

A PICTURE OF BLINDNESS



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A white plinth stands alone, a meter away from the curved wall, isolated in the exhibition space of the *Palais de Tokyo*. A visitor, awakened from his somnolent focus by this base supporting nothing, intrigued maybe by this surplus pedestal or alarmed by the possibility of a mistake, a joke or worse, his own misunderstanding,

reads the closest wall label. Before providing the mandatory interpretations of the work's meaning, the text gives an account of how it was made: Tom Friedman asked a witch to curse a spherical space above the pedestal, thereby justifying its descriptive title, *Untitled (a curse)*.

The elegance of this piece resides first and foremost in the minimality of its material means - they stand in strong contrast to the entire world summoned (up) on top of a pedestal. More, their anonymity within the institutional context intensifies the "enlightening" moment of the reading, which reveals a worldview that their rational, modernistic forms are far from suggesting. Right after the reading, the spell acquires a near-physicality in the vertical prolongation of the plinth. The suggested leap of faith in witchery humorously echoes the audience's traditional challenge to its belief: "is this Art?"<sup>1</sup> In fine, what signaled itself as an art gesture proved to be a piece highlighting the evocative power of text and epitomizing art's latitude in inviting external realities.

*Untitled (a curse)* by Tom Friedman was my first encounter with invisibility in contemporary art, a beautiful and inspiring one if any. I consider indeed the perspective of making an invisible work appealing for several reasons. First, the propensity to use a minimal vocabulary of forms in my own works, confirmed and affirmed through the years, always carried the possibility of bringing this logic

to its endpoint. If radicalizing one's artistic position is a classic of vanguardist strategies, such possibility should not however be dismissed at first hand for its obviousness (entertaining a fantasy being always fruitful.) Second, such works test the audience's faith in art and in the artist's proposition in particular, and thus make demands on the artist's faith itself. In this view, making an invisible work could almost be instituted as a rite of passage for visual artists. Yet the closest an art school has to offer as a rite of passage is a Graduation Show, which is of a very different nature.

At the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, for instance, nearly two hundred students participated in the show in 2010, necessitating more than the available buildings' surface — the size and position of the space assigned to each student being the object of much attention and negotiation, ownership being regarded here too as the prime sign of identity. Given the unusual audience, both by its size and its potential — most gallery owners of Amsterdam scouting there new talents, students often feel compelled to stand out of their own crowd by proposing a bigger, flashier, or more immersive work than the others. This urge goes furthermore hand in hand with the need to publicly assert their artist-hood. The effect then snowballs by the sheer number of students, turning the graduation show into a global competition for attention, where prominence precedes existence. We can nevertheless, I believe, exist without being (entirely) visible. Producing an invisible work is thus justified a third time, as a strategy for the Graduation Show: what could resist more to the requirement of visual impact than an invisible work? This strategy could be judged defeatist, but it simply parallels the way out of a rat race, namely: not entering the race.

Friedman completed his piece in 1992. Yet its lineage can be traced back to Yves Klein's proposition, at the end of the fifties, to regard the sensuous experience of emptiness as a work of art. The intentions surrounding the making of these two works differ however greatly, as apparent from Klein's declaration:

The object of the attempt: to create, establish, and present to the public a sensible pictorial state within the confines of a painting gallery. In other words, to create the ambiance of a pictorial climate that is real, and for that reason, even invisible. This invisible pictorial state within the space of the gallery should literally be what is the best general definition yet given of painting: "radiance". (Yves Klein, *The Specialization of Sensibil-*

*ity in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility*, as cited in [1, p. 51])

Friedman, on the other hand, recounts the circumstances leading to *Untitled (a curse)*:

At the time I was thinking about how one's knowledge of the history behind something affects one's thinking about that thing. While going through the process of giving these objects a history I thought about documenting this process in order to make things more believable. I decided not to because I like how the idea of believability created in the object a line between the ordinary and the fantastic. (Tom Friedman, as quoted in [2, p. 130])

These instances of invisibility are molded in the concerns of their respective time: Klein's statement echoes the greenbergian conception of modern art as a process of self-purification [3, p. 813] while Friedman questions the perception of reality induced by a certain history — participating thereby in the critique and revision of notions of history undertaken by artists after the fall of the eastern block [3, p. 1016]. Given the acute specificity of the circumstances that brought these works, one could therefore legitimately wonder if *making an invisible artwork whose medium<sup>2</sup> is invisibility is still a relevant strategy today*.

Let us refine, before any further development, the type of artworks that will be considered here: if they fall within the general description of being "unable to be seen, not visible to the eye" [4], aural pieces are nevertheless to be discarded, for encompassing the whole field of sound works would broaden the scope of this research too greatly.<sup>3</sup> The limitation to the sphere of visual works aims thus less at exhibiting an obvious paradox than at gaining in specificity. On the other hand, are considered to belong to this group not only the "purely" invisible pieces but also works using invisibility as one of their medium, including thereby works with a visible component. For instance, Carsten Höller's *New World Race*, an installation composed of fantasy vehicles, one of which is invisible, will be examined in the next part. For convenience, the elements of this group will be designated in the following as *invisible* works, independently of their "proportion" of invisibility.

To answer the question of relevancy, it will be first necessary to present some examples of invisible works, filling the temporal gap between *Le Vide* and *Untitled (A Curse)*,

before trying to characterize their group. However, the variety of pieces composing this ensemble, the lapse of (art) history they span — starting after World War II until nowadays, and the consequent disparity between their respective context of production, will invalidate any unified aesthetic or historical theorization. To avoid conceptual myopia, missing a pattern from looking too close to these few examples, we will further broaden the terms of our inquiry to include “infra-visible” artworks.

The motivations to embrace invisibility in an art practice will be examined in a second part. Understanding invisibility as an artistic device, we will investigate its functions. A contextualization of the exemplary works will reveal that they are best distinguished by their critical aspirations toward art, or inversely, by their relation to the imaginary. The invisible will hence appear as a space enabling a negotiation between imaginary and criticality. To justify these characteristic functions, a phenomenological framework will be adopted, the best suited to account for the perceptive and experiential levels of invisibility. Consequently, both self-criticality and appeal to imaginary will be shown to be engrained in invisibility.

In a third part, the practice of two contemporary artists, Bethan Huws and Tino Sehgal, will be investigated on the basis of these functions. For this, it will be necessary to generalize the idea of invisibility, by unfolding it around a notional “background”. In particular, the strategies of appropriation developed by Marcel Duchamp and Sherrie Levine will be reframed as the production of an invisible contribution. This will allow an interpretation of Huws’ work. Last, the complicit strategies of simulation adopted by Jeffrey Koons will be studied, to justify the approach followed by Sehgal.

The moment when a limit is reached, when there is nothing ahead but darkness: something comes in to help that is not real.

Lydia Davies, *Break It Down*



This first part will briefly describe some invisible works representative of the diversity of the medium. These examples were chosen to span the last half-century, to recount the integration of invisibility in the field of visual arts. Each work will be interpreted and contrasted with the previous one, to help us in the search of a coherent historical or ideological rationale to use invisibility.

