new definition they have accorded to culture is both relative and extended, and involves the cultural recognition of material evidence of everyday life in the past. The ethnological museum—"an expansion of the terrain"²²—serves to collect, preserve, and classify objects and also represents a documentary *conservatoire*, dedicated to ethnologists' scholarly research. It is also, but in a different way, a museum of art.

For a long time (shorter or longer depending on the particular case), traditional objects have been seen as insignificant because their technical use has been superseded; they have remained unused and without purpose, have stayed buried or in some way hidden. Before the museum's social recognition of "non-functionality," these objects were often relegated to sheds, barns, or second-hand furniture storerooms. But as soon as they are definitively removed from the "useful" world (and in particular from that kind of fake usefulness—not that of its initial purpose and one responsible for the rustic mania currently enjoying great success) such objects draw the pure and disinterested gaze of the aesthete.

As rare objects, even if their rarity is residual, as non-reproducible objects (through the very fact that their technical, social, and economic conditions of production belong to the past), and as gratuitous objects, the ethnographical object is destined for artistic recognition. Yet not all will have the right to enter the kingdom of art.

The process of artistic legitimization of popular objects has been underway for a long time. In the eighteenth century in Russia, Germany, England, and France, writers and men of letters collected—for themselves—songs, stories, and legends; the Romantics counted popular art among works of literature. The second half of the nineteenth century (when industrialization and urbanization threatened the existence of traditional ways of life) is the era of the great object collections

and the moment when museums of ethnography multiplied.²³ Local scholars, enthusiastic regionalists, members of emulation societies, and charitable curators of museums of folklore all contributed, by bringing their particular prestige, to re-evaluating popular objects, not only as historical witnesses, but as aesthetic objects. In addition, through turning to popular sources, modern painters from Gauguin to Picasso have further contributed to the process of artistic recognition. European and African ethnographical objects, lifted in successive waves to the level of artistic distinction, owe such promotion largely to the structural relationship they maintain with the intellectual and artistic creations of successive “*avant-garde*” movements in high culture.

Institutional machinery devoted to popular art is based on that of intellectual art; it is of note that in France, popular art has its own national museum.²⁴ Moreover, museums have enabled the installation of important exhibitions, in particular, perhaps, that of 1956.²⁵ Again with reference to France, a Chair of Popular Art and Tradition was created as early as 1937 in the École du Louvre, and in 1977 the option, “Social, Historical, and Cultural Anthropology,” was included in the entrance exam for national museum curators. Very recently, a Society of Friends of the National Museum of Art and Tradition was founded, its statutes modeled on those of the Society of Friends of the Louvre Museum.

The expert community concerned with ethnographical and popular art is composed of researchers (ethnologists and anthropologists) and curators of specialist museums. Despite the keen interest shown in ethnographical objects by contemporary “generalist” historians, it nevertheless appears that in the eyes of art historians, such objects have not been quite absolved of the original sin of “non-art.” Of course, at their outset, ethnographical objects were neither produced nor perceived as “artworks.” And even if they belong in a wide sense to history, and indeed to the cultural heritage, they have until now been excluded from art history, and historians (as curators) of high art sometimes treat them (and this in the best of cases) with indifference.

It is the expert community, the anthropologists and curators, whose job it is to designate which objects are of ethnological importance and bestow, on a few, the certificate of art. It is the experts whose job it is to define what selection criteria should be applied to objects in order that they be considered “artworks.” With respect to the definition of popular art itself,²⁶ the recognition of the field of popular art, and of its boundaries,²⁷ and the principles of classification of popular works of art, there is ongoing scientific controversy. Nevertheless, and in spite of this, the expert community that is recognized as such both socially and internationally does exist and bears the authority to integrate one, rather than another, object into the universe of “works of art.” At a given moment, the group dictates the norms of aesthetic judgment in the field of ethnographical objects,²⁸ thereby defining a hierarchy for the quality of works. Residual rarity is socially constituted as artistic value

by museums and museum directors, which in turn enables the potential for acclaim within the art market.

The popular art market has yet to be the subject of in-depth study. Jean Cuisenier rightly signals that extensive investigations are needed with respect to the market, the composition of collections, the profiles of connoisseurs, and the frequentation of museums.²⁹ Given that we ourselves have as yet to undertake such an enquiry, we will limit our own comments at this time.

The traditional popular art market is far from being autonomous and its boundaries still remain sketchy. The language used to refer to this area by dealers of both second-hand and antique merchandise is also uncertain. Similarly, public sales catalogs indicate hazy subject areas with column-headings that variously read, “Antique Objects,” “Art Objects,” “Unusual Objects,” and “Collection Objects.”³⁰ Modern societies, which take change as the driving force for their development, are fanatics of collecting, archiving, and conservation; it takes less and less time for the second-hand object to become a collector’s item. Specialist museums are dedicated to the archaeology of technical societies while “antiquities” of the industrial era are making a spectacular entrance into the rarities market.³¹ Nevertheless, if the market has become the accomplice (and in certain cases, the initiator) of the craze for rarity—assured by the irreversible nature of time—that characterizes our societies, the economic players, while commercializing residual rarity, are not equipped to bestow labels of artistry³²—any more than can, at least for the foreseeable future, museums devoted to old motorcars or cameras.

Stretching or extending the artistic label would of course have no interest if it ended up inflating the label. Cartwheels and harness-yokes, “old objects with no notable artistic or decorative characteristics,”³³ have hardly more rarity and no more legitimate artistry than *Sunset in Venice* or *The Hunt*—working-class substitutes for master painting. On the contrary, an ethnographical object offering the greatest perfection in its genre (and often, at the same time, the greatest rarity) is positioned by experts on the top rung of the ladder of quality. A propos of the carved lacework known as *canivet*, Jean Cuisenier writes, “A genre was born, developed and then, with industrialization, disappeared. Linked to specific social practices, it encompassed a clearly defined field of work, bearing indexes, models, and legitimate sources, mass-produced copies and *unique masterpieces*.”³⁴

The price of traditional popular works is potentially fixed. Residual rarity is determined as a value by legitimizing authorities such as museums of popular art and knowledgeable books produced by specialists. The degree to which the price is able to be substituted decreases in relationship to a masterpiece’s artistic excellence (as historically and socially defined), together with its uniqueness (that is to say, absolute rarity). After that, with the aid of rarity and non-functionality, objects of

popular culture (like master paintings) will be counted among “articles sought by antiquarian curiosity” to which John Stuart Mill alludes.³⁵

The Social Genesis of Rarity

In the two cases analyzed, rarity is effective, even if, in the case of popular art, such concrete rarity is not socially established as artistic in advance. There is an international group of experts for each of the two cases. The first group distinguishes the authentic from the inauthentic, an original from a copy, and a minor work from a major (or at least within a given genre). The second group distinguishes, from out of the whole range of objects of popular culture, what is exceptional from what is significant and the unique masterpiece from its serial copies (at least within a given genre). Art historians and ethnologists³⁶ develop the qualitative hierarchy of rare works: for the first, of rare objects with established artistic status; for the second, of objects whose artistic status is recently acquired.

