

CHAPTER FOUR

GESTURE¹ AND SIGNATURE:
SEMIURGY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

The painting is a signed object as much as it is a painted surface. The paraph of the creator seems actually to increase its singularity. What does this signature indicate? The act of painting, the subject who paints. But it indicates that this subject entrenched at the heart of an object and the very act of painting is named by a sign. Imperceptibly, but radically, the signature introduces the *oeuvre* which is that of the painting. In certain modern works it is unique — no longer as an *oeuvre*, but as an object — until it bears this signature. Then it becomes a model to which an extraordinary, differential value is brought by a visible sign. But it is not a meaning value — the meaning peculiar to the painting is not in question here — it is a *differential* value, carried by the ambiguity of a sign that does not cause the work to be seen, but to be recognized and evaluated in a system of signs, and which, while differentiating it as a model, already, from another perspective, integrates it in a series, that of the works of the painter.

1. *Le gestuel* is difficult to translate: it is opposed to *geste* as its extension, not contradiction. Yet it is the latter that is usually translated as "gesture." Briefly, *le gestuel* refers to a sort of complex, or paradigm, of gestures, and this is the simplest way to grasp the term. However, constantly referring to "the gestural" is awkward in English, and various renderings are thus to be found in the text. There is another sense in which *le gestuel* refers to a congealment, petrification or crystallization of gestures, of single, relatively independent, unsolicited, physical actions into sequences that take on an almost magical, incantatory aspect. For clarification we have taken a brief passage from Baudrillard's *Le Système des objets* (Paris: 1968), pp. 57-58: "Still in the analysis of ambient values, when we broach the study of functional forms (that may be called forms drawn in profile, dynamic, etc.), we see that their stylization is inseparable from that of the *gestuel humain* (the complex of human gestures) that goes with them. Stylization always signifies the elision of muscular energy and of work. All the processes of the elision of primary functions to the profit of the secondary functions of relation and calculation, or of the elision of the drives to the profit of culture (*culturalité*) have for a practical and historical mediation at the level of objects the fundamental elision of the gestures of effort (*gestuel d'effort*), the passage from a *universal gestural paradigm of work* to a *universal gestural paradigm of control*. It is there that a millenarian status of objects, their anthropomorphic status, definitively comes to an end; in the abstraction of the sources of energy." And further along: "this profound, gestural relation of man to objects that epitomizes the integration of man with the world and with social structures... is still a constraint... a complex of gestures and of forces, of symbols and of functions, illustrated and stylized by human energy.... The splendor of this relation of conformity remains subordinated to the relational constraint." — *Trans.*

Thus the painted *oeuvre* becomes a cultural object by means of the signature. It is no longer simply read, but perceived in its differential value. A single aesthetic emotion often confuses the critical reading and the distinguishing signs of its physical identity.²

A certain fact may be of interest here: until the 19th century, the copy of an original work had its own value, it was a legitimate practice. In our time the copy is illegitimate, inauthentic: it is no longer "art." Similarly, the concept of the forgery has changed — or rather, it suddenly appears with the advent of modernity. Formerly painters regularly used collaborators or "negros": one specialized in trees, another in animals. The act of painting, and so the signature as well, did not bear the same mythological insistence upon authenticity — that moral imperative to which modern art is dedicated and by which it becomes modern — which has been evident ever since the relation to illustration and hence the very meaning of the artistic object changed with the act of painting itself.

It is useless to argue that the forgery, the copy of the counterfeit are unacceptable today because photographic technique has disqualified "photocopy" by hand. That sort of explanation is specious. Something else has changed: the conditions of signification of the *oeuvre* itself.