The seminal works of Yves Klein are to be presented first. During his short career, Klein created several pieces proposing the void as central component, starting at the gallery Collette Allendy (14-23 May 1957), followed by the famous *Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void*, in 1958 at gallery Iris Clert. Following his exposure to oriental philosophy, Klein regarded Emptiness no longer as a lack, but rather as a primary concept in its dialectical relationship with the Full.<sup>4</sup> Bringing the void in an art context amounts then to defining a conceptual closure to the positive, material presentation of artworks. His first immaterial works involved however more than emptying a space: a whole scenography was devised, which included painting the space white, setting blue curtains and republican guards at its entrance... At *Le Vide's* opening, its scandalous emptiness attracted a mob, granting Klein instantaneous fame.<sup>5</sup>

The second example has a very different premise, away from any will to win popular acclaim. In its issue of November 1967, Arts Magazine published an essay by Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson entitled “Remarks on Air-Conditioning”. This incremental report hinges on the implicit proposal that an air-conditioning system, or the column of cool air it produces, constitutes an artwork. The authors ruminate on the work’s physical requirements by questioning the very terms of its elusive materiality: Is a volume of free air open or contained? What is to be considered “ornamental” in a gallery? What is designated as “temperature”? If the work has been vainly realized in 1972, under the tutelage of Joseph Kosuth, once Conceptual Art was baptized and its paternity claimed, the initial essay operated an ingenious *mise en abyme*: the text, describing an invisible piece, is

in itself a dematerialized work. The approach chosen, a discursive process manipulating Occam's razor to skin the artwork, leaves only one object, the artistic process, and one vehicle, language itself - illustrating thereby the artists' claim that discourse is paramount to art.<sup>6</sup>

Art's linguistic framework has been explored and extended to study the silent language of art spaces by the following generation of artists. For instance, at the invitation of the Anna Leonowens Gallery, Michael Asher proposed in 1974 to leave the space as it was after the previous exhibition was removed. The artist commented:

Unlike my earlier works, this work was concerned with the minimal amount of modification to the gallery space itself. In part, it showed that any place defined as a gallery would be perceived as such by the viewer, whether or not objects were exhibited there. The absence of objects, in this case, first objectified the architectural space and design details and then shifted the viewer's attention to their own preconceptions of what an exhibition should look like. Ultimately, the viewers were left to decide to what degree they might have been the subject of this exhibition or whether they were supposed to project some imaginary exhibition into the space.

Viewers may have perceived the installation as an exhibition by Michael Asher (particularly if they were aware of the announcement posted on the bulletin board); as an architectural container waiting for a function; or as an empty gallery space between exhibitions. Audience perception could also have been directed back upon itself, since the installation was set up with no object or person as its focus. Finally, the *method* of the work, in the tradition of designation or declaration, could have been seen as its dominant feature. Unlike a designatory work, however, this installation was located within an existing exhibition space continuing to function as a gallery. While all of these possibilities were inherent in the work, the sequence of perception was determined by the viewer. [5, p. 101-102]

Here, despite a setting similar to *Le Vide*, emptiness is not celebrated for its own sake but used for what this lack induces on the work's reception — in particular, the individual negotiations with the piece are carefully considered by the artist.

A very different conception of receivership guides the following work, by Andy Warhol. His prolificacy reached the shores of intangibility in 1985, with the production of his *Invisible Sculpture*. Diverging accounts exist regarding this work, due to the existence of a previous piece bearing the same name, the performative nature of the work and the chosen environment — a nightclub in New-York, the trendy Area. Whether the performance was executed several nights or only once is, for instance, uncertain. A pedestal was arranged against a wall, along with a label giving the work's title, description and author. For a short moment, Warhol stood still on the pedestal, or between the pedestal and the wall label, and then walked away. In either cases, his action amounts to transferring his legitimacy, his celebrity aura [6, p. 62], to the piece, as if the un-institutional environment demanded such artistic blessing — despite Warhol's implicit impetus to address a different public [7, p. 121]. Such provocation highlights Warhol's insight into, and mastery of, the social construction sustaining art.<sup>7</sup>

This work of *the* Pop artist, surprisingly hinging on a lack, coincided for the art market with the end of optimism and abundance, so characteristic of the Reagan era: a market bubble bursted soon after, bringing down its darlings, Jeffrey Koons among others, and opening a period of incertitude and irony,<sup>8</sup> reinforced by the property bubble burst of 1991. The same year, Maurizio Cattelan produced *Denuncia* for a group show, a work which consisted of a simple paper sheet protected by a wooden frame, hung on a wall. The sheet, a certified copy of an official report of theft, described the conditions and object of the larceny, "a box containing an artwork "INVISIBLE" which had an affective value and was to be included in an exhibition". If this early work epitomizes Cattelan's sense of humor, it does so with a form of sadness proper to his ironical stance on art: the artist-as-slacker escapes the burden of production at the cost of a loss, however imaginary it may be. Yet the work displays an undeniable efficiency in its critical derision. With the mere use of a real administrative document, the artist obviously mocks state authority, for the candid camera moment of the document's obtention at the police station, but also denounces art orthodoxies in its parody of Conceptual Art, by adopting a literal reading of the claimed Aesthetic of Administration [7].

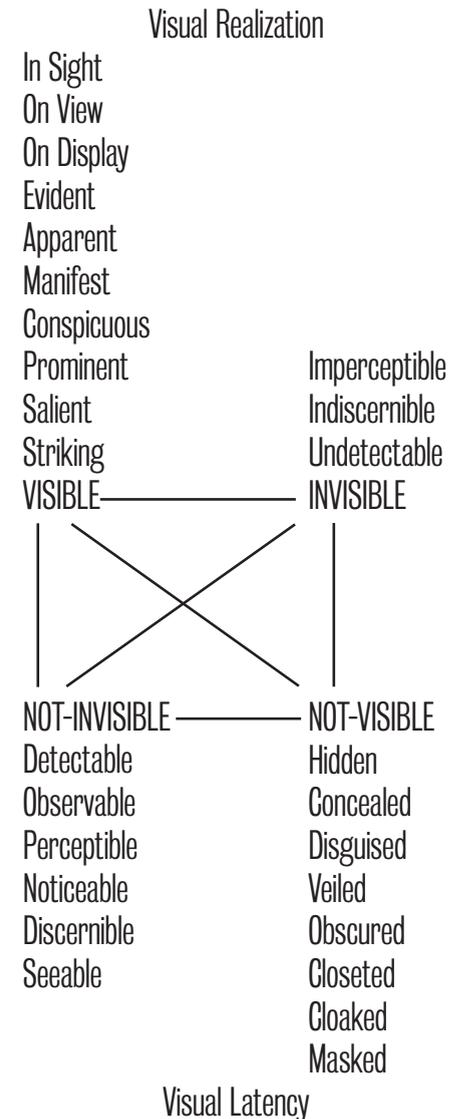
The humorous pieces of Cattelan heralded an emphasis on playfulness in art production and reception, a major trend of the last decade of the 20th century, epitomized by

Carsten Höller's *New World Race*.<sup>9</sup> The *Race* is an installation whose extension on the floor is marked by a grid, delimiting ten numbered starting blocks, arranged in lines of two. Each cell contains a fantasy vehicle with a self-descriptive title, the pole position being held by a Bathtub, the last position by a Spinning Top, a human habitable striped saucer hung by its launching strings, provided with a plexiglass dome and, more intriguingly, a coffee machine. The piece, in the visual immediacy of its vehicles, is atypical in Höller's body of works, where sensorial strategies dominate, but for position 7. This berth, left apparently unoccupied, is labeled *The Invisible*. With the provision of this undetectable machine, Höller completes his call to the viewer's imagination and confronts it with a child's flights of fancy. Indeed, the machines' bright colors, the playfulness of these blown-up toys, the general wackiness, of *Wacky Races* levels, everything participates in the suggestion of a juvenile imagination at play in the art space, even the exhibition's handout, filled with naive justifications (the bathtub has no drain so that "the bathtub captain sits dry while surrounded by water outside his vehicle.") The viewer's take on the work, floating between irony and embrace, culminating with *The Invisible*, ultimately reflects the ambivalence of Höller, who equates the museum with a Pleasure Island, in response to the imperatives of the new world order, dominated by cultural tourism [8, p. 25], but who nevertheless acknowledges the institution's potential to foster Utopian imagination [9, 10].

How can the implicit spirituality of *Le Vide* be compared with the infantile materiality of *New World Race*? Having reached the end of the century, it is clear that our search for a coherent historical or ideological rationale to use invisibility is frustrated by the heterogeneity of artistic, intellectual and economic contexts the examples depend upon. One could turn to the very terms of our investigation and broaden them in the hope of distinguishing a larger pattern. In particular, we have considered so far works which are completely invisible, because they claim emptiness.<sup>10</sup> This approach is sustained by a binary logic: each of a work's component is either "visible" or "invisible". Such conceptual cookie-cutter does however little justice to the gamut of (aesthetic) invisibility.