In the two other cases in question, those of the artistic “avant-garde” and photography, we propose to observe the means of production of artistic rarity, without historical hindsight, which presumes the manipulation—both linked and simultaneous—of both rarity itself and the markers of rarity’s legitimacy.

1. Bestowing the Artistic Label and the Manipulation of Rarity: Contemporary Art

The price of contemporary art, produced by living artists, is potentially indefinite and any estimation of artistic value is surrounded by uncertainty. Competition between artistic ideologies and the perpetual renewal of the “avant-garde”³⁷ excludes a *consensus* on aesthetic judgment among professionals (here, art critics, museum curators, and more recently, the many officials running new cultural institutions).

We need not dwell much further on the market’s predominance as the organizing system of artistic life up to the beginning of the sixties, or on the strategies of monopoly that since Impressionism have been instated in the contemporary art market: strategies that exist to artificially create conditions resembling those given at the outset in the earlier art market.³⁸ We will simply give a quick reminder. The system’s linchpin is the dealer-entrepreneur in the Schumpeterian sense of the term, that is to say, the *innovator*.³⁹ The artist owns the monopoly on his work and he is, at the outset, the sole shareholder of any relevant offer; he owns the monopoly of his “invention” at a moment where *priority* has become an element of aesthetic appreciation.⁴⁰ The dealer, through a contract of exclusivity, temporarily becomes the monopolist. Any doubts over a work’s later recognition that legitimacy authorities might bring to bear in the long term is of no consequence in the short term: with

works of art, as with shares, it is a case of reflecting mirrors; that which is important is not what a work will be, but what the economic players think it will be.⁴¹ Probably the best illustration of monopolistic systems is seen in the most speculative sector of the market: the sector devoted to the most recent artistic and enterprising research ventures. In the pre-modern art market, monopoly exists in the etymological sense of the term; it corresponds to the effective limitation of the offer. In the contemporary art market, control of the offer is neither total nor lasting⁴² and the return to a monopoly of innovation—monopoly defined in relation to methods of industrial manufacture—brings insurmountable problems to the art market beyond the short term.⁴³

Several factors prompted us to focus in particular on the 1960s in this study, although we have not constrained ourselves to strict chronological limits. First, one should note that the introduction of new “media” (such as photographic images, film, and electronics) was instrumental in toppling artistic produce into the category of reproducible goods. In addition in this period, the accepted definition of an artwork (with its status of rarity) and the recognized classification of high art genres (painting, sculpture, engraving) were contested more systematically than had ever previously been the case.⁴⁴ Innovation tended to become absorbed inside the new, with brief periods of fashion taking the place of longer periods of style. As the intellectual avant-garde gradually broke away from all kinds of training, trades, and specific skills, their ideas could not avoid—if they were to be recognized as such—traveling through the obligatory publicity and dedicated art networks. Moreover, if the complexities of their aims were to be understood, they had to be read on several levels and demanded a high level of cultural awareness. The art market, as the organizing system of artistic life, found itself challenged by (then) current processes of redefining artistic practices and work and, equally, by the development of public “sponsorship.” What we need to stress at this point are the ways in which the art market reacted to its being challenged by the artists themselves and by technical innovation; more precisely, we will explain how these reactions focused on rarity.

Attacks from artists who sought to undermine the work in its unique existence came from two extreme tendencies. The “*nothing*” and the *multiples*, although opposite and complementary to one another, represent the two main paths that lead to destabilizing the unique and to discrediting rarity.

Artistic experiments, somewhat erroneously gathered under the ambiguous heading of *multiples*, are experienced by their authors as radical ways of transgressing the rules of the game instituted by the traditional art market. In its final objective, the *multiples* project involves the use of industrial systems as methods of *creation* rather than *reproduction* and pioneers the employment of new, reproducible media. In theory, the *multiples* project leads to the mass production of identical and

interchangeable objects. It eliminates the work of art, not by making it disappear (disappearance that could never be effective), but through multiplying it. It sacrifices uniqueness (which establishes difference and rarity) to multiplication (which guarantees abundance in similarity).

One must note that this great endeavor was not realized in practice. The leap into the limitless remains theoretical and rarity is artificially maintained by skillfully controlled numbers of copies. The artist's signature continues to authenticate the product and its commercialization remains largely intact, due to art market experts. There is no doubt at all that the art market no longer has either to prove its ability to prevent, on the one hand, or to assimilate, on the other.⁴⁵ But the resistance of the traditional art market players to the challenge to the uniqueness of an artwork does not rule out another kind of interrogation. Who, today, could spot and buy as a work of art an unknown object of industrial nature that is also mass-produced? An artwork's economic worth in the final analysis depends on a certain social definition of art, and, from this point of view, it is of note that the minimal conditions for the *multiples*' entrance into the art world is that—following the example of Marcel Duchamp's "objets trouvés," to which we will return—they be accepted by artists who are socially recognized as such.⁴⁶ Those who try to reconcile art with industry, and promote mass-produced art, are not held to be artists until they have been so declared by the experts in artistic distribution and the art market. For the artistic label to be awarded, *multiples* have to be shown in particular locations (museums and galleries), have been approved by endless high priests of art criticism, and have received acclaim within the art market.

While the industrialist aspiration pushed certain artists to sacrifice the unique for the multiple, other artists set out on a long march against art, nursing as they went the hope or illusion of being artists minus works of art.

