

2017

## Circulation and Resemanticization: An Aporetic Palimpsest

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### Recommended Citation

Joyeux-Prunel, Béatrice. "Circulation and Resemanticization: An Aporetic Palimpsest." *Artl@s Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (2017): Article 13.

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# **Migrations, Transfers, and Resemanticization**

**ARTL@S BULLETIN**

Volume 6, Issue 2

Summer 2017



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The journal promises to never separate methodology and history, and to support innovative research and new methodologies. Its ambition is twofold: 1. a focus on the “transnational” as constituted by exchange between the local and the global or between the national and the international, and 2. an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

By encouraging scholars to continuously shift the scope of their analysis from the national to the transnational, *ARTL@S BULLETIN* intends to contribute to the collective project of a global history of the arts.

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*ARTL@S BULLETIN* (ISSN 2264-2668) is published by the École normale supérieure, 45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris, France and the Centre national pour la recherche scientifique 16, rue Pierre et Marie Curie, 75005 Paris, France. The online version of the *ARTL@S Bulletin* is hosted by Purdue Scholarly Publishing Services.

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## Circulation and Resemanticization: An Aporetic Palimpsest

This issue looks to answer the questions raised by the resemanticization that enters into play with artistic migrations and transfers. Resemanticization can come about with the voluntary or forced migrations of artists or the transfer of objects, texts, images, motifs, or styles. Circulation can occur between cultural or linguistic systems, between artistic disciplines, between mediums (from painting to engraving or photography, for example) and even, alongside geographical transfers, between time periods. While this issue gathers only a relatively small number of studies into these processes, through both the strengths and weaknesses of their analyses they all encourage us to consider the possibility of a general theory of artistic resemanticization that would bring together historical and social perspectives along with aesthetic and cognitive ones. What meaning is vehicled by a work of art? By the practice of an artist? How is meaning constituted, and how does it evolve over time and across in different places? What factors influence shifts in meaning? What are the possible consequences of artistic resemanticization? Are some resemanticizations more conscious than others, according to the actors and stakes involved? All these are questions raised by a circulatory approach to the history of art, and ones to which traditional methods do not always field answers.

Beyond these basic questions, studying resemanticization entails the kind of re-evaluation

that the history of art nowadays seems increasingly ready to undertake. We have discussed elsewhere the importance of a circulatory approach that could support a global history of art, one that could go beyond the problems of domination and imperialism—important as these are.<sup>1</sup> Resemanticization lies at the heart of the issues raised by circulation, and though it is rarely studied in its own terms, it is one area which allows for a powerful interrogation of the art historical canon. Directly bearing upon what can be said about art and how, resemanticization is just as effective an argument against the existing canon as the political one which rightly points to the glaring absence of minorities from across the board.<sup>2</sup> An awareness of resemanticization and its significance overturns all and any notions of the permanence of an artwork and its meaning; it challenges the idea that a work can possess a single meaning, and encourages a healthy suspicion towards those who would impose their own vision of art; it deals a fatal blow to closed interpretations and the valorisation of such perspectives; it casts doubt upon the possibility of an artwork's belonging to a given style, and thus upon the validity of the category of style as a whole; it unsettles the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin & Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (New York : Routledge, 2015)  
<sup>2</sup> Here I am referring to the notion of 'abyssal thinking', of which the history of art offers a fine example, as discussed by Boaventura De Sousa Santos, for example in « Beyond Abyssal Thinking. From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges », *Eurozine*, 29 juin 2007 <http://www.eurozine.com/beyond-abyssal-thinking/>. English translation of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, « Para além do Pensamento Abissal: Das linhas globais a uma ecologia de saberes », *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais* [Online], 78 | 2007, colocado online no dia 01 Outubro 2012, criado a 13 Junho 2017. URL : <http://rccs.revues.org/753> ; DOI : 10.4000/rccs.753.

authority of the specialist and of the institution in matters of interpretation, and relativizes even those declarations made by artists themselves. Across the spaces and times of reception, an artwork often accumulates manifold interpretations, while what we might consider as ‘final’ interpretations—those that are almost universally assigned to an artwork whether by the historiographic canon or vulgate, or by the wall texts of the museum—are in reality the cumulative result of processes of circulation and resemanticization. The same can be said for the meaning more generally conferred upon the work of an artist, a group, a movement. What’s more, any reputation they may have acquired over the years can, too, be qualified in the same way. The majority of artistic canonizations at work in our museums are the product of the often surprising resemanticizations that occur as an artwork ages and travels, the study of which can help us to relativize the artistic canon.<sup>3</sup>

Figuring resemanticizations as an object of study forces us to dispense with a number of reflexes that are second nature in the field of the history of art, and opens up a range of alternative questions and methods. The identification of changes in meaning requires that we account for not only the trajectories of objects, actions, discourses, and reception practices, but also for the historical, social, and cultural vectors that underpin circulation at any given time; to this extent, the study of resemanticization is anchored in the methods of transnational art history and cultural transfers. It requires a rigorous pragmatism, a willingness and an ability to name what is circulating and what is at play in such processes, and to back this up with concrete proofs and clear concepts. As Pierre-Yves Saunier rightly points out, an attention to circulation cannot come at the expense of the imperative of contextualisation, even when this sometimes means running the risk

of a seemingly endless or erratic investigation of the trajectories of the object in question.<sup>4</sup>