A way to go beyond the conceptual closure of semantic oppositions has been proposed by the semiotician Algirdas Greimas, a methodology summed up in a diagram, the "semiotic square" [11, 12]. Following this approach, each of the two oppositional terms, named dominant, is assigned to a

corner of the square. We label temporarily the remaining corners with the negation of each dominant term: "not-visible" and "not-invisible". To properly name those corners, a seemingly obvious consideration is needed: they exist within this system because they are different from their neighbors, yet they relate to each others — they are thus characterized differentially. The element labelled "not-visible" draws on both visibility and invisibility, but implies invisibility. The object is thus in a lesser state of invisibility, it can become visible: it is *hidden*. Conversely, if "not-invisible" encompasses aspects of visibility and invisibility, it still suggests visibility. The object is about to appear, it is *noticeable* (but not yet manifest).<sup>11</sup>



Additionally, some edges of the square can be named: the conjunction of the visible and the invisible designated the objects whose visibility is achieved, their axis is that of visual realization; the gathering of noticeable and hidden objects speaks of potential visibility, their axis thus concerns visual latency. The square can be traversed in various manners, defining as many new relations: implications (along the vertical edges: *hidden thus undetectable, apparent thus noticeable*), contradictions (along the axis of realization: *strikingly imperceptible, noticeably covert*) or contraries (across the square: *obscured/manifest, indiscernible/perceptible*.)

The corners of the square define a graduation of invisibility, from full to none, and each of these degree seems to correspond to a different cause for invisibility. Indeed, a work is effectively invisible because it is either immaterial, hardly perceivable in itself, or occluded by something else. It is not difficult to find examples for each category: *The Ghost of James Lee Byars* playing on its detectability, Man Ray's *Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, Robert Morris's *Box with the sound of its own making* or Daniel Spoerri's *Un Déjeuner sous l'herbe*, on hiding. There is however only one artist who conducted a systematic exploration of invisibility, spanning all three categories: Robert Barry.

For instance, the following description was provided for his *Telepathic Piece* (1969): "During the exhibition I will try to communicate telepathically a work of art, the nature of which is a series of thoughts that are not applicable to language or image." Barry not only deprives the work of materiality, but weakens to the extreme the elements of its believability: the existence of non-visual, non-linguistic thoughts and the possibility of telepathic transmission being highly questionable, one could only find comfort in the marks of the artist's firm conviction in his own capacity, yet it pales into a modest declaration of intention.

In April of the same year, Robert Barry used physical yet imperceptible material for his *Inert Gas Series*, releasing each time a noble gas (Helium, Neon, Argon, Krypton or Xenon) in an open space, "measured volumes to indefinite expansion". In the same logic of dilution of the artistic matter into the ephemeral, performance and sculpture are here denied any monumentality in nature and consequences: the artist merely opens a bottle, left to contaminate the atmosphere with an element already present in the air, and which is in any case inert.

This dilution also operates in an earlier piece, *0.5 Microcurie Radiation Installation*, produced in January of

the same year. Barry buried some Berium 133, a radioactive isotope, in four locations in Central Park, New York, and took four photographs for sole proof of his action. The capsules containing the isotope, the only visible elements that could betray the work's aspiration to intangibility, are thus removed from sight. As the activity of this isotope is halved every decade, the prominent effect of this work, its invisible radiations, is progressively reduced to tenuity, in an exponentially slow death.

To our knowledge, Robert Barry is the only artist who conducted an extensive exploration of invisibility, in its wider definition. The brilliant succession of works he produced in 1969, the climactic year of Conceptual Art, probably amounted to a blitz, depleting possibly any artist's velleities to investigate this medium. The momentum for this investigation was however never stronger than at the heydays of the claimed "dematerialization of art" [13]. If the integration of invisibility in the field of visual arts elicited the full dedication of a movement, it could only be at that time. Yet it did not happen.

Thus non-visible artworks, as the previous collage of descriptions suggested, resist their integration in an aesthetic or historical theory. Invisibility seems rather to exist at the margins of numerous artistic practices. Our search for coherence was probably ill-defined: as much as other categories, for instance, anti-art or outsider art, "non-visible visual arts" could simply be a construction, an artifact of art history or art criticism, that conveniently gathers, for methodological reasons, the fringes and reactions and constitutes them as a entity, which however does not correspond to any reality of a self-conscious group or a network of artistic exchange.

All of this is quite obscure. The reader is invited to enter into this darkness to decipher a theory or to experience feelings of fraternity, those feelings that unite all men, and particularly the blind.

Marcel Broodthaers, *To be bien pensant... or not to be. To be blind*, 1975 (cited in [3, p. 931])



The first part showed that in the last half of the 20th century, visual artists were not concerned with invisibility itself, except for Robert Barry. This suggests that, if invisibility could theoretically be regarded as a medium, it is denied practically the reflexive exploration it entails. More, invisibility should be restrained to a mere artistic device, employed for dedicated purposes. How do invisible works operate? Do they possess, in the way they are perceived, common traits that can be abstracted in functions? This question will be first explored using the examples given previously. The functions will be then justified within a philosophical framework of vision, to show that they are inherent to invisibility.

Starting with our introductory example, *Untitled (A Curse)* by Tom Friedman, one can remark that this work had a rather obvious effect: it challenged the viewer's belief in art. This is however not characteristic of invisible pieces, but concerns any practice ambitious enough to flirt with the accepted boundaries of the field or to even transgress them. The ambition of challenging the spectator cannot be seen thus as a purpose in itself, but is rather a consequence of any vanguardist work.<sup>12</sup>

Cattelan's *Denuncia*, Höller's *New World Race* and Warhol's *Invisible Sculpture* are all built around the same articulation: the work alludes to a concrete entity — an object, a vehicle or a sculpture, but this entity can no longer be seen, for it is present but "became" invisible or is invisible for it is missing. A text, a wall label or an official document, being the only reference to this entity, the spectator is left with the task of completing the piece (for) herself. This task goes beyond the expected individual interpretation of any work of art, the viewer having to form conceivably a mental image of the missing object. This call to the faculties of imagination has been already described for *New World Race*, for its desultory utopianism most explicitly instrumentalizes this call. Surprisingly, it is also foreseen by Michael Asher in his work: "Ultimately, the viewers were left to decide (...) whether they were supposed to project some imaginary exhibition into the space." Other examples show the same *modus operandi*. Indeed, *Le Vide* and *Untitled (A Curse)* rely manifestly on imagination, for they both confront the rational viewer with the assertion of the mystical nature of the world. Such completion from the audience opens the work to a new plane, in addition to the sensuous

and intellectual appropriations, a plane that will be designated, without any justification for now, as the Imaginary. This *call to the Imaginary* constitutes our first candidate to justify invisibility in visual arts.

The practices of Robert Barry, Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson can be clearly situated in the fundamental premise of Conceptual Art. Against the fissiparous self-theorizations of this movement, Benjamin Buchloh suggested, 20 years later, to view the movement's main proposal as "replac[ing] the object of spatial and perceptual experience by linguistic definition alone (the work as analytic proposition)" [7, p. 107]. Ending the heydays of greenbergian theory about medium specificity, Minimalism merged painting and sculpture in the creation of specific objects, developing an aesthetic of industrial production sustained by a perceptual logic. Yet, more than a renewal, Minimalism incarnated Modernism's cul-de-sac in self-reflexiveness and autonomy. As a reaction, the forerunners of Conceptual Art opened ironically to social praxis via photography (Edward Ruscha, Dan Graham) or introduced linguistic elements in their work (Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris). The refinement of these strategies lead to an art based on and expressed through language, epitomized by Lawrence Weiner's textual works and dogmatically summarized as "art as idea" by Joseph Kosuth, an art whose radical visuality was the non-aesthetic of photographic documentation.<sup>13</sup> As such, the conceptual practices "performed the postwar period's most rigorous investigation of the conventions of pictorial and sculptural representation and a critique of the traditional paradigms of visuality" [7, p. 107]. Robert Barry, Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson, forming invisible pieces through language, thus take up an implicit critical position on visual arts through their works.

Criticality is also acknowledged by Michael Asher as an endeavor for his (non-)intervention at the Anna Leonowens Gallery, a criticality passed onto the viewer:

Should an exhibition institution generate exhibitions, or does the given institutional space, time, producer, and receiver suffice to define the experience of the exhibition? For an exhibition to concretize and demarcate itself within a culture, it will generally require a public's presence and awareness within a specific time and place, as determined by the producer. A work such as this generates its own historical mode of production. At a minimum, it affects its own discourse. At a maximum, within artistic practice, it demands the viewer to take a critical position within the material world [5, p. 102].