In a world that is the reflection of an order (that of God, of Nature or, more simply, of discourse) in which all things are representation, endowed with meaning and transparent to the language that describes them, artistic "creation" proposes only to describe. The appearance of things has the keys to the city,³ being itself the signature of an order that is given there to be recognized and not to be analyzed. The *oeuvre* wishes to be the perpetual commentary of a given text, and all copies that take their inspiration from it are justified as the multiplied reflection of an order whose original is in any case transcendent. In other words, the question of authenticity does not arise, and the *work of art is not menaced by its double*. The various copies do not constitute a series in the modern sense of the word, whose model would be the original: all else remaining equal, original and copy are equivalent in a single finality, whose "reason" escapes them. In summary, it is impossible to circumvent the true source of values. *The Forgery does not exist*. Nor is the signature there in order to turn the *oeuvre* into a pure object, which has surged with emotional power from the act of painting. Even if he signs it

2. This is not peculiar to painting: this ambiguous apprehension defines the *consumption* of all cultural goods.

3. As is shown by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

(sometimes with a monogram), the artist does not attest to its truth: he is never more than the one who gives (*donateur*).

Today the conjuncture of values is entirely different: transcendence is abolished, the oeuvre becomes the original. Its meaning passes from the restitution of appearances to the act of inventing them. Value is transferred from an eminent, objective beauty to the singularity of the artist in his gesture.

And this new act is temporalized: it is the irreversible moment of invention to which other irreversible creative moments can only be subsequent. Here modernity begins. The modern oeuvre is no longer a syntax of various fragments of a general tableau of the universe, "in extension," where continuity and reversibility are active; rather, it is a succession of moments. The oeuvres no longer combine with one another to revive the model in its likeness (the world and its order) by means of their contiguity. They are only able to follow one another in order then to refer, by virtue of their difference and their discontinuity in time, to a quite different model, to the *subject-creator himself* in his unlikeness and his repeated absence. We are no longer in space but in time, in the realm of difference and no longer of resemblance, in the series and no longer in the order. This last point is essential. Once legitimacy is transferred to the act of painting, the latter can only prove itself untiringly: by this very fact it constitutes a series. Incidentally, since the final term of this series is no longer the world to be represented by the ever absent subject, it becomes essential to indicate this subject as such, and in the same act to declare the oeuvre as the object of this subject: that is the function of the signature, it is from that necessity that it derives its present privilege.

Otherwise, how could we explain the insistent mythological demand for authenticity in contemporary art — that each painting be the emanation of a unique moment, often sanctioned by the very day and hour of its execution, and by the signature? And how explain the fact that any contemporary oeuvre is constituted as a declension of objects — each painting being a discontinuous term of an indefinite series, and thus legible first, not in its relation to the world but in its relation to the other paintings by the same artist, its meaning being thus tied down to succession and repetition? What paradoxical law, in its very movement, bends authenticity to the constraint of seriality? Once again we can look for *de facto* determinations, the conditions of the market, for example, which chain the artist to his mannerism and to a cadence of production. And once again, this would be too simple.

In fact, it is precisely because the series has become the constitutive dimension of the modern oeuvre that the inauthenticity of one of the elements of the series becomes catastrophic. Each term in its specific difference is essential to the functioning of the series as such, and to the convergence of meaning from one term to the other toward the model (here the subject himself). If one defects, it is the rupture of an order. A false Soulages may well be worth another Soulages⁴ but it throws suspicion on all Soulages. The code of recognition becomes suspect, and hence the integrity of meaning of the oeuvre itself. If you like, there is no longer a God today to separate out his elect. The work is no longer rooted in God (in the objective order of the world) but in the series itself. *The essential task then is to preserve the authenticity of the sign.*