Such methodologies are far removed from those that still dominate the history of art: monography, methodological nationalism and stasis, formalism, a heavy focus on studies of critical texts, and the use of vague and all too rarely problematized notions of style, influence, and diffusion. Could this be the reason why there are, to date, no scientific works explicitly dedicated to artistic resemanticization? Without aiming for an exhaustive coverage, this essay offers a historiographical and theoretical overview of the question, reviewing in turn possible methods and looking at the various sources and objects of study and the kind of questions asked of them. The history of art struggles to consider directly what goes on when an object circulates, and all the more so for the contemporary era: studies tend to focus on the context in which a work is first presented and upon its reception, rather than on its circulation. When they do look at this latter aspect, research is generally carried out into individuals and their attitudes which lead to a particular attribution of meaning—the case of most of the articles in this issue—rather than concentrating on the objects themselves. Yet objects, too, deserve critical attention, since it is they that function as the vehicles of meaning.

## Are Reception Studies Enough?

When looking to study the meaning attributed to a work of art and its evolutions over time, our first reflex might well be to refer to reception studies, which constitute a significant body of literature in the history of art. This reflex is both a healthy and a somewhat misguided one. The bibliography of reception studies in the history of art has swelled since the German theorist Hans Robert Jaus pioneered this line of enquiry in literary studies.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques. Une histoire transnationale*. Vol. 1 1848-1918 (Paris : Gallimard, coll. Folio Histoire, 2016) ; vol. 2 1918-1945 (Paris : Gallimard, coll. Folio Histoire, 2017); vol. 3 1945-1968 (forthcoming 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational history* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, coll. "Theory and History", 2013), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Robert Jaus, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Original in German. On the limits of such an approach, see Isabelle Kalinowski, « Hans-Robert Jaus et l'esthétique de la réception », *Revue germanique internationale*, 8 | 1997. URL : <http://rgi.revues.org/649>.

Indeed, Jauss' seminal work was required reading for many French students in the 1990s following its translation from German. The reconstitution of a 'horizon of expectation' was, for Jauss, the means by which reception studies could go beyond mere psychologism.<sup>6</sup> The strength of his study lay in its demonstration that the meaning of a work (of literature, in this case) is by no means predefined and instead plays out constantly through the activities of reading and reception, within the broader context of a series of past and contemporary receptions. But Jauss' theory, at least in its vulgarized form, is limited to a work's 'first audience', the public from which and for which the author supposedly composed it. By extension, reception studies in the history of art have looked at contemporary audiences, those for which the artist created their artwork and which functioned as arbiters capable of conferring the status of 'artwork' in the first place. The result was that researchers' efforts focused on the articulation of an 'original' meaning, to the detriment of its possible variations over time.

A great deal of progress has since been made with regards to our understanding of the diversity of receptions across different periods, spaces, and social milieux; though this has allowed for more justice to be done to Jauss' hermeneutic, it does not enable us to avoid the apories to which this seems to inevitably lead. If the diversity of receptions and even their serial construction have become relatively common themes in research, reception studies too often focus on a single place or cultural system that is considered as a unified and unvariegated whole with no internal diversity of its own. By limiting reception studies to single spatiotemporal frames, we risk consolidating the very national essentialism that is universally acknowledged in the history of art as redundant and invalid. The reception of French art in Germany, of German art in France, of French art in

the United States, of 'American' art in France, of Spanish art in France; the reception of impressionism in one country, of pop art in another, the reception of this or that artist in such and such a country. How many master's and doctoral theses have addressed such questions? One can only read so many such studies before being left with a distinct feeling that their conclusions are always framed in more or less identical terms: national prejudices, cultural essentialism, xenophobic polemics, artistic nationalism, and so on.

The overrepresentation of the press as a source in reception studies is perhaps the most problematic aspect of this field. First and foremost because the press represents such an abundant source of information: a common refrain from researchers in their vivas and thesis defences is that one barely has enough time to read through the contemporary press, let alone interpret it. Such sources are the most readily available, so it seems only natural to take them as a starting point. Yet we might ask if accessibility should be the criteria to bear in mind as we choose our sources – in particular when this same availability means that study of the press comes at the expense of the analysis of other material. Moreover, the press is not always representative of a unified reception. A study that looks at press alone must question and evaluate a vast range of parameters: the relative importance in a daily newspaper of an insert on page 11 against a full page article, the representative value of press cuttings in a dossier which, in isolation, reveal nothing about the nature of the critic's column, their symbolic status, the print run of a revue or the importance of a critic within the title in question, the identity of the author of a given article and their motivations, and so on. We might just as well ask if the critic is simply contradicting his opposite number in a rival title, or dashing off an article any which way due to a lack of interest in art and a secret desire to cover sports instead.