In the sector where desire for rupture exceeds desire for continuity, the story of contemporary art appears to be an exercise in "self-destruction." Kant's legacy of the negation of extrinsic finality, as revised by the doctrinaires of Art for Art's Sake, found its fulfillment in abstract art. The fact that certain characteristics associated with abstract art (lack of reference to a natural model; rejection of intellectual signification; refusal of the utilitarian) were so readily dropped, comes out of the process by which art attained its autonomy. The artist finishes by considering that the handling of his/her ways of expression constitutes the ultimate worth of artistic activity. Such a concept of autonomization ends in privileging the imagination over the image and the form over the function. The "Abstract" artists, whatever their particular tendencies, have nevertheless saved the work of art in its concrete existence and have respected its uniqueness.

At the same time, and continuing in the tradition of the abstract avant-garde, we find successive renaissances of the Dada and Surrealist

tradition: following the denial of the functional finality comes the denial of the work itself. The creative act is left to chance (the Surrealists' "*hasards objectifs*") and an object's designation as artistic is a matter of the artist's arbitrary decision.

In response to the art object in itself, an object whose true power lay in its surrounding itself in an aura of legend, Marcel Duchamp invented the inverse: with a click, the *Sic Jubeo* of the Ready-made, he launched the legend capable of lifting the indifferent object to the level of art.⁴⁷

The Ready-made, the negation of the work of art, possesses a physical existence and a durability that renders it a potential substitute for a work and—under certain conditions—for the work of art. Further on along the path of nihilism, the artist has no longer to produce objects but neither does he have to designate any sort of object as artistic: it is enough that he exists, or, like Craven and Crevel, that he eliminates himself. The gratuity of the act thus takes over from the gratuity of the work and lived experience takes the place of creation: the artist is he who lives artistically.

The sixties witnessed a permanent artistic revolution. They saw the art of derision, or "demystifying mystification,"⁴⁸ which, constantly renewed by Dada and Duchamp, used art to engage in a parody of art. Such were Waste Art and the aesthetic of perishable rubbish: an art of the ephemeral, as seen in Land Art's desert excavations and furrows in the snow. Here was the art of freeing oneself through art: "gestures," "manifestations," "events," and "actions," all of which took place in the tradition of the *happening*—an improvised kind of theater that emerged in the fifties and is linked to the stage arts. Here was the art of freeing oneself from art, whose conceptual design gave its declared objective as the destruction of the concept of art. Yet in naming these types of sixties' art, we must add that the list of inventions, experiments, and practices that society has qualified as belonging to the avant-garde is nowhere near exhaustion.

In the absence of the negativist ideology that underlies anti-art, rarity's trap snaps shut on two different levels: that of the author, who is unique, and that of the production, which is limited, of artwork substitutes. As rationalization in the Weberian sense came to an end, and at the moment when, as Schwitters had proclaimed, "anything the artist spits out is art," it was the signature that conferred on the work, or on what takes its place, its existence as art.⁴⁹ The devaluation of the work calls for the valorization of the author, in his or her irreplaceable uniqueness. At the moment where the artistic product evolves in the direction of "anything at all," the recuperation of uniqueness demands that "anything at all" not be produced by anyone at all. A transfer of rarity is made from the work to the author: but except in the case where

the author considers himself to be the work and sells his physical presence in a place devoted to the showing of the work of art,⁵⁰ the survival of the art market assumes that the signature is attached to a material object. This might be an industrial object, in the style of Duchamp, or certified photographs, films, videotapes, or any other kind of concrete evidence—having an arbitrarily fixed number of copies—of the author's unique genius.⁵¹

Once the focus had shifted from the unique nature of the work onto the unique nature of the artist, artists were obliged to in some way distinguish themselves from one another. In the rarefied atmosphere of "officialized" avant-garde artistic groups, they were driven by that same essential differentiation toward a constant search for minimal and constantly renewing individuality. It was of very little importance, moreover, that the particularizing "step" contained any plastic element. It appears to us that in the period in question, any originality in methods of artistic production—in the "limited production" sector⁵²—turned on art's ability to adapt to the social requirements for a label of "artistic." "If I put this NOTHING in an art gallery, although it is not certain, NOTHING might be equated to ART. Why? Because an art gallery implies the notion of art."⁵³ The producers are produced by a more and more complex system, which carries many players, including curators, coordinators, gallery directors, art college teachers, critics, academics, and a limited non-professional audience. An artistic "master" work under question tends to pass from the specialists to the freelance workers, because the rejection of all specific norms excludes the very idea of specialty. Artists and their "works" receive their naming from the artistic micro-sphere and have no existence other than social: the ultimate step in the evolution proclaimed by Robert Klein, where in order to account for artistic production, sociology is required to take the relay from the history of art.

At the certain risk of being overly schematic, we might propose an opposition between works of popular culture without artists and artists from a certain intellectual avant-garde without works; and to art *en-soi* the final adventures of art *pour-soi*. We might also note the current beginnings of the return to works of art, to trades, joint work, traditional media, and to the no-less-traditional categories of drawing and painting. But what we feel important to stress is that it was just at the moment where both the effective rarity of a work and its relative autonomy were decreasing, that artistic rarity was being socially recreated in order to be economically valued.

2. The Paradox of Rarity: Photography

At its outset, photography was placed in a context of rarity due to technology, but at the same time found itself in a position of artistic ignominy—again due precisely to its technical mode of operation.

Daguerre's photographs were non-reproducible silver plates, which were enclosed like jewels, in a box, and which were extremely expensive at the time.⁵⁴ But the daguerreotype itself, despite the artisan nature of its production and the uniqueness of the product, could not, at that moment, escape from the shame that was poured on photography, with its status of "machine."