Hence the mythical value taken on by that guarantee of vintage (*appellation contrôlée*): the signature. It becomes the veritable caption of our oeuvres. In the absence of fable, of the figures of the world and of God, it is that which tells us what the work signifies: the artist's gestures that are materialized in it (as in the other signs of the painting, moreover). For if the signature can fulfill that legible function of meaning, it is because in its allusive singularity as a sign it is fundamentally homogeneous with the combinatory order of signs which is that of the painting. In certain modern work it is graphically mixed with the content of the canvas, it becomes a rhythmic element and one may conceive of a painting that realizes and abolishes itself in its signature, which is only a signature. That is a limit, however, for — sign among signs — the signature always retains legendary values. If each sign of the painting retraces the subject in his act, only the signature designates him explicitly, giving us that particle of meaning, that reference and, hence, that security, which, in modern painting, is no longer given by the illegible truth of the world. The social consensus, and beyond that, of course, all the subtle combinations of supply and demand play upon the signature. But one can see that this myth is not purely and simply an effect of commercial orchestration. There is a conjunction of sign and name in the signature — a sign different from the other signs in the painting, but homogeneous with them; a name different from the names of other painters but complicit in the same game. It is through this ambiguous conjunction of a subjective series (authenticity) and an objective series (code, social consensus, commercial value), through this inflected sign, that the system of consumption can operate.

4. In the end, Soulages copies himself well and Fautrier admits he does not always know whether a given canvas is his work.

That is why the slightest attack upon this sign which is both authentic and accepted, unmotivated and codified, is felt as a profound attack upon the cultural system itself — and why today the forgery and the copy are viewed as sacrilege. In our time, moreover, there no longer remains any difference between copy and forgery (the forgery plays upon the signature and presents itself as authentic; the copy plays upon the content and avows itself a copy). If one admits that the value of the painting is established upon the gesture, it is clear that every copy is a forgery because it no longer simulates a content but an irreversible act (*geste*) of pictorial invention.

Today only the artist may copy himself. In a sense, *he is condemned to do so* and to assume, if he is logical, the serial character of creation. At the limit, he reproduces himself literally: "In Factum I and Factum II, Rauschenberg has done the same canvas twice, almost to the last daub, literally. . . . What seems a brush stroke thrown on as hurriedly as possible and followed by droplets in an entirely accidental fashion is in fact a very studied gesture which Rauschenberg is capable of executing repeatedly at will" (Otto Hahn, *Les Temps Modernes*, March 1964).

Here we find something like a truth of modern art: it is no longer the literality of the world, but the literality of the gestural elaboration of creation — spots, lines, dribbles. At the same time, that which was representation — redoubling the world in space — becomes repetition — an indefinable redoubling of the act in time. Moreover, the performance of Rauschenberg, that tautology of the gesture, marks only the paradoxical limit of a logical evolution. In his case, there is a sort of coquettishness (realist) or obsession (paranoid) in redoing his own canvas stroke for stroke; but in fact that literality is not necessary in order for repetition to take place. In any case, Rauschenberg knows that although his two paintings are identical, they are nonetheless different because they testify to two distinct moments and so retain their own individual value on the market. So this duplication retains nothing of a copy. *Subjectivity triumphs in the mechanical repetition of itself*. That is why this concern can be left to no one else.

What must be clearly understood is that this *formal literality of the gesture* carries a structural constraint of succession and of differentiation from one sign to another of the same canvas, and from one canvas to another. This constraint is at work everywhere in our oeuvres, even when their individual themes and techniques can be specified. In this sense, Rauschenberg's "doubled" canvas (and the analogous procedures of other serial painters) is misguided, insofar

as it tries, with photographic literalness, to exorcise, at the level of content, a seriality that is of a profoundly different order.

But then everything comes back to this question: what are the possibilities, for modern art, of retracing the actuality of our world (the everyday reality of objects, social reality and its conflicts)? What can be its critical value? Artists themselves are often divided between the ideology of pure gestural values (values of authenticity) and this other ideology, the critical necessity of regrasping reality. The same dilemma is posed for art critics, moreover, who have great difficulty reconciling a tangled paraphrase of the creative action (*gestuel*) with an analysis of objective significations.