More generally, the artist's decision to produce only site-specific works, implying his refusal of any re-enactment anywhere else, stems from his critical view of studio art as the mere production of commodities [14, p. 128], objects perfectly adapted to the requirements imposed by the movements between the spaces of the museum and of the gallery. The lack of awareness about the achieved genericity of these spaces motivated Asher to dedicate his practice to their analysis, inaugurating thereby a critique of the institutions of art [14, p. 130]. Criticality is thus a central aspect of his work, expressed forcefully at the Anna Leonowens Gallery by his invisible intervention.

Critical intentions can be also attributed to Yves Klein's *Le Vide*, even if this attribution is retroactive. Indeed, it has been regarded as a proto-conceptual work for its attempt at a *dematerialization of art* — Lucy Lippard including him in her all-encompassing list of artists in her eponymous article [13], and as an antecedent to institutional critique [15] for literally baring the gallery.<sup>14</sup> Klein's clever use of media shows his intuitive understanding of the growing packaging of art [6, p. 12] into an event. *Le Vide* can be thus interpreted as a present that is all wrapping, emphasizing the symbolic gift over the material one. Additionally, considering Klein's ascertained inclination for fraud, this work appears as a counter-strategy, a fraud forfeiting another fraud, that of the "hollow spectacle of the high bourgeois culture of his time" [16, p. 83].

An even more ambiguous strategy of disappointment can be read in the pieces of Andy Warhol and Maurizio Cattelan. Both challenge the need to produce tangible art, but for opposite reasons of professional status: stardom exempts from the need for material proof of artistry, even outside the institutional frame, while the unassuming idler-*cum*-artist leans on an external authority, state police, to demonstrate his prowess. Both works comment on the dominating importance of the artist's notoriety (or lack thereof) as "aesthetic criteria". The ironical stance they suppose participates in what Hal Foster termed "the art of cynical reason" [17, p. 99]. Indeed, this "aesthetic criteria" is both criticized by exposure and trivialized in its mere endorsement. By collapsing critique and its object, the work's critical status acquires an undecidable ambiguity, reflecting a cynical position: "the cynic knows his beliefs to be false or ideological, but he holds to them nonetheless for the sake of self-protection, as a way to negotiate the contradictory demands placed upon him" [17, p. 118]. As we will see later, our theoretical framework will explain this strategy, used extensively in the last 30 years and rewarded with commercial success.

Our short investigation for the functions of invisibility using a handful of examples, revealed that this device is used mainly to conjure the Imaginary and as a critical tool. Before turning to a theoretical justification for these functions, one can further remark that these purposes come from rather opposite intentions. For instance, two works using the same premise(s), an empty gallery, seem the negative of one another: Michael Asher wishes to engage the viewer critically, even if the part played by the viewer's imagination is acknowledged. On the contrary, Klein explicitly requests his audience to apprehend an invisible radiance, a *Specialization of Sensibility*, even if we know he might have been ironic about it. Additionally, it seems difficult to ascribe critical aspirations to *Untitled (A Curse)*, a work invoking supernatural forces, as it is difficult to concede any evocative power to the deadpan *Remarks on Air-Conditioning*. More generally, rather than being exclusive of one another, it seems that these two functions exist within a work in inverse proportions, as if the more invisibility is directed toward a critical purpose, the less there is room for the Imaginary. Invisibility would thus appear as the locus where Imaginary and criticality are negotiated.

To show that both criticality toward art and call to Imaginary are engrained in invisible art, beyond the examples we provided, we must adopt an adequate body of thoughts to account for the perceptive and experiential levels of invisibility. Phenomenology, once termed "the philosophy of vision", seems most suited for this task. This movement is a development of continental philosophy during the course of the twentieth century, concerned initially with renewing the theories articulating mind and reality. The "science of phenomena" emphasizes the role and nature of the lived experience in arguing that the structure of experience is intentional. That is: no fact is noticed, no phenomena exists, without expectations being formed beforehand about it. Thus reality can no longer be seen as engendering the mind or the other way round, as experience informs both subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>15</sup>

That invisible artworks, by their openness, call upon the faculties of imagination is obvious, as they bring the audience to fill the absence, to complete the artist's proposal. Yet this assertion is crude, for it disregards the context of this call. The circumstances of an encounter with an invisible art piece conditions the experience of reception twice: first, the audience is hosted in a space dedicated to art;<sup>16</sup> second, an announcement or a wall label refers to something that is not visible, be it an object, a sensibility

or a whole exhibition. Thus the reception of such a work is structured by intentionality twice, as it is not only expected as art, but also as it calls upon imagination for an object specified previously. This "directed imagination" differs from the Kantian concept of a centered faculty of imagination and demands a phenomenologist approach. Jean-Paul Sartre carried this intentional analysis of imagination, that he termed "the Imaginary" in his eponymous book.

For Sartre, the work of art is thought as a juxtaposition of the real and the unreal, the tangible and the Imaginary. In this conception, the tangible (printed pages) allows the "derealization" of the work of art (a novel) into an aesthetic object (the mental images and sensations the text conveys), an object which is unreal in nature and exists only through a consciousness [18, p. 27]. If this description seems to be applicable to all works of art, a few remarks need to be made. First, this description is meant to be general, yet it is clearly molded on the workings of literature, Sartre's first and lasting love. The generality of this description will however not be investigated here. Yet, we can note that literature is rejoined in the minimality of its means, a mere text, only by non-visible visual arts, and that this minimality favors greatly a call upon the Imaginary. As such, invisible art could be understood as an elementary form of literature.<sup>17</sup>

Further, the reception of an invisible work entails a reflexivity that this description accounts for only implicitly. This reflexivity is part of the Sartrean Imaginary, but goes beyond the framework of intentionality. Indeed, Sartre mentions that "I cannot touch [an imaginary object], change its place". "Or rather I can, but... unreally, by not using my own hands but phantom hands that administer unreal blows... To act upon these unreal objects. I must double myself, make myself unreal." This doubling illustrates Sartre's evolution from an intentional reference to a self-reference, characteristic of Existentialism [18, p. 49]. Self-reference, the consciousness of doubling, is properly instantiated by invisible art: I expected something visible and this disappointment refers to me, to my intentionality. Thus if the Imaginary participates in any visual artwork, invisible art is singular in that its constitutive absence operates a *reflexive call upon the Imaginary*.

To show intuitively that a proper critique of art by art requires the modality of invisibility, we will develop a metaphor based on concepts defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his essay entitled *The Intertwining — The Chiasm*. These concepts need first to be introduced. His last writ-

ings attempt to root Phenomenology in our own bodily experience: since the body constitutes the hinge between mind and reality, since the body is the place of our opening to the world, he argues, the body not only participates in a framework of intentionality, but *is* this framework of intentionality [19, p.74], because of its double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject”. In the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* (to which the essay *The Intertwining — The Chiasm* belongs), he turns in particular to the following problem to develop an ontology of the visible:

The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer<sup>18</sup> or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them [20, p.130]

Merleau-Ponty resolves the quandary by asserting firstly that the relationship between seeing and the visible is in all ways like the one between touching and the tangible — “the palpation of the eye” is a “remarkable variant” of the “tactile palpation”. Regarding the sense of touch, he then remarks that:

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only, like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. [20, p. 133]

This double presence, “this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible” occurs in the body, but at its limit, in its *flesh*. This intermediary element, its thickness, explains at once the intertwining of the sensible and the sentient, their reversibility, and their separation. The flesh is

elevated by Merleau-Ponty to the rank of ontological object: It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. It is for the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen by a body. [20, p. 135]

Once again, a duality, in this case opposing the seer and the seen, is resolved into a triad, by the addition of a mediating element, the flesh of the visible. However, this element is not to be regarded as the superposition of the sentient and the sensible body in time, enabling a factual reversibility, but rather as the possible superposition, an immanent reversibility of the touching and the being touched:

But this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. My flesh and that of the world therefore involve clear zones, clearings, about which pivot their opaque zones. [20, p. 147]

Merleau-Ponty further elaborates in the book’s working notes on these opaque zones, making them constitutive of consciousness:

What it does not see it does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. What it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibres that will permit the vision spread out into it). What it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the object is born. [20, p. 248]

The elements are now in place to justify the use of invisibility as a critical tool. This justification will be sustained by mere analogy with Merleau-Ponty’s arguments. Art, when considered as a sphere of human interest, can be regarded as a body immersed in an external reality, an outside encompassing the other spheres of human interest. A sensible body, whose corporeal space is inscribed in this reality. But also a sentient body, probing the world through its perceptions, each of its palpations partaking of its faculty

of inquiry. As for the phenomenological body, what lays between art's body and the world is this mediating element, its flesh. Merleau-Ponty's prose can be thus transposed as follows: *it is that the thickness of flesh between art and reality is constitutive for reality of its visibility as for art of its corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. It is for the same reason that art is at the heart of reality and that art is far from it: because it has thickness and is thereby naturally destined to be seen by a body.*<sup>19</sup>

But we must turn to a specific situation for our purpose: when the body's palpations are directed toward itself, when art looks into art, when the artwork inquires, investigates, in order to solicit a judgement of its own field, to delineate a critique. As mentioned earlier, when I touch my own hand, the superposition of the touching and the touched does not occur: "I am always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariable perspective" [20, p. 148], either subject or object. This leads Merleau-Ponty to acknowledge that within the inquiring device exists inherently an opaque zone, a zone it does not see, an invisible part which enables vision. By analogy, an artwork investing critically its own field possesses, necessarily, a blind spot to enable critique.<sup>20</sup> This blind spot, this hiatus between the object and the subject, is thus required to avoid the intricacies of self-referentiality and the resulting neutralization, "the indeterminacy of a proto-consciousness unable even to register the vague and ephemeral deformations of its corporeal space." As we saw previously, the art of cynical reason willfully produces this collapse between object and subject to achieve a convenient ambiguity as to its criticality. Examples of this cynical reason will be explored in the next part, to justify contemporary strategies of simulation.

The *asperspective* thus obliges us to consider the objective definition, the anatomico-physiology or ophthalmology of the *punctum caecum*, as itself a mere image, an analogical index of vision itself... of that which seeing itself see, is nevertheless not reflected, cannot be "thought" in the specular or speculative mode — and thus is blinded because of this, blinded at the point of "narcissism," at the very point where it sees itself looking.

Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*



In this last part, the notion of invisibility will be broadened to shed light on the practice of two contemporary artists, Bethan Huws and Tino Sehgal, who both relate to invisibility, but on very different terms. To grasp their respective approach, it will be necessary to consider theoretical elements and artistic practices apparently remote from invisibility.

*4'33''* is probably the most famous work of John Cage. It consisted of a partition forbidding the instrumentalist to perform for the ascribed duration. David Tudor premiered the piece in August 1952 for a concert of contemporary music in Woodstock. The venue, the concert and its participants fostered thus the usual expectations regarding its content, which were betrayed by the piano's silence, leaving the audience face musical emptiness. For these aspects, *4'33''* can be considered a close analog to *Le Vide*.<sup>21</sup> The motivations of their respective maker seem however diametrically opposed: Klein promotes emptiness, celebrating it in a mystical ontology, while Cage denies its existence, asserting that "there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound" (as cited in [21, part IV]). Indeed, if emptiness can be thought in isolation, reality disrupts its autonomy: a sensuous emptiness is always contained, and its walls simply present. Susan Sontag, in her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*, shares this conclusion:

Nor can silence, in its literal state, exist as the property of an art work — even of works like Duchamp's readymades or Cage's *4'33''*, in which the artist has ostentatiously done no more to satisfy any established criteria of art than set the object in a gallery or situate the performance on a concert stage. There is no neutral surface, no neutral discourse, no neutral theme, no neutral form. Something is neutral only with respect to something else. [21, part IV]

This something else, these walls, form a *background*. The mute music of *4'33''* foregrounds its aural background, noise, and elevates it to the order of music. The non-visible artwork foregrounds its visual background, that of the ex-

hibition space, highlights its framing role for art and legitimizes this space as object of artistic interest.

Implicit to the words of Sontag is the idea that this background also operates metaphorically: there is an immaterial background of expectations, of intentionality, against which the work stands out. This allows her to align “4’33” and the readymades of Marcel Duchamp. In the latter case, his *Fontain* and his *Bottle Dryer* failed to meet the main demand formulated to art in a bourgeois society: to be autonomous, abstracted from the world. The readymades as commodities had already a use value, as such, they could not offer any aesthetic value [17, p. 108]. The Duchampian objects were also invisible artworks, because they were not seen as art.

This articulation between invisibility and background can be read in any critical practice which negates a supposedly essential requirement for art, usually embedded in institutional discourse. In fact, one could posit that a work is critical of this essential requirement *because* this requirement is turned invisible in the work.<sup>22</sup> This conclusion, illustrated by Andersen in his moralistic story, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, sees its radicalization in the oeuvre of Sherrie Levine. For her series *After Edward Weston* and *After Walker Evans*, elaborated at the beginning of the 80’s, Levine photographed a photography made by Weston or Evans, produced one print of it, which was presented conventionally, protected by a glass frame. She provided no contribution to the previous image — this expectation was defaulted and highlighted by an “invisible contribution”. Her pieces constituted a frontal attack to the modernist pillar of originality, understood here in both acceptations: as expectation that the work is novel, and as requirement, enshrined in copyright law, that the work should originate from its claimed author. The myth of originality is indeed vigorously denounced in her critical statement:

The world is filled to suffocating. Man has placed his token on every stone. Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash. A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. Similar to those eternal copyists Bouvard and Pécuchet, we indicate the profound ridiculousness that is precisely the truth of painting. We can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. [3, p. 1039]

Thus by appropriating someone else’s artwork to the perfection, Levine “opens the print from behind to the series of

models from which it, in turn, has stolen, of which it is itself the reproduction” [22, p. 168]. That is: it not only denies any claim of originality to the previous work, but negates the very idea of an origin for the image — a postmodernist view to which we shall return later.

The work of Levine is the epitome of Appropriation Art. Its general strategy will be detailed here, as an understanding of it will be necessary later. In his book entitled *Mythologies*, published in 1957, Roland Barthes dismantles the myths of post-War french society: the DS, wrestling, the face of Garbo, the brain of Einstein, the “bifteck” and its fries... The exercise of social commentary would be limited if the inner workings of the myth would not be theorized in a second part, revealing Barthes’ visionary thought. The myth, he explains, is an evolved semiological species, a parasite which feeds on another species, the sign. He didactically expounds the tenets of semiology: the sign (for instance, a mathematical formula) is composed of a signifier (the print of the formula), and a signified (the equivalence of two quantities). And so is the myth, with a signifier and a signified, yet it is unique in that it *appropriates* an already constituted sign as signifier: the sign “ $E=mc^2$ ” becomes a carrier for the notion of mathematicalness [23, p. 206], to form the mythical scientific formula, shown on every scientist’s blackboard appearing in movies, television shows or comic strips. Since “any semiological system is a system of value” [23, p. 204], the myth stands for values in disguise, values hiding behind that of its sign, for them to become *natural*: “The myth consumer takes its signification as a system of facts”. To unveil this naturalization, Barthes suggests to create parasites of the myths themselves, myths of myths, by appropriating them in a signifier:

Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since the myth steals language, why not stealing the myth? All that is needed is to use it as a departure point from a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth. Literature provides some great examples of these artificial mythologies. I will consider here *Bouvard et Pécuchet* from Flaubert.<sup>23</sup> [23, p. 209]

This is the exact strategy of Appropriation Art, twenty-five years later: Sherrie Levine mythifies the myth of originality, Richard Prince, that of the american way of life.