The second problem with the press relates to its imposition of political and aesthetic interpretative

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<sup>6</sup> "The horizon of expectation, defined as: the system of references objectively formulatable which, for each work at the moment in history in which it appears, arises from three principal factors: the audience's experience of the genre to which the formulation refers, the form and thematic preoccupations of earlier works of which it is presumed to be aware, and the opposition between poetic language and practical language, and between the imaginary world and daily reality. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 53.

frameworks that characterizes the political and artistic press. Can the application of such frameworks truly do justice to artists and their works? After all, they effectively mask the social structures and logics at work in the phenomena of writing on art and the construction of meaning – all the more so when the art historian neglects to investigate them. An approach in which the art historian focuses upon one result of the encounter with an artist or artwork – i.e. journalistic or critical writing – amongst a whole range of others means that these sources are accorded a disproportionate importance in the field. Is it press titles and critics that truly determine the meaning of a work and its evolution?

In reality, reception, the meaning that we give to a work, cannot be measured by the press alone. Sometimes we have to put to one side such apparently obvious sources, and turn our attentions to reproductions, their circulation, and their comparisons with other works, or else to human, artistic, plastic, material, and literary echoes. Julia Madeleine Trouilloud picks up this gauntlet in her work on the reception of modern art in Calcutta in the interwar period, bringing together the accounts of contemporary observers and press sources as well as artworks, which she compares to the references cited by artists themselves: “What can Matisse teach me?”, asked the painter Sailoz Mookherjea before his students.<sup>7</sup> Reception is also to be measured, lastly and especially, by practices: how we act before an artwork, the length of time we spend contemplating it, how we look at it, whether we touch it, or photograph it, etc.

Even widening the range of our sources fails to address one of the consequences of carrying out studies based on reception, namely the notion of a passive reception and therefore of influence. What do we make of the freedom of the ‘receiver’ within such a framework? Of their capacity to take away from a work of art only what they choose? Of their power of negotiation? Most articles in this issue,

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Madeleine Trouilloud, “The Reception of Modern European Art in Calcutta: A Complex Negotiation (1920s-1940s)”. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/7>.

and in particular those which deal with artists traditionally associated with ‘peripheral’ regions of artistic modernity—those that have typically been presented as areas that ‘receive’ innovations from artistic centres—insist on such freedoms. By the same token, they encourage us to deconstruct the ways in which the work of ‘peripheral’ artists is received and perceived by audiences, and the meanings which are attributed to it; more often than not, our way of thinking about these processes implies an observer aligned with the centre. As Joana Cunha Leal’s article in this volume demonstrates, the interpretations of the work of many a ‘peripheral’ artist have been—and continue to be—skewed by their supposedly ‘far-flung’ origins and the subsequent devaluation of their art.<sup>8</sup> Returning to the receptions of Miró and of Amadeo Souza Cardoso, Joana Cunha Leal exposes their systematically selective nature that has obscured the fact that these artists intentionally emphasized their provinciality and their distance from the Parisian centre and its cubist model; in reality, these two painters were just as aware of the risk of being accused of parochial *gaucherie* as they were of what was then being valorised and *fêted* in the milieux of the centre; they were just as capable of adapting to these norms as they were of criticizing them. When reception is our hermeneutic for studying the meanings of works of art, then, we risk projecting a centralist (usually Euro-, Paris- or New York-centric) conception of art onto the regions (of reception) held to be ‘peripheral’ and therefore condemned to artistic imitation.

Reception studies cannot be a singular field of study, but rather must be multiple and comparative, accounting for places, milieux, eras and even moments: a single, static exhibition can have multiple receptions according to the geographical, social, educational and cultural origins of visitors. The validity and the worth of research into receptions hinges on a shift in their

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<sup>8</sup> Joana Cunha Leal, “Distance and Distortion: Amadeo Souza Cardoso’s and Joan Miró’s War-years Painting and the Words that Fail Them?” <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/2>.

object from reception *per se* to circulation and the construction of meaning.

## From Loss to Enrichment

Amongst the problematics which have occupied researchers working on the changes in meaning that occur in spatial and temporal transfers, the most recurrent issue seems to be the loss of meaning. We can often detect a quest for the original meaning of a work, the one which the artist sought to convey but which has been occluded by a series of (mis)interpretations. To the extent that this kind of approach involves the reconstitution of contexts and avoids the substitution of one canon for another, it is not to be rejected. Attempts to discover what a work of art meant for the artist who created it sometimes reveal significant semantic differences between the moment of its creation and its contemporary reception, and thus invite us to consider how such a resemanticization could have come about. For an example of this, we could cite Marcel Duchamp's first ready-mades, *Roue de Bicyclette* (1913), *Porte-Bouteilles* (1913), or even *Fountain* (1917); a study of their changing meanings reveals interpretations rather different to the now-canonical ones inherited from surrealism. A reconstitution of the internal rivalries of European avant-gardes in the 1910s (for the former two works) and of the context of the New York artistic milieu in 1917, as the U.S.A. prepared to join the war on the side of the Allies, makes aesthetic interpretations of the ready-made an interesting albeit partial way of reading Duchamp's works.<sup>9</sup> It leads us to question, for example, the fairly comprehensive erasure from the story of Marcel Duchamp's direct competitors in the 1910s, figures that a comprehensive recontextualisation reveals were in fact extremely present during the period: from Robert Delaunay to the futurists, why have these artists disappeared from the historiography on Duchamp's work? How did the

canonical interpretation of the ready-made come to prevail, and why did its dominance come at so relatively late a stage? The first occurrence of a definition of the ready-made—one still cited today—came from André Breton in the 1938 *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme*: the ready-made was to be understood as “a usual object promoted to the dignity of an artwork by the choice of the artist.”<sup>10</sup> Yet this term only appears in the aesthetic debate towards the end of the 1950s...

