The Field of Cultural Production

Essays on Art and Literature

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Polity Press
The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods

Once again, I don't like this word 'entrepreneur'.

Sven Nielsen, Chairman and Managing Director of Presses de la Cité

In another area, I had the honour, if not the pleasure, of losing money by commissioning the two monumental volumes of Carlos Baker's translation of Hemingway.

Robert Laffont

The art business, a trade in things that have no price, belongs to the class of practices in which the logic of the pre-capitalist economy lives on (as it does, in another sphere, in the economy of exchanges between the generations). These practices, functioning as practical *negations*, can only work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing. Defying ordinary logic, they lend themselves to two opposed readings, both equally false, which each undo their essential duality and duplicity by reducing them either to the disavowal or to what is disavowed — to disinterestedness or self-interest. The challenge which economies based on disavowal of the 'economic' present to all forms of economism lies precisely in the fact that they function, and can function, in practice — and not merely in the agents' representations — only by virtue of a constant, collective repression of narrowly 'economic' interest and of the real nature of the practices revealed by 'economic' analysis.

*Translator's note: The terms *negation*, *denial* and *disavowal* are used to render the French *dénégation*, which itself is used in a sense akin to that of Freud's *Vermeinung*. See J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), entry 'Negation', pp. 261–3.
by a practical mastery of the laws of the functioning of the field in which cultural goods are produced and circulate, i.e. by an entirely improbable, and in any case rarely achieved, combination of the realism implying minor concessions to 'economic' necessities that are disavowed but not denied and the conviction which excludes them. The fact that the disavowal of the 'economy' is neither a simple ideological mask nor a complete repudiation of economic interest explains why, on the one hand, new producers whose only capital is their conviction can establish themselves in the market by appealing to the values whereby the dominant figures accumulated their symbolic capital, and why, on the other hand, only those who can come to terms with the 'economic' constraints inscribed in this bad-faith economy can reap the full 'economic' profits of their symbolic capital.

WHO CREATES THE 'CREATOR'?

The 'charismatic' ideology which is the ultimate basis of belief in the value of a work of art and which is therefore the basis of functioning of the field of production and circulation of cultural commodities, is undoubtedly the main obstacle to a rigorous science of the production of the value of cultural goods. It is this ideology which directs attention to the apparent producer, the painter, writer or composer, in short, the 'author', supressing the question of what authorizes the author, what creates the authority with which authors authorize. If it is all too obvious that the price of a picture is not determined by the sum of the production costs - the raw material and the painter's labour time - and if works of art provide a golden example for those who seek to refute Marx's labour theory of value (which anyway gives a special status to artistic production), this is perhaps because we wrongly define the unit of production or, which amounts to the same thing, the process of production.

The question can be asked in its most concrete form (which it sometimes assumes in the eyes of the agents): who is the true producer of the value of the work - the painter or the dealer, the writer or the publisher, the playwright or the theatre manager? The ideology of creation, which makes the author the first and last source of the value of his work, conceals the fact that the cultural businessman (art dealer, publisher, etc.) is at one and the same time the person who exploits the labour of the 'creator' by trading in the 'sacred' and the person who, by putting it on the market, by exhibiting, publishing or staging it, consecrates a product which he has 'discovered' and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource; and the more consecrated he personally is, the more strongly he consecrates the work. The art trader is not just the agent who gives the work a commercial value by bringing it into a market; he is not just the representative, the impresario, who 'defends the authors he loves'. He is the person who can proclaim the value of the author he defends (cf. the fiction of the catalogue or blur) and above all 'invests his prestige' in the author's cause, acting as a 'symbolic banker' who offers as security all the symbolic capital he has accumulated (which he is liable to forfeit if he backs a 'loser'). This investment, of which the accompanying 'economic' investments are themselves only a guarantee, is what brings the producer into the cycle of consecration. Entering the field of literature is not so much like going into religion as getting into a select club: the publisher is one of those prestigious sponsors (together with preface-writers and critics) who effusively recommend their candidate. Even clearer is the role of the art dealer, who literally has to 'introduce' the artist and his work into ever more select company (group exhibitions, one-man shows, prestigious collections, museums) and ever more sought-after places. But the law of this universe, whereby the less visible the investment, the more productive it is symbolically, means that promotion exercises, which in the business world take the overt form of publicity, must here be euphemized. The art trader cannot serve his 'discovery' unless he applies all his conviction, which rules out 'sordidly commercial' manoeuvres, manipulation and the 'hard sell', in favour of the softer, more discreet forms of 'public relations' (which are themselves a highly euphemized form of publicity) - receptions, society gatherings, and judiciously placed confidences.

