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Alienability and Alterity

When museumgoers turn to cell phones, their possessive gaze renders artworks alienable by transforming them into digital images. This is one of the several ways in which modern and contemporary art is subject to circulation virtually and physically. It is transposed into information and consumed as knowledge (in formats ranging from extended labels displayed on museum walls to art-historical monographs), and it is sold as commodities whose value is specified by a price. But this dynamic of alienability goes far beyond individual works of art to encompass a vast chain of proprietary relationships that establish the identity and territoriality of cultures. Artworks are regarded as the intellectual property of their authors and, in turn, the cultural property of whatever nation, community, or identity these authors are assigned to. In all cases, alienability is enabled through acts of representation: a digital photograph represents the experience of an artwork; interpretive discourse represents the artwork as a quantum of meaning or a historical document; the auctioned

artwork represents a market value; intellectual property represents the legal limits of an artist's creativity; and cultural property represents a nation, class, gender, or ethnicity. As a procedure of capture and curation, representation and exchange work hand in hand. Think, for instance, of paper currency, which, unlike precious metals such as silver or gold, has no intrinsic value but merely *represents* value. Paper money accomplishes a strategic impoverishment—in order to enable exchange, it must attenuate its own materiality. So it is with art: when artworks are represented by a reproduction, an interpretation, a price, an author, or an identity, they are alienated as a currency of experience, knowledge, or value. The cost of such transpositions is significant. By sublimating the artwork's materiality, such chains of representation falsify its ontological fundament: its experiential inexhaustibility over time. The artwork's duration is curtailed, transposed into finite exchangeable properties.

Nonetheless, the power of art remains the durational infinitude it stages. It straddles the here and now and an elsewhere or otherwise. It is an opening to various forms of alterity whose capture has been, throughout history, a source of worldly power. What is Christ? An alterity whose susceptibility to representation has been tested through time in paint, wood, plaster, and stone. What is absolutism? An alterity that the *premier peintre du roi* Charles Le Brun brought to bear upon the body of Louis XIV at Versailles. What is revolution? Consider Soviet artists Varvara Stepanova and Lyubov Popova,

who investigated the intimacy of revolutionary alterity through redesigning the furnishings of everyday life. The history of art is drawn from such socially embedded performances of alterity—each iteration activates singular effects of power that range from consolidating despotism to challenging white supremacy. The temporality of these effects is distinct from the rhythms of conventional politics. Alterity's elsewhere or otherwise does not take place in the exclusively human realm of the state, or civil society. Art's special capacity is to configure multiple registers of experience (the spiritual, the terrestrial, the abstract, and the material) rather than remaining embroiled in the ephemeral conflicts of day-to-day politics. Its power *is its capacity to activate alterities*. This capacity has always been coveted because the colonization of alterity through its representation can realize or legitimize power—it can assist someone in becoming a pope or becoming an absolutist king or becoming the avant-garde. But because art's alterity lies in its infinite and heterogeneous duration, it can never be thoroughly objectified or commodified; it can only be alienated in new derivatives, never exhausted. These derivatives are produced through acts of representation in which art's duration is fixed in a single transactional moment of representation where one thing is made to stand in for another.

In distinguishing the infinite and hetereogenous temporality of artworks from historical time, characterized by the organization of successive choronological periods, Henri Focillon wrote, in 1934:

> The artist inhabits a country in time that is by no means necessarily the history of his own time. He may . . . be thoroughly contemporary with his age and may even, because of this fact, adapt himself to the artistic activities going on around him. With equal consistency he may select examples and models from the past, and create from them a new and complete environment. He may, again, outline a future that simultaneously strikes into the present and the past. But a sudden shift in the equilibrium of his ethnic values may bring him into violent opposition with his environment and hence with the moment, and arouse a nostalgia in him that is highly revolutionary.[1]

"A *country* in time" does not denote a *period*, which is defined by a span of contiguous years. Countries in time are more like topographies composed of geological strata whose sedimented layers, each indexing a different era, are reorganized by tectonic or volcanic pressure, pushing one stratum through another, or allowing them to fall back on one another. According to Focillon, such quasi-geological temporal formations may become revolutionary: "a sudden shift in the equilibrium of [an artist's] ethnic values may bring him into violent opposition with his environment and hence with the moment, and arouse a nostalgia in him that is highly revolutionary." This association of nostalgia with revolution is the antithesis of avant-garde orthodoxy: unlike the latter it rejects a linear progression in time, but like

it, it defines revolution as a temporal rupture.[2] That this rupture is accounted for by "a sudden shift in . . . ethnic values" is a mark of how time and identity can exist in a state of mutual destabilization—a kind of parallax that, in fact, makes it incoherent to force an artist to represent a period or an ethnicity, as she is often made to do in art-historical accounts.