We must, of course, remain circumspect as to the existence of an ‘original’ meaning, since the meaning of a work of art can be multiple from the moment of its creation—as in the case of Duchamp's ‘urinal’, presented by some as a Madonna, considered by others as a vulgar bathroom fitting, yet carefully placed in a context that was likely to guarantee its status as a work of art and earn it an aesthetic significance.<sup>11</sup>

In the study of styles, or of the various significations associated with a single aesthetic reference across different places, a change in meaning can imply an alterity which renders comparison between an ‘original meaning’ and its degeneration largely irrelevant. Enric Bou's article on the Catalan variant of surrealism deployed towards the end of the 1920s by the author Josep Vicenç Foix and the young painter Salvador Dalí offers one such example.<sup>12</sup> Enric Bou shows how difference between the Catalan version and the original—if we can indeed speak of an ‘original’ with regards to surrealism—can only be fully understood by accounting for an intentional play on the distance between Barcelona and Paris that was essential to the local posture adopted by the two artists. Foix presented himself as the disinterested importer of a literary model, one which had yet to establish its monopoly in Paris.<sup>13</sup> Dalí meanwhile started out by appropriating

<sup>9</sup> Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, « Géopolitique des premiers readymades », *Revue de l'Art*, n°85/2014-3, 27-33 and *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1848-1918*.

<sup>10</sup> *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*, André Breton & Paul Éluard (ed.) (Paris : Galerie Beaux-Arts, 1938).

<sup>11</sup> Thierry De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism on Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Enric Bou, “From Foix to Dalí: Versions of Catalan Surrealism between Barcelona and Paris” <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/3/>.

<sup>13</sup> “On the delay between Surrealism's “Birth” in 1924 and its recognition as the owner of the word “surrealism”, see Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1918-1945*.

elements that the Parisian surrealists did not consider as central to their surrealist project, but which they would soon adopt as their own upon the Catalan painter's scandalous arrival in Paris.

More convincing than the notion of meaning's degeneration, then, is that of an enrichment of meaning. This is a phenomenon that is evoked with some regularity in studies of artists' travels abroad, occasions when they make new discoveries and encounter new approaches. It is a model which goes some way to explaining, for example, the aesthetic inflections of young Portuguese artists who travelled to Paris on study grants in the 1950s and 1960s – the focus of an article in this issue by Joana Baião.<sup>14</sup> This interpretative framework is ideal for shedding light upon the individuals studied, and corresponds to a system that valorises the emergence in centres (Paris, in this case) of artists who are supposedly 'behind' due to their peripheral position. However, it needn't necessarily correspond to such interpretations. According to the point of view we adopt, the beneficiaries or 'receivers' are different: Per Bäckström thus shows, in a deliberate decentring, that the happening scene in New York would never have been so dynamic without foreign personalities such as the Swedes Öyvind Fahlström and Billy Klüver.<sup>15</sup> Klüver in particular brought to New York a keen interest in ingenious mechanical engineering that he had developed in Sweden, and thus an approach that was radically new in an American context where artists dominated and engineers were altogether absent. The New York avant-garde was then being shaped by an aestheticizing critique which threatened to sever performance from its social and participative dimensions, with museums already expressing a growing interest in the art form. By bringing the possibility of incorporating new technological elements into artworks to the New York art scene, and to the international avant-

garde more generally – Klüver also worked with Jean Tinguely – the Swedish artist was the source of innovations that were more apt than any theory to realize the objectives of the generation of Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Andy Warhol—in particular with regards to the aleatory.

Resemanticization in circulation and through circulation can generate further meaning as new, altered meanings begin to circulate in turn, accompanied by individuals, objects, and texts and illustrations. An approach based on cultural transfers, which induces us to study circulation and the different translation of the same object across various contexts, ultimately reveals—beyond enrichments of meaning – the changes in context brought about by circulation, by both the circulation of artworks themselves and by this new productivity.<sup>16</sup> In order to understand this modification of contexts (rather than simply observing it), an approach drawing on anthropological tools can be useful. Elodie Vaudry offers one such an example of this method by reconsidering the thought of Alfred Gell on the agency of artefacts in order to better articulate how objects and elements from other places and times have, through their reproduction and the circulation of such reproductions, impacted the construction of artistic and collective, national identities since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as influenced? the invention of new decorative and sartorial styles in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Her article on books featuring collections of pre-Columbian decoration offers a fine example not only of the transnational manner in which one or several motifs can emerge, circulate, and be adapted and interpreted, but also of the way in which they inspire new aesthetic orientations in other contexts and other artistic mediums. She offers an exciting insight into the symbolic and real voyages of ornaments across the Atlantic—artists' sketches, scientific reproductions, drawing manuals, the circulation of artworks, the invention

<sup>14</sup> Joana Baião, "Six Portuguese Painters From Paris Revisited: Artistic Emigration From Portugal To Paris In The First Half Of The 1960s".