The controversy over photography's status, and whether it pertained to the categories of "industrial arts" or "fine arts," was a subject of great debate in the nineteenth century (and is as yet, we feel, to be fully explored) that had a bearing on the relationship between art and industry. It is not possible here to retrace the complete history of debate over the status of photography from the nineteenth century to the present day. We will again simply make one or two remarks, with the particular aim of stating that the recognition of photography as a work of art, even if it was not unanimous, nor without ambiguity, is nonetheless a nineteenth-century legacy—despite Baudelaire's famous diatribe against naturalism and photography, and the idiotic confusion between art and industry.⁵⁵

In the context of the 1855 World Fair, photography was considered as an industrial art and the daguerreotype was presented as "Design and the Plastic Arts Applied to Industry." But a decisive step was taken in 1862 with the court decree ending the trial of Mayer and Pierson versus the German photographers Bethéder and Schwabbe, who were accused of having illegally reproduced and sold portraits of Count Cavour and Lord Palmeston that were produced by Mayer and Pierson. At the first hearing, the court rejected the accusation, given that photography "was a artisan procedure that, without any doubt, demands experience and training, but which has nothing in common with the work of an artist who has created a work of art from life, using his emotion and his imagination." At the appeal, the court came to the opposite conclusion. At a second appeal, the artists protested, stating that "photography can in no way be compared to art, since it consists of a series of manual procedures," but the protest was in vain.⁵⁶

During the course of research that looked at provincial Fine Art exhibitions in the 1880s, we observed that photography had by then gained the right to belong to the category of "Fine Art."⁵⁷ Even if the artistic quality of the photographs selected was later to be challenged and then reconsidered, according to differences in taste, this happened no more or less than to the artistic quality of paintings. Critics' accounts in the 1880s demonstrate that photography was certainly accepted as art, but this was on condition that it depicted subjects that the pictorial tradition had designated "classic"—that is to say, that its artistic advancement took place with reference to painting. But it should be remembered that in the context of a realist aesthetic, the critic expects the painter to present a representation of reality as "exact" as that of the photograph.

Photography is present in all the great artistic movements of the twentieth century, with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy as much as Man Ray, to give just two examples. The history of reciprocal influence between painting and photography must also surely help us to understand—as does the historical sociology of the producers and their respective audiences—the ideologies and cultural practices of painters who, even if they did not achieve it, had the declared objective of destroying art in its cultish notion of the unique; photographers, meanwhile, were in search of artistic legitimacy of the traditional kind.

With photography, the rise toward the heights of artistic legitimacy passed for a long time by way of entry into institutions of pictorial legitimacy, and more recently, specifically in the area of photography, via reproductions by institutions acclaimed in the painting field. The most paradoxical type of borrowing is seen with rarity and the most unexpected imitations appear with the marketing of photographic prints.

Photography made its entrance more than forty years ago in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Photography exhibitions followed the trodden paths around international museums of modern art. Following painting's example, photography had its own foundations and exhibitions and fairs, of which the most important was the Cologne *Fotokina*, a biennial exhibition first given in 1950, which brought together exhibitions of photographic material that was presented by the makers, and photographs presented by the photographers. In an attempt to create a boundary between industry and art, in 1974 the photography exhibition crossed the Rhine and set up in the Cologne *Kunsthalle*. Like painting, photography has its own historians (the first Chair of the History of Photography was inaugurated at the University of Princeton in 1972); it has its own curators, critics, journalists, and specialist journals; it also has its different genres (determined by the particular professional style of the photographer), its fashions, its schools, and of course, its geniuses, be they acclaimed or cursed. Again like painters, photographers follow a path studded with prizes, including a large number of annual awards. To mention just a few of the many, the Pulitzer Prize is awarded in the United States, the Nihon Shashin Kyokai Prize in Japan, the Niepce Prize in France, and the David Octavius Hill Prize in Germany. These kinds of acknowledgments take prominent positions in a photographer's *curriculum vitae*, as do the artistic prizes in the painter-artist's *c.v.* Here, therefore, the need remains to calculate painting's ultimate characteristic: that of rarity, which is the basis of economic evaluation of a masterpiece of high legitimacy.

Independent of the photography sold by "photo shops,"⁵⁸ the photography market currently comprises two sectors. These cannot be compared in terms of transaction figures, but the second sector offers considerable interest in our present context. The first market is that of reproduction rights: the photographer sells the photography reproduction rights, which is to say, according to the law of March 11, 1957,

on artistic ownership, the royalties.⁵⁹ The second market is that of prints: the photographer sells objects, which are the photographic prints.

This second market, whose precursor may be considered to be Alfred Stieglitz, first emerged at the very beginning of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ Between the two wars, a small number of galleries existed, particularly in the United States, that usually brought together the sale of paintings with that of photographic prints: this brought American and European collectors into being. The market was established around the Second World War, but grew most vigorously in the sixties and “boomed” in 1974–5. Although all the market players concerned deny any mimicking of the painting market, the structure and function of that of photographic prints bears more similarities than differences with the classified painting market (in the case of old prints) and with contemporary painting (in the case of recent prints).

The intermediaries are the paint galleries, photograph galleries, brokers, and those in charge of public sales (auctioneers). The major prizes are those of the United States, where distribution and specialized marketing systems were first set in place. If one considers and compares the number of columns relating to photography in the major newspapers, the number of specialist magazines, the number of exhibitions (200 in 1972⁶¹), the sum of public sales, and the significance of the buyers (in particular museums and universities), the United States is first in the list and is the top place for international validation. In a market of an international nature like that of painting, it is clear that many places have seen photograph galleries multiply and art galleries with dedicated photography areas increase; these include London, Rome, Paris, the large German towns, Japan, and South America.

All leaders of the photographic print market, together with a small number of photographers (those who, belonging to the generation of under-40s, would like there to be no other photographic practice than that which leads to the print as work of art), a small number of curators and museum directors (those who benefit reciprocally from the highest recognition as connoisseurs), dealers and gallery directors (the last conferring more importance than the first on what they call “cultural engagement”; that is to say, exhibitions), and finally, collectors (of greatest to smallest means, “passionate” art lovers and/or potential speculators), all support the theory of effective rarity, which is imposed by the means of production of the original print.

Industry intervenes both before (with the photographic industry of instruments and films) and sometimes after, with industrial printing techniques. Between these two moments, the photographic print is the result of an artisan process consisting of three stages: the taking of the shot, the development of the negative, and the printing. Photographers who hold art to be the product of individual work carry out all three operations. The product of such actions may or may not be recognized as artistic beyond the studio: the verdict comes from the

international community of connoisseurs, whose authority will impact on the market.

In the micro-sphere of the print market, reference to the unique print is constant. Metaphors inspired by artistic practices such as painting, engraving, and sculpture also occur: “light is the photographer’s clay.” Printing is held to be a long and difficult operation that in certain cases involves physical or chemical treatments reminiscent of painters’ “mixing”; as Paul Strand, whose printing contributed to his success, said, “every photo is unique.” Market regulars like to say that the difficulty arises more out of the excessive rarity of original print-runs: print-runs, numbered on the model of the engraving⁶² and usually fixed at twenty-five or thirty copies, are imaginary in the sense that it would be almost impossible to obtain several original print-runs from those new fanatics of the unique that certain photographers have now become.