THE CIRCLE OF BELIEF

But in moving back from the 'creator' to the 'discoverer' or 'creator of the creator', we have only displaced the initial question and we still have to determine the source of the art-businessman's acknowledged power to consecrate. The charismatic ideology has a ready-made answer: the 'great' dealers, the 'great' publishers, are inspired talent-spotters who, guided by their disinterested, unreasoning passion for a work of art, have 'made' the painter or writer, or have helped him make himself, by encouraging him in difficult moments with the faith they had in him, guiding him with their advice and freeing him from material worries. To avoid an endless regress in the chain of causes, perhaps it is necessary to cease thinking in the logic, which a whole tradition encourages, of the 'first beginning', which inevitably leads to faith in the 'creator'. It is not sufficient to indicate, as people often do, that the 'discoverer' never
discovering anything that is not already discovered, at least by a few painters, already known to a small number of painters or connoisseurs, authors, 'introduced' by other authors (it is well known, for example, that the manuscripts that will be published hardly ever arrive directly, but almost always through recognized go-betweens). His 'authority' is itself a credit-based value, which only exists in the relationship with the field of production as a whole, i.e. with the artists or writers who belong to his 'stable' - 'a publisher', said one of them, 'is his catalogue' - and with those who do not and would or would not like to; in the relationship with the other dealers or publishers who do or do not envy him his painters or writers and are or are not capable of taking them from him; in the relationship with the critics, who do or do not believe in his judgement, and speak of his 'products' with varying degrees of respect; in the relationship with his clients and customers, who perceive his 'trademark' with greater or lesser clarity and do or do not place their trust in it. This 'authority' is nothing other than 'credit' with a set of agents who constitute 'connections' whose value is proportionate to the credit they themselves command. It is all too obvious that critics also collaborate with the art trader in the effort of consecration which makes the reputation and, at least in the long term, the monetary value of works. 'Discovering' the 'new talents', they guide buyers' and sellers' choices by their writings or advice (they are often manuscript readers or series editors in publishing houses or accredited preface-writers for galleries) and by their verdicts, which, though offered as purely aesthetic, entail significant economic effects (juries for artistic prizes). Among the makers of the work of art, we must finally include the public, which helps to make its value by appropriating it materially (collectors) or symbolically (audiences, readers), and by objectively or subjectively identifying part of its own value with these appropriations. In short, what 'makes reputations' is not, as provincial Rastignacs naïvely think, this or that 'influential' person, this or that institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer or publisher; it is not even the whole set of what are sometimes called 'personalities of the world of arts and letters'; it is the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.7

FAITH AND BAD FAITH

The source of the efficacy of all acts of consecration is the field itself, the locus of the accumulated social energy which the agents and institutions help to reproduce through the struggles in which they try to appropriate it and into which they put what they have acquired from it in previous struggles. The value of works of art in general - the basis of the value of each particular work - and the belief which underlies it, are generated in the incessant, innumerable struggles to establish the value of this or that particular work, i.e. not only in the competition between agents (authors, actors, writers, critics, directors, publishers, dealers, etc.) whose interests (in the broadest sense) are linked to different cultural goods, 'middle-brow' theatre (théâtre 'bourgeois') or 'high-brow' theatre (théâtre 'intellectuel'), 'established' painting or avant-garde painting, 'mainstream' literature or 'advanced' literature, but also in the conflicts between agents occupying different positions in the production of products of the same type: painters and dealers, authors and publishers, writers and critics, etc. Even if these struggles never clearly set the 'commercial' against the 'non-commercial', 'disinterestedness' against 'cynicism', they almost always involve recognition of the ultimate values of 'disinterestedness' through the denunciation of the mercenary compromises or calculating manoeuvres of the adversary, so that disavowal of the 'economy' is placed at the very heart of the field, as the principle governing its functioning and transformation.