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/8>.

<sup>15</sup> Per Bäckström, "Kisses Sweeter than Wine. Öyvind Fahlström – the Swedish neo-avant-garde's driving force in New York".

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/9>.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Espagne, "La notion de transfert culturel", *Revue Sciences/Lettres* 1 | 2013, consulted June 2017. URL: <http://rsl.revues.org/219>; DOI: 10.4000/rsl.219.

<sup>17</sup> Elodie Vaudry, "Les recueils d'ornements latino-américains: Instrumentalisations nationales et internationales (1923 -1947)". <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/1>.

of new styles – throughout highly diverse contexts. These range from the invention of a ‘Latin American’ culture, to the mobilisation of pre-Columbian ‘pasts’ for the construction of identities and nations destined for Europe (by way of Universal Exhibitions or the donation of pre-Columbian objects to major European museums), to the export of motifs used in the milieu of fashion and decorative arts that were searching for exotic motifs that could renew their artisanal practices and confer upon them distinctive criteria, or even a primitive authenticity in the context of an industrial civilization ill at ease with itself.<sup>18</sup>

## Desires and Projections in Circulation

The power of art to elicit various forms of desire plays a central role in resemanticization: wherever a work circulates, it attracts such sentiments, as if by magnetism. The projection of one’s expectations onto an artwork or an art form is made all the easier when one is the sole actor introducing them into a social or cultural space. One such phenomenon that we can understand in terms of projection and desire is the Nietzschean reinterpretation of French post-impressionism in Germany, which allowed for the movement’s introduction into the neighbouring country and a relative consecration there; post-impressionism could then return to the Parisian scene and market, its stature boosted by this legitimacy earned abroad. Having discovered in this group of French avant-garde painters ready to entrust the promotion of their art to a third party—impressionist painters already had their champions—young German atheists found an art form with which to nourish their worldview; whether in the religious paintings of the fervent Catholic Maurice Denis or in the highly scientific divisionist compositions of the realist Paul Signac, it mattered little. Though both artists were well

aware that their work had not truly been understood on the other side of the Rhine, they did nothing to oppose such projections – thanks to which they were able to earn a living.<sup>19</sup>

Art’s capacity to function as the site of a projection of desire owes much to its symbolic function: free and a priori non-utilitarian, it lends itself perfectly to logics of social distinction, anthropological operations of gifting and counter-gifting, and to processes of mimetism.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, circulation itself can increase the power of desire, arousing often remarkable phenomena of spontaneous comparatism, jealousy, and collective imitation. The rhetoric underlying the axiom “no man is a prophet in his own land” thus accuses local scenes of an inability to recognize the genius in their midst and credits (sometimes in a highly rhetorical manner) other, foreign or external circles with the ‘discovery’ or comprehension of an artist or artwork; this is a highly effective means of increasing the symbolic legitimacy of artwork, and one which is impossible without a real or imagined circulation.<sup>21</sup> This kind of manipulation, conscious or otherwise, is to be found throughout numerous avant-garde discourses. It has long proved an effective means of inducing feelings of guilt in the supposedly unappreciative audiences and thus increasing the symbolic value of artworks; it is a logic still at work today in the contemporary art world. Only artists whose creations travel and circulate can benefit from such discourses and the legitimacy they afford.

From a sociological and economic point of view, circulation endows an artwork with a pedigree, a symbolic capital that has always been a desirable attribute in artistic milieu. The field of economics has only recently become sensitized to the importance of an artwork’s patrimonial density<sup>22</sup> – of which circulation is an important part. Sale histories compiled by auction houses or in

<sup>18</sup> Elody Vaudry, “Présence et usages des arts précolombiens dans les arts décoratifs français de 1875 à 1945”, PhD thesis, université de Paris-Nanterre, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> See Joyeux-Prunel, *Nul n’est prophète en son pays ?*

<sup>20</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction, Critique social du jugement* (Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1979) ; Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, coll. « Quadrige Grands textes », 2007) ; René Girard, *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953-2005*, Robert Doran ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> See Joyeux-Prunel, *Nul n’est prophète en son pays ?*

<sup>22</sup> Luc Boltanski & Arnaud Esquerré, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris : Gallimard, NRF Essais, 2017).

catalogues raisonnés contribute to this system in which a work becomes all the more desirable if it has, at some point in the past, belonged to a major institution or an illustrious collector. In auction catalogues in particular, an artwork's 'history' and 'provenance' – essential parameters when it comes to presenting it and justifying its price – are inevitably discussed in terms of three types of space: geographic, social, and artistic. For an example, we need only look to this extract from the sale catalogue concerning a work by Julio Gonzalez from an Artcurial auction that took place in Paris on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2012:<sup>23</sup>

Lot 33

**Julio GONZALEZ** (Barcelona, 1876 - Arcueil, 1942)

MASK, "LE POETE", 1929

Single piece of iron, wrought, cut, soldered on iron plaque mounted on wooden plaque signed and dated bottom right 'Gonzalez/1929'

Mask : 20,7 x 18,6 x 3,3 cm. (8,15 x 7,32 x 1,32 in.)