By far the most important criterion for a plastic work of art’s originality (1957 law) is its individual execution, which precisely expresses the dominating artistic ideology. Some variations are accepted with respect to a photographic print, or an engraving, but this is as long as everything possible is done to protect the principle.⁶³ The definition of an authorized edition, such as given in fiscal legislation, does not concern photography.⁶⁴ And if the custom of restricted editions is now becoming established, it is nonetheless not exclusive. Many very well-known photographers do not undertake to print their photographs,⁶⁵ yet as soon as they are signed, they are considered to be original. In signing a photograph, the person who took the shot acknowledges it as being in conformity with his idea. Restricting the print-runs of prints sold as originals was not usual practice within the generation of the great photographers such as Brassai, Cartier-Bresson, and Doisneau.

We should add that the distinction between an original work and its reproduction is particularly difficult to establish in the area of photography. A photograph of a painting or an engraving is a reproduction, but is no longer an engraving, whereas the photograph of a photograph is a reproduction of the same nature as the original: a duplicate—negative taken from a negative or a print—is a copy, but remains a photograph.

One example is enough to justify, in monetary terms, the differences between types of practice. A photograph by Imogen Cunningham, printed by herself, was in 1977 worth approximately \$400; when it was printed by a laboratory, but signed, it was worth \$200, when it was printed after her death, it was valued at \$150.

The definition of an original print, in usual market terms, carries certain ambiguities due to the fact that its very nature is analogous. By analogy with the plastic work of art (painting, sculpture, or engraving), originality assumes that the work is personally executed by the artist, in all its stages;⁶⁶ and by analogy with engraving, has a limited number of copies. As we have seen, infractions of one or the other of these principles occur frequently among well-known artists, but only on

condition that the print is signed. Fame itself is the result of a complex system whereby two different kinds of photograph market interact. As a result of photography's elevation in the hierarchy of cultural legitimacy and its recognition both within and outside the area of artistic production, a community of experts has emerged (historians of photography, directors and curators of museums and libraries) and contributes to the establishment of a hierarchy of quality.

As in the painting market, one may already observe that photography—despite its relative youth—has two sectors in the print market. The old prints market combines several effects of rarity: original rarity (in particular in the case of the daguerreotype), residual rarity, rarity or uniqueness of the represented subject, and rarity of the artistic excellence as defined by photographic historians and museum directors—in particular, for France, those in the *Cabinet des Estampes* at the National Library in Paris. When all criteria of rarity are met (or at the very least, a large number of them), the price nears the absolute limit and the factors determining it are comparable to those applied to pre-modern paintings—on the condition that the possibility of reproducibility is overlooked.⁶⁷ In the old print market, prices are more and more elevated, although they remain beneath those of pre-modern paintings. As illustration, one may cite the record figure given for a photograph at public auction: on March 10, 1977, *Jabez Hogg and Mr Johnson*, a daguerreotype, was sold in London for £5,800.⁶⁸

When the price is not fixed objectively, as it is after the death of a work's author, many factors intervene, which can contribute to the “launch” of a photographer, to methods of recognition, and to a rise in price. The main difference with respect to the contemporary painting market (other than reproducibility) rests with the dual photography market and to the various positions one photographer can occupy, on the one hand, in the press, illustration, and publishing market and in the print market, on the other. The reader should bear in mind that the development of the print market is not the sole product of a conscious or unconscious quest by market players with rarity as their objective. The lack of outlets in the market for large print-runs (given the crisis in the illustrated press) has been one of several favorable conditions that together have contributed to the rapid growth of the print market.

At a time when technical innovations enable huge print-runs and where photography is practiced by all social classes and age groups among the public,⁶⁹ we are now witnessing a revival, in one of the photography markets, of the rarity of beginning. However, in no way is the process the same. Photography in its early stages was frustrated by being the prisoner of faltering techniques, whereas today's photography is in revolt against a technology that overwhelms.⁷⁰ And the question has to be raised as to whether the celebration of photographic rarity does not represent an unconscious quest for the ultimate “artistic certificate.” Photographic prints belong to the category of reproducible

goods. Because of their technical production, they are *multiples*, and as merchandise cannot be assimilated either to unique works of art, produced by artisanship, or to pre-industrial forms of reproduction such as engraving. As soon as the photographic print market began to structure itself according to the model of the artworks market—in the accepted sense of the term—the contradiction between uniqueness and multiplicity, rarity and abundance, and art and industry, exploded. To drive the photographic print, as merchandise, into the category of artworks, one must firstly cleanse it of its original sin of reproducibility. If the photograph currently appears to be winning its case before the tribunal of art (on the economic grounds that the art market represents), it is at the cost of a massive technological Malthusianism and a cult-like regression. But what significance and what influence might a victory have that is gained before a tribunal that the very invention of photography disqualified?⁷¹ In the artistic world of the avant-garde, artists can turn to photography to strengthen a step that is anti-art. The photographic print, on the contrary, in refusing the stigma of reproduction and the “mark” of industry (although large companies do figure on the list of silent partners who intervene in the market), holds itself up as being in accordance with the inherited definition of a work of art. Nevertheless, an original print signed by a professional photographer is positioned at a lower price than the most self-proclaimed-as-ordinary-photograph signed by a painter-artist. In these complicated games where rarity is the issue, the rarity of the artist’s signature remains more socially valuable than the photographer’s.

We have not tried to develop a typology of the different kinds of artistic rarity (as is witnessed by the absence of many diverse tendencies in contemporary art, such as engraving and lithography, and also, among others, of literary manuscripts and holographic musical scores), nor to provide an exhaustive list of the paradoxes of the art market. We have merely tried to signal, through reference to four different areas, the relationship between the socio-economic methods of imposing an artistic label and the manipulation of rarity.

In all sectors other than that of classified high art, the work of establishing an old masterpiece provides the most fertile model. It benefits from the cumulative effects of concrete rarity (original rarity and increasing rarity) and the rarity sanctioned by what we commonly call the judgment of history and which is expressed, at a certain time, by way of the intermediary group of specialists, the art historians. In every other sector, strategies of economic evaluation rest either in the application of historically acquired rarities or in the constant creation of new rarities.