This is why the dual reality of the ambivalent painter-dealer or writer-publisher relationship is most clearly revealed in moments of crisis, when the objective reality of each of the positions and their relationship is unveiled and the values which do the veiling are reaffirmed. No one is better placed than art dealers to know the interests of the makers of works and the strategies they use to defend their interests or to conceal their strategies. Although dealers form a protective screen between the artist and the market, they are also what link them to the market and so provoke, by their very existence, cruel unmaskings of the truth of artistic practice. To impose their own interests, they only have to take artists at their word when they profess 'disinterestedness'. One soon learns from conversations with these middle-men that, with a few illustrious exceptions, seemingly designed to recall the ideal, painters and writers are deeply self-interested, calculating, obsessed with money and ready to do anything to succeed. As for the artists, who cannot even denounce the exploitation they suffer without confessing their self-interested motives, they are the ones best placed to see the middle-men's strategies and their eye for an (economically) profitable investment which guides their actual aesthetic investments. The makers and marketers of works of art are adversaries in collusion, who each abide by the same law which demands the repression of direct manifestations of personal interest, at least in its overtly 'economic' form, and which has every appearance of transcen-
RITUAL SACRILEGE

This argument might be encountered by pointing to the attempts made with increasing frequency in the 1960s, especially in the world of painting, to break the circle of belief. But it is all too obvious that these ritual acts of sacrilege, profanations which only ever scandalize the believers, are bound to become sacred in their turn and provide the basis for a new belief. One thinks of Manzoni, with his tins of 'artist's shit', his magic pedestals which could turn any object placed on them into a work of art, or his signatures on living people which made them objets d'art; or Ben, with his many ‘gestures’ of provocation or derision such as exhibiting a piece of cardboard labelled ‘unique copy’ or a canvas bearing the words ‘canvas 45 cm long’. Paradoxically, nothing more clearly reveals the logic of the functioning of the artistic field than the fate of these apparently radical attempts at subversion. Because they expose the art of artistic creation to a mockery already annexed to the artistic tradition by Duchamp, they are immediately converted into artistic ‘acts’, recorded as such and thus consecrated and celebrated by the makers of taste. Art cannot reveal the truth about art without snatching it away again by turning the revelation into an artistic event. And it is significant, a contrario, that all attempts to call into question the field of artistic production, the logic of its functioning and the functions it performs, through the highly sublimated and ambiguous means of discourse or artistic 'acts' (e.g. Maciunas or Flynt) are no less necessarily bound to be condemned even by the most heterodox guardians of artistic orthodoxy, because in refusing to play the game, to challenge in accordance with the rules, i.e. artistically, their authors call into question not a way of playing the game, but the game itself and the belief which supports it. This is the one unforgivable transgression.

COLLECTIVE MISRECOGNITION

The quasi-magical potency of the signature is nothing other than the power, bestowed on certain individuals, to mobilize the symbolic energy produced by the functioning of the whole field, i.e. the faith in the game and its stakes which is produced by the game itself. As Marcel Mauss observed, the problem with magic is not so much to know what are the specific properties of the magician, or even of the magical operations and representations, but rather to discover the bases of the collective belief or, more precisely, the collective misrecognition, collectively produced and maintained, which is the source of the power the magician appropriates. If it is 'impossible to understand magic without the magic group', this is because the magician's power, of which the miracle of the signature or personal trademark is merely an outstanding example, is a valid imposture, a legitimate abuse of power, collectively misrecognized and so recognized. The artist who puts her name on a ready-made article and produces an object whose market price is incommensurate with its cost of production is collectively mandated to perform a magic act which would be nothing without the whole tradition leading up to her gesture, and without the universe of celebrants and believers who give it meaning and value in the terms of that tradition. The source of 'creative' power, the ineffable mana or charisma celebrated by the tradition, need not be sought anywhere other than in the field, i.e. in the system of objective relations which constitute it, in the struggles of which it is the site and in the specific form of energy or capital which is generated there.