In telling time, the clock *represents* all forms of temporal experience with the same standardized abstract units. Art's duration, like that of the earth, escapes clock time and thus escapes history. Indeed, this is the further distinction Focillon draws with his geographic metaphor, of "a country in time that is by no means necessarily the history of *his own* time" (my italics). This declaration may seem an anodyne reference to the romantic or bohemian artist—one who is out of step with the norms of the time in which she lives. But Focillon means much more here—in fact, he accomplishes an elegant and subtle, though deadly serious, challenge to the discipline of art history. For, as I argued above, the significance and meaning assigned to artworks in most scholarship and criticism is premised on a possessive chain of representation that enables art to function as an alienable asset: creativity comes to represent the artist; the artist in turn represents national history and culture, while this heritage is used to represent a nation-state (and, moreover, each of these relations is reversible: the artist represents creativity; nation and culture represent an artist; and heritage is understood as national). I have

italicized Focillon's possessive expression when he declares that the artist's country in time is not "necessarily the history of *his own* time," because even in Focillon's careful effort to distinguish between an artist and his era, the representational relation returns in the notion of one's *own* time. This is because the representational mechanism is fundamental not only to art history—in which the artist becomes a document of her time—but also to the value of art more generally. That which can be represented can be possessed (as image, knowledge, wealth, personal identity, or group identity). That which exceeds representation, which is outside the possessive gaze, is inalienable. The mark of this disruption for Focillon is "a sudden shift in the equilibrium of [an artist's] ethnic values." In other words, the artist ceases to represent an ethnicity and thus becomes other to herself.

What Focillon theorizes is art's alterity vis-à-vis the possessive gaze; following his analysis, artists cannot be made to represent "their" time because they inhabit a different "country in time." Moreover, an artist's alterity to herself (what Focillon describes as a potential disruption of her "ethnic equilibrium") disqualifies her to represent a finite identity—indeed to force her into such a mold is to commit a kind of conceptual violence. It is the argument of *Art's Properties* that the power of art lies in such excess or alterity—in its capacity to elude capture. But despite art's recalcitrance (or perhaps on account of it), its excess accrues power through the desire for sacred and secular authorities to channel it as a

mode of worldly legitimacy. The politics of art inheres less, then, in art itself than in various gambits to harness its force as a means of authorization. As Marie-José Mondzain declares, with regard to the economy of representation constructed around Byzantine icons: "Christian discourse, taken as a whole, is nothing other than an immense ordering and management of the question of the image, whether it is flesh, sin, women, nature, or art that are concerned."[3] The ordering that Mondzain traces is different from the possessive gaze of modernity; it is the gaze of God filtered through various incarnations (of Christ as the image of his Father, and the icon as the image of Christ, hence the image of an image): "It could be said that what the icon imitates is not the vision that humans cast at things but God's imagined gaze that is cast upon humans."[4] While icons were circulated widely, their authoritative gaze was wholly centralized, whereas in modern times the possessive gaze is not located in a chain of images whose ultimate source is God but atomized as the *private* properties of everyone, susceptible to exchange. Regardless of this enormous and significant difference between Byzantium and modern Euro-America, the desire to capture alterity as a form of worldly power has persisted through time. Indeed, it has persisted *as* time—that is, art's opening to alterity lies in its capacity to assemble and compose diverse experiences of duration. The artwork is a composition of time, a kind of attentional score, or what Mondzain might call an economy of the gaze. In the case of the icon, the Christian god

represents a powerful form of alterity to be captured: its temporal signature is eternity. In our time, as I have already argued, art has tended toward an economy of instantaneous exchange, a stock market of cultural capital that has most recently resulted in rampant speculation in NFTs, or non-fungible tokens—"unique" digital properties whose aesthetic value, and even de facto rarity, is often nominal, but whose market value as art has nevertheless exploded.

In order to grasp the particular violence involved in making art alienable, it is crucial to understand its ontological resistance to capture. For despite assumptions to the contrary, artworks are dedicated not to representation but to its *failure*. This is because every work of art has two bodies, a material substrate with its own mortality, and an image or series of images characterized by immortality.[5] Unlike the letters that compose words—like the ones you are reading now—whose efficacy is based on their transparency to an intended meaning, the material that constitutes an artwork's substrate always offers an excess—an optical and affective richness that is ultimately impossible to capture in its singularity. In its very structure, the artwork itself is an allegory of capture—the capture of an image by matter. But such capture is impossible to achieve. Sometimes it is the image that shines through with minimal interference, but frequently it is a material substrate that dominates, as in nonobjective painting, where there may be no recognizable image beyond the formal disposition of matter.