In the light of what has just been said, this velleity of regrasping the world that is still new in contemporary art (recently again in pop art and the new portraiture) appears naive: it seems unaware of that systematic dimension according to which the modern gesture of painting is first organized — beside, or outside, or despite the conscious intentions of the artist. This velleity seems unaware that what is signified (and thus in a way domesticated) in contemporary art is no longer the world as substance and extension, but rather a certain temporality that is that of the subject in its self-indexing (and not the social individual of biographical data). There is a discontinuity and reconstitution of the subject from act to act, of which the signature is the socio-culturally encoded index. Modern art is actual (i.e., contemporary) in the strict sense of being "in the act" (*en acte*), from action to action: not contemporary with the world, but with itself and with itself alone in its own movement.⁵ It changes gears according to a formal constraint of succession and plays upon variations and differences ("reading" the work will, most of the time, consist inversely in the decoding of these variations and differences).

Any function that one may wish to assign to art (among others, that of critical realism and of any form of commitment) must be measured with respect to this basic structure, and thus to this limit of meaning. Otherwise, the artist condemns himself to a pious ideology (which, on the other hand, is always the dominant ideology in matters of art): the eternal illusion of the philosophic consciousness, which makes him live his work as an absolute uniqueness that *confronts* the world and is responsible for bearing witness to it (for every philosophic consciousness is necessarily accompanied by a moral conscience).

5. Thus, no longer at the level of "creation" this time, but of appropriation, the collection of objects has no other temporality than that of the cycle that it constitutes: it is outside of "real" time.

Having said that, modern art is no less contemporary but its contemporaneity is neither direct nor critical: if it fully describes what we are, it does so by its very ambiguity.

Let us reconstruct this ambiguity. In a technical civilization of operatory abstraction, where neither machines nor domestic objects require much more than a controlling gesture (that gestural abstraction signifying a whole mode of relations and behavior), modern art in all its forms has for its primary function the salvation of the gestural moment, the intervention of the integral subject. It is the part of us, crushed by the technical habitus, that art conjures up in the pure gestural complex of the act of painting and its apparent liberty. Thus art (in its gesture) registers itself negatively as the sign of a lack. But this inscription that nourishes the most current ideology (that art is spontaneity, upsurge, living opposition to a mechanized universe) is not critical: it poses as a challenge confronting the world; but by default, it is stamped with nostalgic values, it compensates. And above all, it is caught up in its subjectivity, in its very act, by that seriality against which it registers itself in the external world. Despite this inscription, despite the sublime instantaneousness which it proclaims (in good faith, however: it seriously believes in it), subjectivity in action can only obey the same formal constraints of organization as the functional world. And here we have the truth of our modern art: if it bears witness to our time, it does so neither by direct allusion nor even in its pure gesture denying a systematized world — it is in testifying to the *systematic* of this full world by means of the inverse and homologous systematic of its empty gesture, a pure gesture marking an absence.

This serial dimension and this absence value are its absolute conditions of signification. Whether it assumes them or not, enacts them or evades them, it is in this that it is the only art possible. It is an art that is neither positive nor critical — contradictory (these are the two sides of the same illusion) but homologous and collusive: and thus, ambiguous. Most artists (and consumers) flee this contradiction. And even the acknowledgement of this systematic dimension may still be a detour to escape it. This is what one perceives in the mannerisms of the literal repetition of Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg, etc., by which they proclaim themselves painters of seriality and thus redirect this fundamental structure, turning it into an effect of fashion.