So it is both true and untrue to say that the commercial value of a work of art is incommensurate with its cost of production. It is true if one only takes account of the manufacture of the material object; it is not true if one is referring to the production of the work of art as a sacred, consecrated object, the product of a vast operation of social alchemy jointly conducted, with equal conviction and very unequal profits, by all the agents involved in the field of production, i.e. obscure artists and writers as well as 'consecrated' masters, critics and publishers as well as authors, enthusiastic clients as well as convinced vendors. These are contributions, including the most obscure, which the partial materialism of economism ignores, and which only have to be taken into account in order to see that the production of the work of art, i.e. of the artist, is no exception to the law of the conservation of social energy.
adjustment to demand is not the product of conscious design but the result of a structural correspondence.

THE LONG RUN AND THE SHORT RUN

The fundamental principle of the differences between ‘commercial’ businesses and ‘cultural’ businesses is to be found once again in the characteristics of cultural goods and of the market on which they are offered. A firm is that much closer to the ‘commercial’ pole (and, conversely, that much further from the ‘cultural’ pole), the more directly and completely the products it offers corresponds to a pre-existent demand, i.e. to pre-existent interests in pre-established forms. This gives, on the one hand, a short production cycle, based on the concern to minimize risks by adjusting in advance to the identifiable demand and provided with marketing circuits and presentational devices (eye-catching dustjackets, advertising, public relations, etc.) intended to ensure a rapid return of profits through rapid circulation of products with built-in obsolescence. On the other hand, there is a long production cycle, based on acceptance of the risk inherent in cultural investments24 and above all on submission to the specific laws of the art trade. Having no market in the present, this entirely future-oriented production presupposes high-risk investments tending to build up stocks of products which may either relapse into the status of material objects (valued as such, by the weight of paper) or rise to the status of cultural objects endowed with an economic value incommensurate with the value of the material components which go into producing them.25

The uncertainty and randomness characterizing the production of cultural goods can be seen in the sales curves of three works published by Éditions de Minuit (Figure 3).26 Curve A represents the sales of a prize-winning novel which, after a strong initial demand (of 6,143 copies distributed in 1959, 4,298 were sold by 1960 after deduction of unsold copies), achieves low annual sales (seventy or so a year on average). Robbe-Grillet’s La Jalousie (curve B), published in 1957, sold only 746 copies in its first year and took four years to catch up with the initial sales of the prize-winning novel (in 1960) but, thanks to a steady annual rate of growth in sales (29 per cent a year average from 1960 to 1964, 19 per cent 1964 to 1968) had achieved a total of 29,462 in 1968. Beckett’s En attendant Godot (curve C), published in 1952, took five years to reach 10,000 but grew at a fairly steady 20 per cent every year except 1963. From this point the curve begins to take on an exponential form and by 1968 (with an annual figure of 14,298) total sales had reached 64,897.
able to sense the specific laws of a market yet to come, i.e. espouse the interests and demands of those who will make those laws, the writers he publishes. There are also two opposing images of the criteria of success. For ‘bourgeois’ writers and their readers, success is intrinsically a guarantee of value. That is why, in this market, the successful get more successful. Publishers help to make best-sellers by printing further impressions; the best thing a critic can do for a book or play is to predict ‘success’ for it (‘It’s bound to be a runaway success’ – R. Kanter, L’Express, 15–21 January 1973; ‘I put my money on success for Le Tournant with my eyes closed’ – Pierre Marcabru, France-Soir, 12 January 1973). Failure, of course, is an irrevocable condemnation; a writer without a public is a writer without talent (the same Robert Kanter refers to ‘playwrights without talent and without an audience, such as Arrabal’).

As for the opposing camp’s vision, in which success is suspect and asceticism in this world is the precondition for salvation in the next, its basis lies in the economy of cultural production itself, according to which investments are recompensed only if they are in a sense thrown away, like a gift, which can only achieve the most precious return gift, recognition (reconnaissance), so long as it is experienced as a one-way transaction; and, as with the gift, which it converts into pure generosity by masking the expected return-gift which the synchronization of barter reveals, it is the intervening time which provides a screen and disguises the profit awaiting the most disinterested investors.

ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

The eschatological vision structuring the opposition between avant-garde and ‘bourgeois’ art, between the material ascetics which guarantees spiritual consecration and worldly success (which is marked, inter alia, by institutional recognition – prizes, academies, etc. – and by financial rewards), helps to disguise the true relationship between the field of cultural production and the field of power, by reproducing the opposition (which does not rule out complementarity) between the dominated and dominant fractions of the dominant class, between cultural power (associated with less economic wealth) and economic and political power (associated with less cultural wealth), in the specific logic of the intellectual field, that is, in the transfigured form of the conflict between two aesthetics. Specifically aesthetic conflicts about the legitimate vision of the world – in the last resort, about what deserves to be represented and the right way to represent it – are political conflicts (appearing in their most euphemized form) for the power to impose the dominant
definition of reality, and social reality in particular. On the right, reproductive art66 constructed in accordance with the generative schemes of 'straight', 'straightforward' representation of reality, and social reality in particular, i.e. orthodoxy (e.g., par excellence, 'bourgeois theatre') is likely to give those who perceive it in accordance with these schemes the reassuring experience of the immediate self-evidence of the representation, that is, of the necessity of the mode of representation and of the world represented. This orthodox art would be timeless if it were not continuously pushed into the past by the movement brought into the field of production by the dominated fractions' insistence on using the powers they are granted to change the world view and overturn the temporal and temporary hierarchies to which 'bourgeois' taste clings. As holders of an (almost partial) delegated legitimacy in cultural matters, cultural producers — especially those who produce solely for other producers — always tend to divert their authority to their own advantage and therefore to impose their own variant of the dominant world view as the only legitimate one. But the challenging of the established artistic hierarchies and the heretical displacement of the socially accepted limit between what does and does not deserve to be preserved, admired and transmitted cannot achieve its specifically artistic effect of subversion unless it tacitly recognizes the fact and the legitimacy of such delimitation by making the shifting of that limit an artistic act and thereby claiming for the artist a monopoly in legitimate transgression of the boundary between the sacred and the profane, and therefore a monopoly in revolutions in artistic taxonomies.

The field of cultural production is the area par excellence of clashes between the dominant fractions of the dominant class, who fight there sometimes in person but more often through producers oriented towards defending their 'ideas' and satisfying their 'tastes', and the dominated fractions who are totally involved in this struggle.67 This conflict brings about the integration in a single field of the various socially specialized sub-fields, particular markets which are completely separate in social and even geographical space, in which the different fractions of the dominant class can find products adjusted to their tastes, whether in the theatre, in painting, fashion or decoration.

The 'polemical' view which makes a sweeping condemnation of all economically powerful firms ignores the distinction between those which are only rich in economic capital, and treat cultural goods — books, plays or pictures — as ordinary products, i.e. as sources of immediate profit, and those which derive a sometimes very substantial economic profit from the cultural capital which they originally accumulated through strategies based on denial of the 'economy'. The differences in the scale of the businesses, measured by turnover or staff, are matched by equally decisive differences in their relation to the 'economy' which, among recently established smaller firms, separate the small 'commercial' publishers, often heading for rapid growth, such as Lattès, Laffont (as distinct from Robert Laffont), Orban, Authier or Mengès,68 and the small avant-garde publishers, which are often short-lived (Galilée, France Adèle, Entente, Phébus), just as, at the other extreme, they separate the 'great publisher' from the 'big publisher', a great consecrated publisher like Gallimard from a big 'book merchant' like Nielsen.

Without entering into a systematic analysis of the field of the galleries, which, owing to the homology with the field of publishing, would lead to repetitions, we may simply observe that here too the differences which separate the galleries according to their seniority (and their celebrity), and therefore according to the degree of consecration and the market value of the works they own, are replicated by differences in their relation to the 'economy'. The 'sales galleries' (e.g. Beaubourg), having no 'stable' of their own, exhibit in relatively eclectic fashion painters of very different periods, schools and ages (abstracts as well as post-surrealists, a few European hyper-realists, some new realists), i.e. works whose greater 'accessibility' (owing to their more classic status or their 'decorative' potential) can find purchasers outside the circle of professional and semi-professional collectors (among the 'jet-set executives' and 'trendy industrialists', as an informant put it). This enables them to pick out and attract a fraction of the avant-garde painters who have already been 'noticed' by offering them a slightly compromising form of consecration, i.e. a market in which the prices are much higher than in the avant-garde galleries.39 By contrast, galleries like Sonnabend, Denise René or Durand-Ruel, which mark dates in the history of painting because they have been able in their time to assemble a 'school', are characterized by a systematic slant.40 Thus in the succession of painters presented by the Sonnabend gallery one can see the logic of an artistic development which leads from the 'new American painting' and pop art, with painters such as Rauschenberg, Jaspers Johns, Jim Dine, to Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Wesselman, Rosenquist, Warhol, sometimes classified under the label minimal art, and to the most recent innovations of art pauvre, conceptual art and art by correspondence. Likewise, there is a clear connection between the geometric abstraction which made the name of the Denise René gallery (founded in 1945 and inaugurated with a Vasarely exhibition) and kinetic art, with artists such as Max Bill and Vasarely forming a sort of link between the visual experiments of the inter-war years (especially the Bauhaus) and the optical and technological experiments of the new generation.
past and to become classic or outdated, to drop into the ‘dustbin’ of history or become part of history, in the eternal present of culture, where schools and tendencies that were totally incompatible ‘in their time’ can peacefully coexist because they have been canonized, academicized and neutralized.