Rarity constitutes one of the categories employed to establish artistic value. It is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. The art market’s type of rarity is not the pure rarity of the postage stamps market. The economic genesis of rarity (of historical origins and ending in the

effective poorness of the price) does not exclude the social mechanisms of producing artistic value, yet the respective proportions of the social and the economic, if one may put it thus, are not the same in the two first cases analyzed here as in the last two, where they have a tendency to be reversed.

Currently, research is focused on what remains of concrete rarity in the categories of objects likely to be integrated into the artwork market. One finds a great determination to discover, rediscover, or rehabilitate high cultural works that the history of art has, at one moment or other, lost to view or rejected. The concept of popular art has spread into all marginal areas of every kind of craft production, with labels such as “Naive” Art, “Raw” Art, “Outsider” Art, “Earthworks,” etc. being regularly employed.⁷² At present, the plastic arts are in part, at least, leaning toward a rehabilitation of the craft aspect of a work. On the other hand, the arbitrary, introduced in the definition of originality, justifies the partially artificial nature of the rarity of contemporary prints (engravings, lithographs, and photographs).

Every one of these struggles, which run counter to the possibilities offered by technology, are imposed by the nature of the relationship between the art market (such as it has existed for a century) and the social definition of the work of art as unique and irreplaceable; the product of individual work by an artist and destined for the free and disinterested gaze.

Notes

1. John Stuart Mill: *Principles of Political Economy*, ed. William J. Ashley (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909). First published 1848.
2. Marcel Duchamp, *L'Express*, July 23, 1964.
3. Karl Marx, *Le Capital* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1960), Book III, Vol. III, p. 143.
4. Raymonde Moulin, “Champ artistique et société industrielle capitaliste,” in *Science et conscience de la Société*, festschrift in honor of Raymond Aron (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1971), Vol. II.
5. Karl Marx, *ibid.*, Book III, Vol. III, p. 25.
6. Karl Marx, *ibid.*, Book III, Vol. III, p. 158.
7. See in particular E.-H. Chamberlain, *The Theory of Monopolistic Competition*, doctoral thesis, Harvard, Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press, 1927). French translation (Presses universitaires de France, 1953). See also Joan Robinson, *Economics of Imperfect Competition* (London, 1933).
8. In all sectors of the market, even that of the “chromos,” the producer seeks to differentiate merchandise. The painter selling second-rate pictures wins over his neighbor and competes by using

the street peddler's skills, the gift of the gab, his performance aiming to prove that despite appearances, his painting cannot be replaced by another painter's work. The old artist, looking a bit like a tramp, explains that he cheats neither in the materials—"it's good canvas," "they're resistant colors"—nor the work—"it's finely executed," "it's skillful work"—nor in his qualifications—he takes from his pocket the medal won in a show, without ever quite explaining which one—nor, and this the final objective of his argument—there is no cheating with respect to the work's uniqueness. "There are three of us who do more or less the same work, with the same colors and roughly the same thickness of paint, but each of us has our own speciality; mine is the morning dew." Each painter emphasizes the detail that enables his painting to be distinguished from other producers of "chromos," a detail that he has perfected and that he will reproduce throughout his life and the one that constitutes the mark that differentiates his work.

9. Judgment by the Appeal Court of Lyon, March 26, 1936, cited by François Duret-Robert, "Fictions de l'authenticité. Réalités de l'expertise," *Connaissance des arts*, no. 285 (Nov. 1975).
10. It would be very helpful to be able to analyze the historical stages of the depreciation of replicas.
11. Jaques Thuillier, "*Le Dossier Caravage* par André Berne-Joffroy," *L'œil*, no. 59 (Nov. 1959).
12. Rediscoveries, rehabilitations, depreciations, and revaluations are at the origin of speculative trends in pre-modern art.
13. The need exists for a sociological study of art historians, museum curators, and professional experts. Information regarding their social origins, education, their professional status and career, the relationships in force between them and the other players, etc., would enrich our understanding of the way the pre-modern art market functions.
14. Georges Bernier, *L'art et l'argent* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1977) p. 184.
15. The price is not produced, therefore cannot be reproduced. The price does not regulate the offer. Neither does the price regulate the demand. At the higher end of the art market, typical individual demand describes a curve that is the inverse of that of conventional demand, because the increase in price increases desirability.
16. The uniqueness of the work imposes a monopoly situation: the price is fixed and unsubstitutable. Accordingly, the complex motivations of potential buyers (who do not always buy the unique work for itself but as social symbol or refuge value, neither of which exclude the possibility of substitution) reintroduce competitive elements into the heart of the monopoly.
17. New York, Parke-Bernet, November 15, 1961. The painting was bought by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the price being

- partially explained by the reliability of its history—the guarantee of authenticity.
18. Jean Cuisenier, *L'Art populaire en France* (Fribourg, Office du Livre, 1975) pp. 207–9.
 19. Jean Cuisenier, op. cit., pp. 206–7.
 20. See André Desvallée and Georges-Henri Rivière, with the collaboration of Denise Gluck, *Arts populaires des pays de France*, vol. 1, *Arts appliqués* (Paris: Joël Cuénot, 1975) p. 9. See also Jean Cuisenier, op. cit., p. 205.
 21. Jean Cuisenier, op. cit., p. 205. See also “Vraies et fausses continuités,” pp. 239, 240.
 22. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1st ed., 1958) p. 412.
 23. Le Nordiska Museet in Stockholm (1872); the Museum of Natural History in New York (1874); the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography in Paris (1892). See Jean Cuisenier, “Art populaire” in *Encyclopaedia universalis*.
 24. On Ernest Hamy’s initiative, the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography, created in 1878, contained a French room until 1928, when the museum was reorganized by Paul Rivet. It closed in 1935 to make way for both the Museum of Man, dedicated to the cultural world outside France, and the Museum of Popular Art and Tradition, dedicated to France and French cultural expression, which was founded and directed by Georges-Henri Rivière. See the catalog, *Musée national des Arts et Traditions populaires* (Paris: Éd. Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1969).
 25. *Trésors d’art populaire dans les pays de France*, Museum of Popular Art and Tradition, May 11–Sept. 14, 1956, catalog (Paris: Éd. Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1956).
 26. Denise Glück stresses how popular art resists all attempts at definition. See Denise Glück and Georges-Henri Rivière, *Arts populaires des Pays de France*, vol. I, *Arts appliqués, motifs et styles* (Paris, 1976) p. 201.
 27. We suggest the reader refer to the introduction and first three chapters of the work by Jean Cuisenier, already cited. The introduction offers reflections on the notions of “exemplarity” and “pertinent difference” and suggests a method: “A corpus of works of the same genre must be constructed; then, from among the works, one must find those that act as models for the others; a list should then be drawn up of significant differences presented within the corpus by comparison to the models” (p. 9). The analysis in *Obstacles et illusions* (ch. 3) urges great caution in extending the concept of popular art into the marginalities of all types of aesthetic expression on the part of the working class (“classes populaires”).
 28. All members refuse to hold themselves to an “antimony of taste.” Jean Cuisenier rigorously explains this refusal and develops a