Before sinking into pure consumption, pop art will have had the merit of exposing these contradictions more clearly in the actual exercise of painting and in the latter's difficulties in deciding upon its

true object. Thus we read in Warhol: "The canvas is an absolutely everyday object, on the same plane as this chair or this poster." Let us applaud this democratic conception, but recognize that it is either very naive or in very bad faith. Even if art wishes to signify the "everyday," that is not what it is: that would be to confuse the thing and its meaning. Now, art is constrained to signify, it cannot even commit suicide in the everyday. In that wish to absorb art, there is simultaneously an American pragmatism (terrorism of the useful, blackmail of integration) and something like an echo of a mystique of sacrifice. Warhol adds: "Reality has no need of an intermediary, it is necessary only to isolate it from the surroundings, transfer it to the canvas." The whole question is there: for the "everydayness" of this chair (or of that slice of meat, car fender, or centerfold) is precisely its context, and singularly, the serial context of all similar, or slightly different, chairs, etc. Everydayness is difference in repetition. In isolating the chair on the canvas, I remove all its everydayness from it and at the same time remove from the canvas all the characteristics of an everyday object (which in the theorists' illusion ought to make it absolutely resemble the chair).

This is the stumbling block: art can neither be absorbed into the everyday (canvas equals chair) nor grasp the everyday as such (chair isolated on the canvas equals real chair). Immanence and transcendence are equally impossible: they are two faces of the same dream. In fact, the discourse of modern art is of another order: *it is to signify in the same mode as objects do in their everydayness, that is, in their latent systematic*. It is in this serial and differential organization, with its own temporality punctuated by fashion and the recurrence of behavior models, to which art currently testifies. This by continually proving itself in a gesture that is repeated according to a play of inessential and combinatory variations in turn permits art to be something other than absolute repetition. "I would like to be a machine," Andy Warhol says.

Of course, this formula is paradoxical, because there is no greater affectation for art than for it to pose as mechanical, nor a greater coquettishness for subjectivity than to dedicate itself to serial automatism. But it testifies all the same to a logical exigency and to the limiting condition of modern art: that of a subjectivity fascinated by a technical world that denies it, fascinated by the positivity of that world but which paradoxically can only absorb this world by repeating itself across serial diffractions.

The world in its objective systematic and art in its subjective systematic exchange their significations. This is their homologous

situation.⁶ Art is assigned there in all lucidity: it can only signify the world on the basis of a structural affinity that simultaneously marks the fatal character of its *integration*.

Only recognition of this structural homology between a systematized world and an art that is itself serial in its most profound exercise⁷ permits one to grasp this contradiction of modern art — which is deplored everywhere, even by artists themselves, as a fatality. Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer contests anything, if it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction "consumed." All the more reason there would seem to be, then, to abandon all nostalgia, resign negativity, and admit finally that it is in the very movement of its authenticity, in systematizing itself according to a formal constraint, in constituting itself according to a play of successive differences, that the work of art offers itself of its own initiative as immediately integrable in a global system that conjugates it like any other object or group of objects.

In this sense, modern works have indeed become everyday object: although laden with cultural connotations, they pose no problems to the environment. A modern painting, pop, abstract, a "tachiste," contradicts nothing: it enters into the play of the syntagmatic distribution of objects in space (in the modern interior) just as — and because it issues from the inventory of a circumscribed subjectivity — one sign passes into another, from one moment to another. Two chains cross: the necessary dimension of signification is also the "fatal" dimension of integration and consumption.

Modern art, midway between critical terrorism (ideological) and *de facto* structural integration, is quite exactly an *art of collusion vis-à-vis* this contemporary world. It plays with it, and is included in the game. It can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it; it never disturbs the order, which is also its own. We are no longer dealing with the bourgeois art which, in its redundancy, presents beings and objects, reconciled with their image (all "representation" carries this ideology of reconciliation). In modern art it is a subjectivity which, unreconciled with the world, endeavors to

6. Moreover, this structural homology not only constitutes art as a series, but also the world itself as "mechanical." The world only really becomes mechanical from the moment it can no longer be evoked save mechanically.

7. And for which the reference to the world becomes secondary — just as the exercise of collection is valued above the thematic of the objects collected.

reconcile itself with its own image: it is a subjectivity whose redundancy, while committed in an implicit seriality, is dedicated to homologically illustrating the seriality of all other objects and the systematic of an increasingly well integrated world through its own withdrawal and defiance.