BEING DIFFERENT

It is not sufficient to say that the history of the field is the history of the struggle for the monopolistic power to impose the legitimate categories of perception and appreciation. The struggle itself creates the history of the field; through the struggle the field is given a temporal dimension. The ageing of authors, works or schools is something quite different from the product of a mechanical slippage into the past. It is the continuous creation of the battle between those who have made their names [fait date] and are struggling to stay in view and those who cannot make their own names without relegated to the past the established figures, whose interest lies in freezing the movement of time, fixing the present state of the field for ever. On one side are the dominant figures, who want continuity, identity, reproduction; on the other, the newcomers, who seek discontinuity, rupture, difference, revolution. To ‘make one’s name’ [faire date] means making one’s mark, achieving recognition (in both senses) of one’s difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; at the same time, it means creating a new position beyond the positions presently occupied, ahead of them, in the avant-garde. To introduce difference is to produce time. Hence the importance, in this struggle for life and survival, of the distinctive marks which, at best, aim to identify what are often the most superficial and most visible properties of a set of works or producers. Words — the names of schools or groups, proper names — are so important only because they make things. These distinctive signs produce existence in a world in which the only way to be is to be different, to ‘make one’s name’, either personally or as a group. The names of the schools or groups which have proliferated in recent painting (pop art, minimal art, process art, land art, body art, conceptual art, arte povera, Fluxus, new realism, nouvelle figuration, support-surface, art pauvre, op art, kinetic art, etc.) are pseudo-concepts, practical classifying tools which create resemblances and differences by naming them; they are produced in the struggle for recognition by the artists themselves or their accredited critics and function as emblems which distinguish galleries, groups and artists and therefore the products they make or sell. 

As the newcomers come into existence, i.e. accede to legitimate difference, or even, for a certain time, exclusive legitimacy, they necessarily push back into the past the consecrated producers with whom they are compared, ‘dating’ their products and the taste of those who remain attached to them. Thus the various galleries or publishing houses, like the various artists or writers, are distributed at every moment according to their artistic age, i.e. according to the age of their mode of artistic production and the degree to which this generative scheme, which is also a scheme of perception and appreciation, has been canonized and secularized. The field of the galleries reproduces in synchrony the history of artistic movements since the late nineteenth century. Each major gallery was an avant-garde gallery at some time or other, and it is that much more famous and that much more capable of consecrating (or, which amounts to the same thing, sells that much more dearly), the more distant its floruit, the more widely known and recognized its ‘brand’ (‘geometrical abstract’ or ‘American pop’) but also the more it is encapsulated in that ‘brand’ (‘Durand-Ruel, the Impressionist dealer’), in a pseudo-concept which is also a destiny.