Iron plaque : 25,7 x 24,2 cm. (10,11 x 9,53 in.)

Wooden plaque : 28,4 x 26,8 x 2 cm. (11,18 x 10,55 x 0,79 in.)

Provenance : Roberta Gonzalez, L'Hay-les-Roses. Hans Hartung, Paris, Antibes. Galerie de France, Paris. Collection Jacques Hirsch, Neuilly-sur-Seine. Current owner by inheritance.

Exhibitions : Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, "Julio Gonzalez", 7 April - 10 May 1955, n°31. Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, "Julio Gonzalez", 20 May - 19 June 1955, n°31. Bern, Kunsthalle, "Julio Gonzalez", 2 July - 7 August 1955, n°18. La Chaux-de-Fonds, "Julio Gonzalez", 26 August - 25 September 1955, n°18. Hanover, Kestner Gesellschaft, "Julio Gonzalez", 1 November - 1 December 1957, n°18. Krefeld, Museum Haus Lange, "Julio Gonzalez", 15 December 1957 - 2 March 1958, n°18. Dortmund, Museum am Ostwall, "Julio Gonzalez", 13 April - 4 May 1958, n°18. Leverkusen, Städtisches Museum Schloss Morsbroich, May 1958, n°18. New York, Chalette Gallery, "Julio Gonzalez", 16 August - 28 September 1961, n°10.. [...]

## The Politics of Meaning

The last major pillar of studies of resemanticization is the enquiry into the sometimes conscious and intentional nature of such processes and the more or less direct vested interests of the actors behind them. *Cui bono?* The most obvious motives are often political ones, and

<sup>23</sup><https://www.artcurial.com/fr/asp/fullCatalogue.asp?salelot=2171+++++33+&rfno=10383050>, consulted June 15 2017.

the most frequent operation that of depoliticization as an artwork is transferred from one place to another, in particular when political institutions or museums are involved. This is somewhat self-evident: politics and the museum are unhappy bedfellows, and while the entry of certain works into the whitewashed spaces of the institution is, in and of itself, a depoliticization, more deliberate and direct strategies are sometimes deployed to similar ends. Such is the case of Mexican mural art, whose anti-imperialist origins were erased as it evolved towards easel paintings purchased by the Rockefeller Foundation explicitly for the MoMA.<sup>24</sup> "Mexican artists will cease to be 'reds' if we can get them artistic recognition,"<sup>25</sup> wrote the head of the Rockefeller Foundation to her superior in 1930. To prove her point, she cited the case of Diego Rivera, who had recently been awarded a prize by the American Institute of Architects (backed by Rockefeller's officials), and who now benefitted from a commission for a mural from the ambassador of the United States to Mexico. She suggested that they might now extend their attention to David Alfaro Siqueiros, the most ardent of Mexico's revolutionary artists.

Depoliticization is not, however, the necessary conclusion of a successful artistic trajectory, and not all of the artists whose works fill our museums have suffered this fate. As Claudia Grego March's article exploring the case of Antoni Tàpies shows, artwork can be interpreted variously according to the interests of those who are displaying it, with or without compromises on the part of the artist – who can nonetheless profit from the symbolic gains yielded by early adaptations.<sup>26</sup> Her study of the international trajectory and resemanticizations of the Catalan artist's *Croix de journal* (1946-1947) reveals how, in the 1940s, Tàpies allowed readings of his work to take shape

<sup>24</sup> See Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989) and Anna Indych-Lopez, *Muralism without Walls. Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Frances Paine to Rockefeller, 13 August 1930, cited by Jeffrey Belnap, 'Diego Rivera's Greater America Pan-American Patronage, Indigenism, and H.P.', *Cultural Critique* n. 63 (Spring 2006): 74.

<sup>26</sup> Claudia Grego March, 'Magie, Terre et Cri. Les resémantisations politiques de l'œuvre d'Antoni Tàpies sous le franquisme' <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/10>.

against the backdrop of a conservative and nationalist Spain that was nonetheless keen to maintain a notion of interior freedom that took form in abstract and *matérialiste* paintings. This state of affairs allowed Tàpies, from the 1950s onwards, to carve out an enviable niche as a representative of a Spanish modern art with deep roots in the past that would in turn propel him onto the art markets of Europe and New York. There, emancipated from the yoke of Francoist institutions, the painter could gradually position himself in symbolic opposition to the regime of his home country, to become one of the most prominent heirs to the ageing Picasso in the 1970s.