typology of categories of taste judgments applied to popular art objects: op. cit., ch. 1, 1.1; *L'évaluation des oeuvres: l'oeil, le regard et le gout*. “Deductions to employ in order to reduce the world of culture to the defined domain of popular art” are not dictated by the single exercise of individual sensibility. The limitations of choice are described and clarified in a discourse of a normative kind.

29. Jean Cuisenier, op. cit., p. 36.
30. National legislation makes no distinction between second-hand or antique dealers: they are subject to the same fiscal regulations and the same professional requirements; since 1968, a single VAT rate applies to anything pre-modern, whether antique or sale goods. Until recently, national legislation considered that all objects of *over one hundred years old* could be considered antique. In the light of increased desire to protect the cultural heritage, together with the rate at which the past becomes outmoded, then sought after, the decree of October 30, 1975 assimilates as antiques all “creations” *more than twenty years old*, with a value of more than 5,000 francs. “Antiques” are distinguished from sale or second-hand goods, in that they are “durable goods, non-reproducible and belong to a period sufficiently distant that they be considered ancient, worthy of either artistic interest, historical interest, or curiosity and have avoided the process of depreciation often incurred by second-hand goods”—Henry Mahé, *Le marché des antiquités en France* (Paris: PUF, 1973) p. 22. See also Jean Bedel, *Brocante, Antiquités* (Paris: Hachette, 1977). Among antiques, “art objects” are those that belong to the applied arts, have been produced by a skilled worker, and are destined for a noble placement, as with pieces of gold work, porcelain, or cabinet-making.
31. See in particular “Veteran and Vintage Cars and Models.” In *Christie's Review of the Season 1977*, ed. John Herbert (London: Studio Vista, 1977) pp. 471–80.
32. Neither training nor diplomas are asked of professional experts (having the “eye”—a familiarity with objects—and experience find privilege over knowledge). Most *professional experts* in the area of “antiquities,” as in that of pre-modern paintings, are *dealers* who, after a dozen or so years of practice in sales, are co-opted by a company or a panel of experts.
33. Henry Mahé, op. cit., p. 52.
34. See Jean Cuisenier, op. cit., p. 59. The second chapter is of great interest, we feel, and particularly in the distinction it draws between high art “genres” and popular art “genres.” According to the author, “in popular art, a genre reveals an arrangement of materials according to the rules and for a purpose that is socially recognized ... A classification of genres requires a double reference: the methods of identification of works within a given culture

- and the principles of evaluation of such works by the workers and users at their origin.”
35. John Stuart Mill, see epigraph.
 36. The training programs for art historians and curators of national museums in France carry similarities that produce a strong cohesion within the relevant community: a community of peers who recognize and morally support each other—although this sort of acknowledgment does not necessarily include “professional experts” with a background in selling (see note 32). The community formed of ethnologists and curators has, using the current state of distinctions in training, a lesser coherence.
 37. The notion of the avant-garde is somewhat ambiguous. We understand avant-garde artists to be those who declare themselves such and who together compete to be recognized, socially, as avant-garde.
 38. See Raymonde Moulin, *Le marché de la peinture en France* (Paris: Minit, 1967, 2nd edn 1974).
 39. See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalisme, socialisme et démocratie* (Paris: Payot, 1951).
 40. These remarks have been greatly influenced by Robert Klein, “Peinture et phenomenologie,” *Critique*, no. 191, April 1963, and “L’éclipse de l’oeuvre d’art,” in *La Forme et l’intelligible* (Paris: Gallimard, “Bibl. des Sciences Humaines,” 1970) pp. 403–10.
 41. See J.M. Keynes, *Théorie générale de l’emploi, de l’intérêt et de la monnaie* (Paris: Payot, 1949) pp. 170–1.
 42. On the subject of the “parallel” market, see Raymond Moulin, op. cit., pp. 459–60.
 43. *idem*, p. 472.
 44. The category of the *plastic arts* regrouped the traditional categories of architecture, painting and design, sculpture and engraving into the fine arts, along with the minor or decorative arts. Such traditional categories exploded due to artistic inter-disciplinarity and the proliferation of new experiments. In the “indigenous” language, we happily speak of “objects” and more recently, of “pieces” (*Translator’s note*: the French word in the original text is “pièces,” which Raymonde notes is “a questionable translation from the English”), without, nevertheless, abandoning the term of the plastic arts. In other countries, this has been replaced by “visual arts,” less inappropriate for works whose medium is a perceptible surface, either photographic or filmic. What is important to note is that every artist gives a purely nominative definition to his/her practice and the products that result.
 45. The new methods of artistic creation that introduce industrial procedures are officially rejected by the industry sector. Exoneration from VAT only applies to *original works of art* (article 1, decree June 10, 1967). See below, note 64.