At every moment, in whichever field (the field of class struggles, the field of the dominant class, the field of cultural production), the agents and institutions involved in the game are at once contemporaries and out of phase. The field of the present is just another name for the field of struggles (as shown by the fact that an author of the past is present exactly in so far as he or she is at stake) and contemporaneity in the sense of presence in the same present, in the present and presence of others, exists, in practice, only in the struggle which synchronizes discordant times (so that, as I hope to show elsewhere, one of the major effects of great historical crises, of the events which make history [font date], is that they synchronize the times of fields defined by specific structural durations). But the struggle which produces contemporaneity in the form of the confrontation of different times can only take place because the agents and groups it brings together are not present in the same present. One only has to think of a particular field (painting, literature or the theatre) to see that the agents and institutions who clash, objectively at least, through competition and conflict, are separated in time and in terms of time. One group, situated at the vanguard, have no contemporaries with whom they exchange recognition (apart from other avant-garde producers), and therefore no audience, except in the future. The other group, commonly called the ‘conservatives’, only recognize their contemporaries in the past. The temporal movement resulting from the appearance of a group capable of ‘making history’ by establishing an advanced position induces a displacement of the structure of the field of the present, i.e. of the chronological hierarchy of the
opposing positions in a given field (e.g., pop art, kinetic art and figurative art). Each position is moved down one rung in the chronological hierarchy which is at the same time a social hierarchy. The avant-garde is at every moment separated by an artistic generation (the gap between two modes of artistic production) from the consecrated avant-garde, which is itself separated by another artistic generation from the avant-garde that was already consecrated at the moment it entered the field. This is why, in the space of the artistic field as in social space, distances between styles or lifestyles are never better measured than in terms of time.45

The consecrated authors who dominate the field of production also dominate the market; they are not only the most expensive or the most profitable but also the most readable and the most acceptable because they have become part of 'general culture' through a process of familiarization which may or may not have been accompanied by specific teaching. This means that through them, the strategies directed against their domination always additionally hit the distinguished consumers of their distinctive products. To bring a new producer, a new product and a new system of tastes on to the market at a given moment is to push the whole set of producers, products and systems of tastes into the past. The process whereby the field of production becomes a temporal structure also defines the temporal status of taste. Because the different positions in the hierarchical space of the field of production (which can be equally well identified by the names of institutions, galleries, publishers and theatres or by the names of artists or schools) are at the same time tastes in a social hierarchy, every transformation of the structure of the field leads to a displacement of the structure of tastes, i.e. of the system of symbolic distinctions between groups. Oppositions homologous with those existing today between the taste of avant-garde artists, the taste of 'intellectuals', advanced 'bourgeois' taste and provincial 'bourgeois' taste, which find their means of expression on markets symbolized by the Sonnabend, Denise René and Durand-Ruel galleries, would have been able to express themselves equally effectively in 1945, when Denise René represented the avant-garde, or in 1875, when Durand-Ruel was in that position.

This model is particularly relevant nowadays, because owing to the near-perfect unification of the artistic field and its history, each artistic act which 'makes history' by introducing a new position into the field 'displaces' the whole series of previous artistic acts. Because the whole series of pertinent events is practically present in the latest, in the same way that the six digits already dialled on the telephone are contained in the seventh, an aesthetic act is irreducible to any other act in a different place in the series and the series itself tends towards uniqueness and irreversibility. As Marcel Duchamp points out, this explains why returns to past styles have never been more frequent than in these times of frenetic pursuit of originality: 'The characteristic of the century now coming to an end is that it is like a double-barrelled gun. Kandinsky and Kupka invented abstraction. Then abstraction died. No one was going to talk about it any more. It came back thirty-five years later with the American abstract expressionists. You could say that cubism reappeared in an impoverished form in the post-war Paris school. Dada came back in the same way. A second shot, second wind. It's a phenomenon typical of this century. You didn't find that in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. After the Romantics, came Courbet. And Romanticism never came back. Even the pre-Raphaelites aren't a rehash of the Romantics.'46

In fact, these are always apparent returns, since they are separated from what they rediscover by a negative reference to something which was itself the negation (of the negation of the negation, etc.) of what they rediscover (when, that is, the intention is not simply of pastiche, a parody which presupposes all the intervening history).47 In the present stage of the artistic field, there is no room for naïveté, and every act, every gesture, every event, is, as a painter nicely put it, 'a sort of nudge or wink between accomplices'.48 And through the games of distinction, these winks and nudges, silent, hidden references to other artists, past or present, confirm a complicity which excludes the layperson, who is always bound to miss what is essential, namely the interrelations and interactions of which the work is only the silent trace. Never has the very structure of the field been present so practically in every act of production.