Sometimes artworks are reinterpreted in terms of an artist's reaching intellectual, artistic, or political maturity, as determined by the artist's age, experience, and ability to negotiate more or less effectively their position in a cultural and political environment that is not necessarily hospitable to them. We could thus compare the position of the prominent Hungarian avant-garde artist Lajos Kassák, who returned to the country after years in exile, with that of a younger generation whose work was dismissed by both the Hungarian left and right in the early 1930s due to its lack of adaptability.<sup>27</sup> As Éva Forgács details in her article, it is paradoxically often those that adhere most unwaveringly to avant-garde tenets— intransigence and a refusal to adapt one's discourse—who are excluded from canonical histories. We might well ask what would have become of Pablo Picasso without the constant translations and adaptations organized by his art dealer Daniel Henry Kahnweiler.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, the resemanticization of an artwork, a movement, or an artist, is often an intentional process and an indispensable step on the road to success, whether it aims at self-promotion or at reaching new audiences. The example of Tàpies, of

Wassily Kandinsky in Paris after 1933, or that, more striking still, of 'degenerate' artists exiled to Paris from 1937 onwards all show the extent to which artists themselves have carefully paid attention to the perception of their work and have sought to ensure that it be seen in the most favourable light possible. While one perspective on Kandinsky's work (that held by Alfred H. Barr) sees his work after 1933 in terms of the influence of his Parisian milieu, it is equally possible to argue—as does Kate C. Kangaslahti—that his movement towards sensual forms reminiscent of Miró and Arp stemmed from imperatives that were in fact internal to his oeuvre and that had been stymied by his first exile at the Bauhaus.<sup>29</sup> But Kandinsky's trajectory towards an elusive abstraction was also an intelligent strategy that ensured he remain palatable to all of the different groups that made up Paris' avant-garde scene at the time. Toeing a fine line between the geometric abstraction promoted by Abstraction-Création on the one hand, and the new orientations of Parisian surrealism increasingly open to abstraction as an extension of automatism (not least because it was looking to distinguish itself from the renegade Dalí) on the other, Kandinsky's new paintings were open to multiple interpretations; they could be adapted to a variety of ends, and suited equally well Michel Seuphor, who was looking to constitute an abstract international in the midst of ongoing economic and symbolic crises, and André Breton, who was jubilant at the prospect of laying claim to international heavyweight. This strategy was vital for Kandinsky, whose future was far from certain and who desperately needed to find favour in Paris in order to survive the hardship of the Great Depression. A collective study of the 'degenerate' artists who arrived in France from 1937 onwards reveals a stark contrast between the proactive Kandinsky, who was able to paint 'for all', and these more recent arrivals who struggled to understand the expectations and the context in Paris and whose welcome was anything but warm. It is possible to trace the attempts of the

<sup>27</sup> Éva Forgács, "Unwanted by Both the Political Left and Right: Interwar Europe's Hungarian Migrating Artists". <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/4>.

<sup>28</sup> B. Joyeux-Prunel, "La construction internationale de l'aura de Picasso avant 1914. Expositions différenciées et processus mimétiques" conference paper from *Revoir Picasso* (Paris: musée Picasso, March 2015) and "Den Kubisten ausstellen, ohne Kubismus?" in *Picasso und Deutschland* (Kunsthalle Würth, 2016), 258-273.

<sup>29</sup> Kate C. Kangaslahti, "Nothing to do With Politics, Only Art? On Wassily Kandinsky's Work in Paris, from 1934 until the Outbreak of the War". <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/5>.

'degenerates' to determine which interpretation of their work they ought to foreground and how they best ought to communicate it.<sup>30</sup> With her rigorous archival research, H el ene Duret ably takes reception studies beyond the study of who was paying attention to what (i.e. in the press) to reconstitute the differential positions of exiled German artists and to understand their hesitations as to how to define their collective identity in Paris. Were they modern artists, political exiles, or 'degenerates'? What message should they vehicle in order to raise awareness of and promote their cause? And how would they sell their work—how would they earn a living—in this context?

Circulations can enrich the meaning proper of certain works, as opposed to simply upping their symbolic or commercial value. The reputation of Picasso's *Guernica* would surely be a shadow of what it is today had the painting only been exhibited in the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris and not on the various international tours that endowed it with its universal significance.<sup>31</sup>

The attribution of meaning to an artwork, an oeuvre, a movement, and the monopoly over this attribution, carry serious political weight. From a collective point of view, the decision-making milieux in artistic 'centres' have long reinterpreted migrations and transfers from peripheral regions to shore up their creative and symbolic hegemony. The historian must resituate these resemanticizations and those responsible for them in such a way as to deconstruct the hierarchies which underlie them and which they perpetuate. At the same time, however, we must bear in mind the fact that, whatever their position, individual actors are rarely passive, be they mediators or artists themselves. By studying key moments and contexts and by identifying the actions, questions

and choices of individuals, we can reconstruct the conscious or unconscious strategies wherein the reinterpretation of art figures as a weapon of choice. Resemanticizations are sometimes carried out to ends that are at once commercial and symbolic by interested parties looking to introduce a particular kind of art into a specific social and cultural field—postimpressionism, cubism, or New York painting from the 1950s to the 1970s all offer examples of this.<sup>32</sup> The ramifications of such phenomena are often political.