In other words, every work of art testifies to the paradoxical impossibility of representation—its material and conceptual precarity—because no work can achieve perfect transparency of its substrate to its image. It would not be art if it did. Matter, whether oil paint or a digital file, is both subject to time, in that it has a life span, and a principle of time's organization, in that its aesthetic texture may score the spectator's gaze. The mortality of matter is abundantly evident if one takes the time to notice it. The varnish on old master paintings turns yellow or brown; certain pigments are unstable; photographs fade; wooden objects may become infested with insects; film has been known to burst into flames; in video's short life as an art medium, its standards have changed several times; even, or especially, digital art is not immune to accelerating cycles of technical obsolescence. The work of art requires enormous care in order to survive intact—whole cadres of preparators, registrars and conservators are required to maintain a museum's investment in art's persistence through time as self-identical. Each material experiences its own temporality of decay and recovery and undergoes its own sedimentation in time. Each work also has a specific play of textures, its own aesthetic means of capturing attention. Moreover, these material temporalities may undermine the meaning or authority of a work, as when a photograph, believed to accomplish the instantaneous capture of an actual scene, is also subject to evanescence through fading—a vulnerability that, on

account of museum standards requiring lower light levels and limited exposure for works on paper, conditions how and when a photograph will be publicly displayed.

The image or images to which an artwork's material substrate is linked are of an entirely different ontological (and temporal) order from that of matter. I will follow Jean-Paul Sartre in defining an image as a psychic effect—as a *relation* between a spectator, in whose consciousness the image appears, and a material substrate that is the occasion, or pretext, for its appearance. The image isn't *in* the work of art—it is brought to it by each spectator (including the artist, as the initial spectator) through their intention. Consequently, it is ephemeral and unstable—even more so because the function of the image is to posit an absent object: "The image is an act that aims in its corporeality at the absent or nonexistent object, through a physical or psychic content that is given not as itself but in the capacity of an 'analogical *representative*' of the object aimed at."[6] It is worth pausing to note how strange this entity—the image—is, despite its ostensible familiarity and ordinariness. As a psychic effect, it has no empirical body (it is independent from its material substrate). In principle, it is difficult if not impossible to verify that the image I receive from a particular painting, or photograph or film, is the image *you* see. In this sense, defining the image as a relation, as Sartre does, has significant social consequences. For, if we are to relate to one another through the medium of images, we must find some way to agree on what they are—or at least to accept a shared agonistic space for debate over

their meaning. Right away, this definition suggests that the intending action of an image is characterized by three temporal signatures: instantaneity (its immediate appearance in the mind of the spectator); intermittence (as the function of a relation that may be broken or lost, its appearance is precarious); and displacement (in that the image makes present something that is physically absent). In an observation that highlights art's paradoxical combination of material and virtual constituents, Sartre draws a further important distinction between the image as an instantaneous form of consciousness and perception as a kind of knowledge gradually built up over time by accruing and combining sensory data. "In perception," he says, "knowledge is formed slowly; in the image, knowledge is immediate."[7] This distinction between gradual perception, which is how one encounters an artwork's substrate, and immediate image consciousness, characteristic of what it pictures, points to the constitutive failure of representation within the artwork. We encounter a material object through our sense organs, accruing different data over time in order to build an impression of it in our mind, while the image is recognized in the material substrate instantaneously. Sartre himself points to the crossing of perception and intention as fundamental to the experience of art: "the painting should be conceived as a material thing *visited* from time to time (every time the spectator takes the imaging attitude) by an irreality that is precisely the *painted object*."[8] As I have suggested in my discussion of the material temporalities of art's substrates, the

painting "as a material thing" may also inspire a panoply of images beyond those intended by the artist—what we may call the vicissitudes of the material itself, or its unconscious. But perhaps even more important, attending closely to the materiality of the work can cause one to lose track of the intended image. Far from being the scene of transparent representation, the artwork is a trap for the image—a gambit for building social relations that may, as I have demonstrated, become a consequential medium of worldly power.

Throughout art's history, its ontological alterity—its constitutive self-difference as a composition of divergent temporalities generated through the unstable alliance of matter and image—served to embody various kinds of alterity. Mondzain's analysis of icons offers just one example of a vast category of art's incarnation of alterity: its capacity to make divine beings manifest and thus subject them to human manipulation and desire. As I have already indicated, in modernity, the precarious, unstable relation of image and matter and the complex and contradictory temporalities it generates are disciplined into a form of representation—a kind of currency—in which the inalienable multiplicity and fecundity of an artwork is pressed into alienable forms of property. But as in Byzantium, where the alterity of art was tied to the alterity of the Christian god, in modern times there is a specific form of difference that art is privileged to carry: nation, ethnicity, race, and personal markers of identity such as gender and sexuality. While this dynamic may seem contemporary, in the next sec-

tion I will demonstrate that already with the invention of the first democratic museum—the Louvre—a complex modern regime was established, in which a new form of power—first revolutionary and then, with Napoleon, imperial—was devised, wherein authority was amassed as the accumulation of cultural properties, as embodied in art.

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