Never too has the irreducibility of the work of cultural production to the artist's own labour appeared so clearly. The primary reason is that the new definition of the artist and of artistic work brings the artist's work closer to that of the 'intellectual' and makes it more dependent than ever on 'intellectual' commentaries. Whether as critics but also the leaders of a school (e.g. Restany and the new realists), or as fellow-travellers contributing their reflexive discourse to the production of a work which is always in part its own commentary or to reflection of an art which often itself incorporates a reflection on art, intellectuals have never before so directly participated, through their work on art and the artist, in an artistic work which always consists partly of working on oneself as an artist. Accompanied by historians writing the chronicles of their discoveries, by philosophers who comment on their 'acts' and who interpret and over-interpret their works, artists can constantly invent the distinguishing strategies on which their artistic survival depends, only by putting into their practice the practical mastery of the objective truth of
their practice, thanks to the combination of knowingness and naïveté, calculation and innocence, faith and bad faith that is required by mandarin games, cultivated games with the inherited culture, whose common feature is that they identify ‘creation’ with the introduction of deviations [écart], which only the initiated can perceive, with respect to forms and formulae that are known to all. The emergence of this new definition of the artist and his or her craft cannot be understood independently of the transformations of the artistic field. The constitution of an unprecedented array of institutions for recording, preserving and analysing works (reproductions, catalogues, art journals, museums acquiring the most modern works, etc.), the growth in the personnel employed, full-time or part-time, in the celebration of works of art, the increased circulation of works and artists, with great international exhibitions and the increasing number of chains of galleries with branches in many countries— all combine to favour the establishment of an unprecedented relationship between the body of interpreters and the work of art, analogous to that found in the great esoteric traditions; to such an extent that one has to be blind not to see that discourse about a work is not a mere accompaniment, intended to assist its perception and appreciation, but a stage in the production of the work, of its meaning and value. But once again it is sufficient to quote Marcel Duchamp:

Q. But to come back to your ready-mades, I thought that R. Mutt, the signature on The Fountain, was the manufacturer’s name. But in the article by Rosalind Krauss, I read: ‘R. Mutt, a pun on the German, Armut, or poverty’. ‘Poverty’ would entirely change the meaning of The Fountain.

M.D. Rosalind Krauss? The redhead? It isn’t that at all. You can denigrate Mutt comes from Mott Works, the name of a big firm that makes sanitary equipment. But Mott was too close, so I made it Mutt, because there was a strip cartoon in the papers in those days, Mutt and Jeff, everybody knew it. So right from the start there was a resonance. Mutt was a fat little guy, and Jeff was tall and thin . . . I wanted a different name. And I added Richard . . . Richard is a good name for a loo! You see, it’s the opposite of poverty . . . But not even that, just R. – R. Mutt.

Q. What possible interpretation is there of the Bicycle Wheel? Should one see it as the integration of movement into the work of art? Or as a fundamental point of departure, like the Chinese who invented the wheel?

M.D. That machine has no intention, except to get rid of the appearance of a work of art. It was a whim, I didn’t call it a work of art. I wanted to throw off the desire to create works of art. Why do works have to be static? The thing—the bicycle wheel—came before the idea. Without any intention of making a song and dance about it, not at all so as to say ‘I did that, and nobody has ever done it before me.’ Besides, the originals have never been sold.

Q. What about the geometry book left out in the weather? Can one say that it’s the idea of integrating time and space? With a pun on ‘géométrie dans l’espace’ (solid geometry) and ‘temps’, the rain and sun that transforms the book?

M.D. No, no more than the idea of integrating movement and sculpture. It was a joke. A pure joke. To denigrate the solemnity of a book of principles.

Here we see, directly exposed, the injection of meaning and value by commentary and commentary on commentary—to which the naïve but knowing exposure of the falsity of the commentary contributes in its turn. The ideology of the inexhaustible work of art, or of ‘reading’ as re-creation masks—through the quasi-exposure which is often seen in matters of faith—the fact that the work is indeed made not twice, but a hundred times, by all those who are interested in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, deciphering it, commenting on it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it. Enrichment accompanies ageing when the work manages to enter the game, when it becomes a stake in the game and so incorporates some of the energy produced in the struggle of which it is the object. The struggle, which sends the work into the past, is also what ensures it a form of survival; lifting it from the state of a dead letter, a mere thing subject to the ordinary laws of ageing, the struggle at least ensures it has the sad eternity of academic debate.