The textual works of Bethan Huws could seem remote from

these strategies, and closer to the pieces evoked in the first part, for they directly question the need for visibility. Her exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art, London, in 1991, illustrates her approach: the upper gallery was barely dressed with twenty-four photocopies of manuscripts, directly pasted onto the walls. The texts, transcriptions of Huws recording herself while she wandered on the banks of a lake, are precise observations of her surroundings, free from narrative agency. The reader is projected into this environment, but the phenomenological descriptions also increase his awareness within the exhibition space, connecting, overlapping these places in the reader's mind. *The Lake Writing* thus clearly alludes to the Imaginary, in a reflexive manner, in a characteristic use of invisibility.

Yet her work at the Haus Esters Museum defies this categorization, even if it seems to address emptiness. This house, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, hosted her solo exhibition in 1993, for which she solely produced a printed text handed out to the visitors. The text is composed of groups of deictic words (for the first line: "which had", "being there", "was", "which was", "and it was", "and what was") with the same amount of space between the groups on a line, the first word being all aligned on the left, the last on the right — words drawing a map of a rectangular labyrinth. If the decision to leave the space empty could be interpreted as a "re-enactment" of Michael Asher's institution-critical artwork, the accompanying text contradicts this critical intention: her writing delineates a presence, even if it is a past presence. Yet the text is not evocative, for this presence remains subliminal.

What the work means seems intentionally elusive. We can move away from the signified to the signifier: her words are all but placeholders, both linguistically and spatially. They stand for a place, they connote visually its rational organization. A place which is present but which was already there: the modernist building of van der Rohe. Huws thus leaves the house to itself. She explained indeed that she was overcome with the architectural presence of this house, which she acknowledged as a work of art on its own right, and thus felt this space did not require any direct contribution [1, p.127]. In a reciprocal readymade, foreseen by Duchamp in his advice to "use a Rembrandt as an ironing board", the house's aesthetic value was previously overshadowed by its use value — the work of art, turned into a background for art, became invisible. Through her non-intervention, the site benefits from the audience's heightened awareness, as she substitutes it for her own artwork. She thus appropriates the previous appropriation and thereby reverses it.<sup>24</sup>

The *Haus Esters Piece* stirred strong reactions, triggering Huws to write a notice for the personnel of this museum, to deflect the aggressiveness of some viewers. This shows that, despite its history, emptiness is still not an accepted cultural form for the general public (nor are, probably, readymades and appropriations). Beyond the general dismissals of contemporary art, is there a reason intrinsic to invisibility for such reactions? We saw in the second part that disappointment participates in the Sartrean Imaginary, for invisibility frustrates my pleasure to look at, a drive Freud termed "scopophilia" and described at length. This suggests that a psychoanalytical approach can be used to explain these reactions. In particular, Jacques Lacan defined a notion very close to Sartre's Imaginary, bearing the same name. The Lacanian doctrine distinguishes indeed three orders at play in the human psyche: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The order of the Imaginary refers to the first phase of development of a child, when he becomes conscious of his body's integrity by looking at himself in a mirror. His own identification, his inscription in the world, thus takes place through his specular image, an external entity perceived visually. He is himself as much as he is this Other he sees in the mirror. The Imaginary, the order of the image and the fantasy, stems from this primary tension within identity, from the self constituted in an alienation.

In describing also this self-estrangement, Sartre's Imaginary is thus very close to this notion. Yet Lacan's Imaginary is described as being quintessential to the ego, the Symbolic relating to a later phase, that of language and the Real, to what can not be represented, nor symbolized. As such, "the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real are an unholy trinity whose members could as easily be called Fraud, Absence and Impossibility" (Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London 1991) p. 112, as cited in [24]). This is very interesting for our purpose: as suggested previously for *Le Vide*, an invisible piece is potentially a fraud within the system of production and presentation of visual arts. The work's visual absence calls upon the viewer's Imaginary, which is itself the locus of a fraud, the original fraud of the ego. In this interpretation, the encounter of a viewer and an invisible artwork is the situation of two frauds facing each other. The reflexive call upon the Imaginary that, for instance, *Haus Esters Piece* operates, is the recall of the intrinsic alienation of the subject-viewer, for better or for worse.

What remains of this part will be dedicated to justify a strategy of invisibility Tino Sehgal consistently pursued. To this end, we will take a rather long walk through the

works and theories of others. These aspects form a network which is difficult to represent in the linear structure of a text. The reader will hopefully forgive our sinuous path.

Prescient or at least well aware of the time he belongs to, Jeffrey Koons would be a very talented artist, if it was not for his cynicism. For instance, *New Shelton Wet/Dry Double Decker* (1981), a plexiglas case enclosing two brightly illuminated, brand-new vacuum cleaners, alludes to the fetishism, nascent in the 80's, for brands — a worship no longer directed to a company's product, to what a company's name means, its signified, but to the name itself, its signifier. Yet the latent critique is voided by the work's reversal of the Duchampian readymade [17, p. 112]: the display prohibits any potential use of the cleaners, whereas Duchamp proposed an object whose *use value* was preserved along its new aesthetic value, acquired in its framing as art. The work simply acknowledges that his contemporaries treated artworks as luxury commodities, by providing one — and yuppies would buy “a Koons”. The art of cynical reason is present here too: Koons became knowingly a brand.

These changes were foreseen a decade earlier by Jean Baudrillard, who motivated in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* the capitalism's inherent commodity fetishism, according to marxist theory, by the symbolic exchange it allows: a commodity is circulated and fetishized because of the sign value it conveys, the difference of status/prestige it implies [25, section 1]. He later extended his semiological model by remarking that “signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real” [26, section 6]. Baudrillard appropriates Lacan's vocabulary to ground this evolution: when the Symbolic takes over the Imaginary and the Real, reality is abstracted into an hyperreality whose currency is the sign, a currency disconnected from any referent. Representation and reality are then simple consequences of a global symbolization of the world. If Baudrillard's theory is admittedly an aesthetization of sociological changes, it is nevertheless of a confounding relevancy for certain aspects of contemporary society. For instance, the integration of pornography in mass media can be explained in these terms: this simulation/symbolization of sexuality in consumer society absorbed both the Imaginary, becoming the only representation of sex, and the Real, as it shaped the sexual behavior of newer generations. The explicit subject-matter of *Made in Heaven* (1990), a series of inkjet paintings by Koons, depicting his intercourses with a pornographic actress, shows that he espoused these developments by embodying them.

Another aspect of his work seems a literalization of

Baudrillard's hyperreality. Under this regime, a particular class of signs, the image, moves away from representation to become simulation:

Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.

Such would be the successive phases of the image:  
it is the reflection of a profound reality;  
it masks and denatures a profound reality;  
it masks the absence of a profound reality;  
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;  
it is its own pure simulacrum.[27, p. 6]

This is exactly the tenets of Sherrie Levine: the image is simulation, it refers only to a previous image, not to any reality — hence the image has no origin. Koons' attempts at Appropriation Art were more problematic: In *Rogers vs Koons*, a decision of the US Court of Appeals from 1992 [28], he was found liable for infringement of a photographer's copyrights. Koons retrieved a picture of a postcard, made by Rogers, which fitted his requirements for the upcoming *Banality* series. He asked a studio to produce a sculpture by copying faithfully the image representing a couple holding eight puppies. The legal defense of parody was invoked without much success: the *String of Puppies* was considered in first and second instances an unauthorized copy of the work of Rogers.

Set aside this example of the Real backfiring on the Symbolic, this decision is interesting because it unveils a fundament of Koons' approach: its sculpture originates entirely from the image. For instance, the spatial extension of *String of Puppies* is limited to the photograph's frame. The sculpture is thus understood not in terms of materials, volume or presence, but in its faithfulness to an image, *as an image itself*. This can be explained only if the finality of the work is not the experience of its physicality, but the experience of its visuality. Here, the simulacrum is again at play: the image prevails over its origin. “In short, there is no real: the third dimension is only the imaginary of a two-dimen-

sional world", says Baudrillard about holograms [27, p. 107]. Koons' works are holograms, hollow-grams, a recording of emptiness, that of our world of image consumption.