46. "You can see the paradox, the double-dealing—I'm not known and I can only express my ideas if I position myself as a traditional painter, keeping within disciplines and a circle that holds no interest for me": Vasarely, "Déclaration," *Robho*, no. 1, June 1967.
47. Robert Klein, op. cit., p. 403.
48. See André Chastel, "L'imagination surréaliste trente ans après," *Le Monde*, January 17, 1964.
49. We recommend to the reader "L'art de la signature," a set of articles, *Revue de l'Art*, no. 26, 1974. See also Carla Gottlieb, "Addendum à l'art de la signature: le vingtième siècle," *Revue de l'Art*, no. 34, 1976.
50. "The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam bought the *behavior* of the German artist Henk Jurriaans, and more, the artist *himself*, for about a month, every day between 1 pm and 2 pm. Jurriaans' behavior, as he afterward remarked, consisted of his usual daily behavior. The artist's life becomes work of art because he is an artist and it has been bought by a museum of art." See Jocelyne Hervé, *L'art actuel et son contexte sociologique*, doctoral thesis, Paris I, 1977; 370 typed pages, pp. 321–2.
51. The limitation of the number of "copies" is difficult to control, which has resulted in particular conditions of rental and sale. See Castelli-Soonabend, *Videotapes and films*, vol. I, no. 1, Nov. 1974, published by Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films, where a box on the back cover reads "Conditions of Rental and Sale."
52. See Pierre Bourdieu, "Le marché des biens symboliques," *L'année sociologique*, vol. 22, 1971, pp. 49–126.
53. Jocelyne Hervé, *L'art actuel et son contexte sociologique*, see note 50.
54. The year 1839, that of the official recognition of the invention of the daguerreotype (patent acquired by the State and session of the Academy of Science on August 19, 1839, with Arago's intervention) is generally acknowledged as the year in which photography was born. See Gisèle Freund, *Photographie et société* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).
55. Charles Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques*, Salon de 1859 (Paris: Gallimard, "La Pléiade," 1951), pp. 761–4.
56. Volter Kahmer, *La photographie est-elle un art?* (Paris: Éd. du Chêne, 1970) translated from German by Anne Frejer, pp. 13–99. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Sophie Deswartes and Dominique Pasquier for the information to which they have kindly given me access. Their theses focus on photography in the nineteenth century and are currently in preparation.
57. See Raymonde Moulin, "Les bourgeois amis des arts, Les expositions des beaux-arts en province, 1885–1887," *Revue française de sociologie*, XVII, 1976, pp. 383–422.

58. It is helpful here to consider the professional organizations (in France). The *Confédération française de la photographie* brings together photographers whose commercial activity is to both sell photographic material and to take the shot (marriage photos, first communion, etc.). According to INSEE statistics, this type of practice is that of approximately 1,500 photographers. The *Fédération des associations de photographes créateurs* groups three different organizations: *l'Association des photographes de publicité et de mode* (216 active members), *l'Association nationale des journalistes reporters photographes et cinéastes* (144 active members), and *l'Association nationale des reporters photographes illustreurs* (195 active members and 83 corresponding members).

The professional status of members of the *Fédération des associations de photographes créateurs* varies, but the majority of them, according to our most recent information, work independently. A thesis currently being written by Pascaline Costa de Beauregard treats this subject: *La profession de photographe*.

59. See Pierre Frémond, *Le droit de la photographie* (Dalloz, 1973) p. 95. It is thought that the painter and the sculptor receive their basic income, not from the reproduction of their works, but through the sale of the original. For the novelist, as for the photographer, the opposite holds true: they live on royalties relating to the sale of reproductions of their original works. The negative (like the manuscript of a literary work) is considered as the material aid enabling reproduction. Despite the recent development in the print market, the *ius propter rem* (the right that the owner of a real right has to pursue such a right regardless of who the owner is) does not apply to either literary manuscripts or to negatives or photographic publications.
60. Alfred Stieglitz founded *The Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession* in 1905 with the painter and photographer, Edward Steichen, for the purpose of exhibiting photography.
61. Figure cited by Gisèle Freund, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
62. On the notion of the original engraving and the limited nature of printing, see Michel Melot, *L'Estampe originale: un art de la bourgeoisie*, unpublished text.
63. *idem*.
64. France: ruling on original works of art. Application of law: no. 66-10 of January 6, 1966, the reform of taxes on turnover (Inquiry dated July 24, 1967). The first article of the decree of June 10, 1967, gives the following definitions for original works of art: "Original engravings, prints, or lithographs ...: prints made, in black or in color, from one or several plates entirely conceived of and executed at the hand of one and the same artist, whatever the technique employed, with the exclusion of all mechanical or photo-mechanical procedures, are considered engravings, prints, or

lithographs. Generally speaking, editor-artists limit the size of print-runs of engravings, lithographs, and prints; these are not more than a few hundred and numbering is not systematically used; consequently, it does not seem appropriate to establish any precise limit.”

65. Such was the case, in particular, of Cartier-Bresson, who asked for uncropped editions, from a “regular” printer, and chose not to carry out the printing himself.
66. With this understanding, the apparatus itself does not intervene, *mutadis mutandis*, except by way of the artist’s hand or writer’s pen, as Leonard de Vinci stressed during the controversy over the status of “mechanical” or “liberal” plastic arts. See Anthony Blunt, *La théorie des arts en Italie de 1450 à 1600*, “Idées-Arts, no. 8” (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) pp. 94–5.
67. The elimination of this variable assumes the loss of the negative, although the possibility of photographing the print without differences in the nature of the first and the new print remains—except for the exceptionally experienced *eye* of the connoisseur.
68. *Christie’s Review of the Season 1977*, Stuart Bennett, *First photograph of photography*, p. 498.
69. Already we note that, beginning with family albums, a market of photography as popular art is emerging in the United States; an international postcard market clearly exists.
70. Among the different kinds of resistance against restrictions imposed by industry, one can signal the strong reserve of the print market with respect to color photography. One also notes, thanks to the activity of the craft industry, a desire to rediscover and revive the artisan methods of photography’s founding fathers. Photography teaching, as with the teaching of arts and crafts, in some cases includes reviving and teaching the forgotten craft techniques.
71. “It is against that cult-worshipping of art, the enemy in principle of technology, that photography theorists have tried to fight for almost a century. Of course, this has been without success, for they are undertaking precisely to justify the photograph before the very tribunal which overthrew it.” Walter Benjamin, *Oeuvres. II. Poésie et Révolution*, essays translated by Maurice de Gandillac, Éd. Denoël, “Lettres Nouvelles,” 1971, pp. 16–17.
72. See *Les Singuliers de l’art: des inspirés aux habitants paysagistes* (Exhibition, Paris, Musée d’Art moderne de la ville de Paris, January 19–March 5, 1978. Catalog published by ARC 2.