If the material support cannot be neglected, because the commodity should be sold, why would he prefer, as fine strategist, the image of the sculpture over the sculpture itself? The "collapse of the spaces of production and reproduction" is nothing new, it belongs to the conceptualist ethics of minimum effort, as acknowledged by Seth Siegelau:

For many years it has been well known that more people are aware of an artist's work through (1) the printed media or (2) conversation than by direct confrontation with the art itself. For painting and sculpture, where the visual presence - color, scale, size, location - is important to the work, the photograph or verbalization of that work is a bastardization of the art. But when art concerns itself with things not germane to physical presence, its intrinsic (communicative) value is not altered by its presentation in printed media. The use of catalogues and books to communicate (and disseminate) art is the most neutral means to present the new art. The catalogue can now act as the primary information for the exhibition, as opposed to secondary information about art in magazines, catalogues, etc. and in some cases the 'exhibition' can be the 'catalogue.' [7, p. 124]

The same justification could hardly apply to Koons. Yet the parentheses of the previous text are telling: the "secondary information", and principally the image, allows the artwork's *dissemination* in printed media, its communication.<sup>25</sup> This strategy is thus justified by the broader audience it creates for the work, a desire explicitly stated by Koons:

To me, the issue of being able to capture a general audience and also have the art stay on the highest orders is of great interest. I think anyone can come to my work from the general culture: I don't set up any kind of requirement. Almost like television. [3, p. 1053]

If much as been said on his duplicitous strategy of voluntary kitsch, allowing both naivete and irony, Koons' altruism has been less commented upon. It is rather that, for the essence of Koons' production (the sign), the broader its propagation, the higher its exchange value: indeed, the market and more particularly the collectors estimate routinely a work by its exposure in mass-media. This strategy of simulation is advantageous for another reason: the work benefits from critique, be it textual or visual. Indeed, as justified in the second part, any *détournement* or inclusion

of its image for critical purposes contributes itself to the propagation of this sign. The commercial success of this strategy, along with the legendary *laissez-faire* of the art world, and the longstanding crisis of critique brought emulation. The image-sculptures of Koons were followed by the image-sculptures of Damien Hirst and Maurizio Cattelan, the image-films of Matthew Barney, the image-performances of Vanessa Beecroft and finally the image-images of Murakami Takashi.

It is in this context of *art simulacrum* that we can articulate Tino Sehgal's approach to secondary information. Sehgal's public works, which he names "constructed situations", are movements and utterances executed by non-professional actors and dancers according to his instructions, during the opening times of the hosting institution. For instance, in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, a person lays on the floor of a museum room containing other artworks. She moves slowly, appearing in her inward attention to have a sleepless night or restless dreams. As for a performance, her presence is a force field which keeps the viewers at a distance, her position on the floor emphasizing the vulnerability of her art-objectification. If the surroundings stress the solitude of this process, the piece affects conversely its environment: it seems that the artworks present in the same room, or in the neighboring spaces, can barely sustain the visitor/intruder's look: they suddenly pale, for their objecthood appears in crude light, as an abated distraction to the intensity of this intimate presence. More, one can only look at them with an overwhelming awareness of this act, as he voluntarily ignoring this body, potentially looking at him. This awareness, characteristic of the intersubjectivity of the gaze, be it theorized by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre or Lacan [29, p. 325][17, p. 138], is thus extended here to objects by this sentient artwork.

Sehgal indicated that this work was intended as a critique of the performative works of Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman (hence its ironical title), who were interested at the beginning of the 70's by dance and choreography, an immaterial art if any, but both nonetheless created a tangible work, a video. More generally, Sehgal denounces visual arts for their "reactionary celebration of material production" [30] and proposes as alternative "the simultaneity of production and deproduction" [31]: in his works, an entity is produced, be it a gesture or a dialogue, that leaves no material trace after its is performed, that "deproduces" itself. His practice thus contests radically the pervasive permanence

of visual arts objects. Nevertheless, this approach does not upset the demands of the culture industry, regarding the marketability of art, as Sehgal knowingly makes works which are commodities, even if intangible ones:

I think that, at the very moment one wants to do something specialized, one has to exchange that something in order to be able to cover one's basic needs, so one is in the market. Factually, you do want to be inside the market. So for me, this whole discourse of reification isn't interesting. Instead of being against the product, for me the question is rather how to use the market to circulate a different, more sustainable, and more interesting kind of product. [31]

Thus this neo-dematerialization of art is not a protest against art commodification, as it was for the avant-garde of the 60's [3, p. 920], but an answer to ecological concerns within contemporary art's mode of production — it is closer, to this extent, to the German Green Party founder, Joseph Beuys, and the participatory aspects of his social sculptures. Tino Sehgal brings however this logic to its end point: as a preliminary condition to the creation, exhibition or sell of any work, he expressly forbids the production of written instructions, press releases, catalogues, recording, photographs and in case of selling, of certificates. This decision reconfigures the traditional structure of dissemination. For instance, the curator is no longer the main proponent of an artwork's discourse, the art critic is. But beyond this professional consideration, this strategy has two major consequences in terms of reception. First, since no secondary information is produced, these pieces become invisible for visual mass media,<sup>26</sup> delineating thereby an implicit critique of mass media representation. This critique is blunted by dialectical effects: a repressed representation seems to bring more media attention than an expressed one; the works's audience is restricted to the institution's visitors, thus the critique seems to be classically motivated, i.e. by a form of cultural elitism. These effects notwithstanding, the drive to produce art simulacra, in this case image-performances, is depleted *ab initio*. Second consequence for the reception of Sehgal's oeuvre: in the absence of a visual ersatz, a person who never experienced directly a work from Sehgal has to turn to oral or written accounts. Yet, the available accounts of his works leave little doubt regarding the subjectivity and the variability of their experiences — these texts amount more to interpretations than descriptions [32]. The non-viewer is thus left with the task of investing this unreliable, non-visual reality with her

own subjectivity. The vanished image reveals *in fine* what was tightly sealed beneath: an additional space of projection.

422. What am I believing in when I believe that men have souls? What am I believing in, when I believe that this substance contains two carbon rings? In both cases there is a picture in the foreground, but the sense lies far in the background; that is, the application of the picture is not easy to survey.

423. *Certainly* all these things happen in you.—And now all I ask is to understand the expression we use.—The picture is there. And I am not disputing its validity in any particular case.—Only I also want to understand the application of the picture.

424. The picture is *there*; and I do not dispute its *correctness*. But what is its application? Think of the picture of blindness as a darkness in the soul or in the head of the blind man.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

## CONCLUSION



In the first part of this thesis, we tried to historicize “invisible art” from its many instances in the visual arts. The research was broadened using a structuralist approach. That we could not define an adequate, comprehensive, justification is in itself satisfactory: should it be the case, the specific reasons to turn to invisibility in each instance, the sign it constitutes for each work, would have been appropriated under a general signifier. Put differently, invisibility could only be condensed in a myth of invisibility.

In the second part, a crude “functional” analysis showed in each invisible work the concomitance of a critical purpose and of an appeal to the Imaginary. Both were justified within a phenomenological framework. The turn to Structuralism and Phenomenology is not surprising, as they are the “two bodies of thought in which meaning is understood to depend on the way that any form of being contains the latent experience of its opposite” (Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, as cited in [17, p. 43]). Subjacent to this thesis was indeed the need to think beyond the binary, beyond the oppositional pair visible/invisible. In both theories, the antagonism is resolved by the introduction of a mediation: in Structuralism, these aspects are thought as interdependent within a differential system; in Phenomenology, experience sustains both mind and reality; for Merleau-Ponty, the flesh is constitutional of both the seer and the visible.

As the interpretation, in the last part, of two contemporary practices required elements of semiotics, another opposition demanded intercession, that of signifier/signified. Some idioms of poststructuralism, which posits essentially a splintering between these components, were thus appropriated to understand their practices comparatively to that of their predecessors. I need to mention here that I had

previously only a general understanding of the respective discourses of Phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalytical theory and Poststructuralism at large. This last part owes very much to my reading of Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real* — in this respect, I would like to emphasize that this thesis had no pretense to make a contribution, but simply to gather and understand the thoughts of others. Their use here is certainly plagued with improper appropriations, yet the value of this essay is to be found elsewhere: this text should be read as a personal attempt to understand how theory superseded the conceptual closure of binary divisions. Within this problematic, discovering Heidegger's ontology of disclosure and concealment, allowing a passage between invisible and visible, was a fulfilling moment: the stated subject of this thesis met then its subjacent intellectual inquiry.

To return to our initial question, whether invisibility is still a relevant strategy in a contemporary practice, is to unfold again our steps. There is first no general justification to produce a non-visible visual work. The aesthetics of invisibility was never constituted. The faux pas of citing this aesthetics is thus avoided.<sup>27</sup>

This strategy could be, secondly, motivated by a critical intention towards art. Regarding this aspiration, a work from Tino Sehgal is telling. "In *This is Propaganda* (2002) a museum guard sings a song with the lyrics "This is propaganda/you know/you know" twice, then announces the title and year of the work, each time a visitor enters the room." [33] The fact that the song was originally a commercial electro-pop tune, from a norwegian band called Briskeby, renders the forcefully pedagogical message all the more ironical. Within a museum, this message is no longer a plain warning, nor the acknowledgment that the institution generates its own critique, but the validation of Roland Barthes' insight that "denunciation, demystification (or demythification), has itself become discourse, stock of phrases, catechistic declaration" [17, p. 119]. After or in parallel to its commodification in the 80's [17, p. 101], critique was transformed into a sign, was appropriated and turned into a myth.<sup>28</sup> This evolution does not invalidate all critical endeavor — after all, the real did not disappear; but this crisis severely limits the credence a crude critique can receive.

Alternatively, this strategy can also be chosen for the reflexive call upon the Imaginary it entails. Yet, in some recent examples we examined — Warhol's *Invisible Sculpture*, Cattelan's *Denuncia* or Höller's *New World Race*, invisibility cloaks a mere product of our consumer society. This

fastening of the Imaginary can be explained in a regime of hyperreality: commodities exist for their sign-value, they can thus be literally replaced by a sign. It is remarkable that invisibility, or immateriality, realizes this shortcut perfectly: the substitutive sign is embodied in these works by their title, for Warhol and Höller, or by its description, for Cattelan. Within this regime, a call upon the Imaginary thus merely echoes the Symbolic of consumerism.

Bethan Huws resorted nonetheless to invisibility in her work, and Tino Sehgal also, even if implicitly, in an abstract way. Both approaches can be read as strategies of resistance, be they understood in a perspective of post-critique or not: the *Haus Ester Piece*, for instance, perturbs a logic of container/contained and opposes the oblivious assimilation of modernism;<sup>29</sup> Sehgal rejects the art world's materialism and frustrates the demand for mass-media representation. In different, modest areas, the critical imagination of these artists counters the fundamental mechanism of late capitalism, namely the invisible commodification of culture and identity [29, p. 400], with invisibility itself. Hiding remains, it seems, necessary to resistance.

1. The viewer's credulity is actually tested twice, as the described making of the work can be also called into question.
2. Obviously, the term "medium" does not refer to a distinctive materiality, but is used here tentatively to designate a category of support for artworks.
3. This includes also sound pieces produced by visual artists, for instance Bruce Naumann's *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968).
4. It is also worth noting that at the time of production of Klein's pieces, the idea of emptiness was en vogue, or at least not foreign to popular culture: in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), the founding opus of existentialism, Sartre, inspired by Nihilist thought, defines the self as an absence between two appearances, a pure *nothingness*. Sartre's fame in France and the popular acclaim existentialism received after World War II assured a wide diffusion of his ideas, among which the necessity of an ontological void.
5. A practical investigation of this work has been undertaken, described in annex. The reader is thus referred to it for further details.
6. Works of this level of asceticism could be seen as the clearest examples of how Conceptual Art paralleled the general linguistic turn in humanities. Yet, art took this turn before Conceptual Art was named, as purely textual works were produced earlier: Yoko Ono published "Grapefruit", a compilation of her *Instructions Pieces*, in 1964.
7. His first solo exhibition, twenty years before at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, attracted such a horde of art students, eager to see Warhol and his entourage, that his paintings had to be taken away to protect them and that he had to flee [34].
8. Hal Foster argues that it was rather a "move from an ironic posture to a failed, pathetic, even abject one" [16, p. 101].
9. This description relates to the solo exhibition *New World* held in the Moderna Museet of Stockholm in 1999.
10. One realizes the primacy, inherited from the modernist era, of the gaze over touch in the discourse of fine arts, when the notions of invisibility, intangibility and immateriality are used interchangeably — Warhol's work is entitled *Invisible Sculpture*, Höller's piece, *The Invisible*, yet they are

really immaterial. However, if these notions overlap, they also admit areas of exclusion: Michael Asher's *Vertical Column of Accelerated Air* is invisible but tangible, the opaque smoke filling a room in Olafur Eliasson's *Your Blind Movement* is intangible but visible. Only immateriality implies both invisibility and intangibility.

11. Let us note that the semiotic square and its methodology parallel a more fundamental finding, a more radical answer to the coarseness of any spatial metaphor of a division: Martin Heidegger characterized Western metaphysics as the metaphysics of presence [13, section 1], where an entity can only *be or not be*, and proposed instead an ontology of disclosure and concealment [13, p. 69], an ontology allowing varying degrees of existence, of visibility.

12. We will see in the third part, however, the reason why some invisible piece inherently test the audience's credibility.

13. This non-aesthetic became of course an aesthetic on its own right.

14. The historical appropriations do not stop there: the piece was also described as neo-Dadaist coup for its anarchist anti-art strategy, and Yves Klein as a precursor of Postmodernism.

15. We already came across this way to quell a duel's anger by convoking a third party, by introducing a wedge in between the opposite terms in the heideggerian ontology of disclosure, and it is no wonder, since Heidegger extended the project of Edmund Husserl, founder of Phenomenology.

16. This is the case for all the examples we examined, with the exception of Warhol's *Invisible Sculpture*.

17. The border between this two cultural objects is porous: Literature could inversely be sublated in "invisible art". These inclusions pay however little regard to the respective contexts of literature and visual arts, which differ at least in presentation and distribution. In particular, a textual work, *situated* within the conventional environment of visual arts (the gallery volume), suggests an intention of visuality and of locality.

18. "*Seer*: (chiefly archaic) a person who sees something specified: *a seer of the future* | *ghost-seers*" [4]

19. Cast under this light, the enduring discussions on art's autonomy or heteronomy, amount to little but a crude fixation on its border, within the dualistic ontology subtending them.

20. A bitter personal experience illustrates this fact: exasperated by Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted human skull, and its ubiquitous presence in the streets of Amsterdam to promote its exhibition in the Rijksmuseum, I printed posters showing the classical skull-and-bones flag in a diamond outfit — a mere *détournement* of Hirst's work, and pasted them at night around the Rijks. I later learnt that Damien Hirst collected all parodies of his work, and rightfully so: a critique neutralizes itself when it carries along its object, because the critique then participates in the propagation of its object.

21. Analog and inspiration, as 4'33" could seem to pioneer the foregrounding of emptiness in arts. Yet the use of silence was introduced at least half a century earlier in music. Anecdotally, Yves Klein wrote a *Monotone-Silence Symphony*, whose second part is silent, in 1949.

22. We saw in the second part that, for an artwork to be critical of art, it must necessarily turn to invisibility. We are now considering a complementary clause: any work existing without a supposedly essential requirement for art is *per se* critical of this requirement.

23. The unfinished novel of Flaubert, which was published posthumously together with the *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, a text denouncing the clichés of the ending 19th century — in brief, a precursor of Mythologies.

24. Thus if this strategy of appropriation is critical, it is no longer of the myth of an original author, but of the infra-visibility of the previous work.

25. The caveat of the text, condemning the photograph of a sculpture as a "bastardization", is rather entertaining given the current state of affairs.

26. In theory, at least: images of his constructed situations can be found in mainstream media.

27. Would the irony of turning it into a style be considered innocent?

28. Whether Sehgal's work simply acknowledges this state of affairs or proceeds to the mythification of this myth is left to the reader's interpretation.

29. A later work of Huws asks: "WHAT'S THE POINT OF CREATING ANY MORE ARTWORKS WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE ONES YOU'VE GOT?" [1, p. 136]

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