The study of artistic resemanticizations can help art historians to rid themselves of certain na ive reflexes, and most importantly to do away with pernicious logics that our profession all too often allows to go unchecked and sometimes even perpetuates. Art historians must bear no small part of the blame for the historical and ongoing symbolic hegemony of the United States over world culture. We have regularly (mis)taken nationalist readings of artwork for self-evident interpretations; yet even a minimal effort at establishing some 'circulatory' critical distance quickly reveals such discourses to be the result of circulation and strategies of resemanticization. To give just one example, in the 1940s and 1950s, abstract expressionism was considered as 'typically American' only in the artistic milieu of New York; Peter Schneeman's brilliant analysis shows that it was only thanks to a social construction and the complicity of the liberal U.S. press that this nationalist interpretation came to prevail.<sup>33</sup> In Europe, by way of contrast, there was no hint that the work emanating from the circles of *art informel*—circles in which abstract expressionism was also present—had anything to do with a national style.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> H el ene Duret, « D eg en er es » en France. Tentatives de D efinition d'une Identit e collective par les Artistes Germaniques exil es en France   la Fin des Ann es 1930'. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol6/iss2/6>.

<sup>31</sup> Gijs van Hensbergen, *Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). Conserved during the war, with Picasso's permission, at MoMA in New York, the work was shown in 1940 in Chicago, then in 1941 and 1942 in several American museums. In 1953, it left its American retirement on a tour that symbolically began with the 2<sup>nd</sup> S ao Paulo Biennial, in an emerging 'peripheral' country. Then *Guernica* returned to Europe (with a major success in October 1953, at the *Palazzo Reale* in Milan). In 1955-1956, it toured Cologne, Paris, Munich, Brussels, Stockholm, Hamburg and Amsterdam.

<sup>32</sup> On the first movements, see Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques*. On the USA see Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s, A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Peter Johannes Schneemann, *Von der Apologie zur Theoriebildung: die Geschichtsschreibung des Abstrakten Expressionismus* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003). On the support of the liberal press of the USA for abstract expressionism Serge Guilbaut, *How New York stole the idea of modern art: abstract expressionism, freedom, and the cold war*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>34</sup> Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art*.

Another comparable example, one that also forms part of the symbolic victory of ‘American’ art on the world stage in the 1960s, and by extension is part of the construction of the modernist canon, is the way in which the generation which spearheaded this coup was portrayed as being representative of the United States as a whole—despite its being largely confined to New York. Again, circulation and resemanticization are at work here. Robert Rauschenberg’s coronation at the 1964 Venice Biennial, where he was awarded the Grand Prix, represents the climax of the United States’ symbolic victory. We now know that the attribution of the prize to Rauschenberg was at least in part the result of considerable efforts by Rauschenberg’s gallerist, Leo Castelli, and the organizer of the U.S.A. pavilion, Alan Solomon.<sup>35</sup> The pair’s thundering declarations in the international press sought to assert the inevitability of the U.S.A’s victory over an outmoded Europe whose avant-garde’s had no hope of attaining the lofty heights represented by Rauschenberg and his work. The undeniable quality of Rauschenberg’s work was thus extended, by a metonymic sleight of hand, to become that of all U.S. art. Yet in reality, when they awarded the prize to Rauschenberg, the juries were merely honouring the sole representative at the Biennale of a broader trend that they had supported since its emergence in the late 1950s: whether as a new realism or a postdadaism, this current was pursued by avant-gardes in Paris (notably the New Realism of Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Arman, and César), Milan (in particular Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and Enrico Castellani), Antwerp (the Nul group), and West Germany (the Zero group). Rauschenberg had collaborated and worked alongside numerous artists from this generation,<sup>36</sup> exhibited with them,<sup>37</sup> was friends with several of them, and had travelled in Europe in the early 1950s in defiance of the patriotic isolationism of the New York milieu. Since then, he had drawn on many of the

same *matérialiste* references as the likes of Klein, Tinguely, Manzoni, and Piene; like these European counterparts, he had been inspired by Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Burri, as well as by the heritage of Duchamp and Dada. Just as the Europeans were frustrated by the success of lyrical abstraction, Rauschenberg was out of step with the New York scene and with abstract expressionism, and had moved towards a *matérialiste* and deindividualized realism that broke with a model whose paragon was abstract painting. Rauschenberg’s oeuvre, along with other representatives of what was then called ‘neo-dadaism’—Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, and Claes Oldenburg—had taken form in an almost systematically antinomic fashion, refusing the artist’s gesture and individualism, making constant reference to Europe and to Dada, working on discarded objects and on the past, and according to a collective and interdisciplinary practice.<sup>38</sup> A similar development had taken place in Europe around the cohort made up of Klein, Manzoni, Tinguely, Piene, Macke and others. Castelli and Solomon had wilfully interpreted—and the U.S. press dutifully represented—Rauschenberg’s reputation and oeuvre as ‘Made in the U.S.A.’ when in reality it had been constructed *against* the ‘American’ modern at that had dominated the United States since the end of the 1940s and against the international modern art that held sway over the international art market. It was in Europe that the reaction against lyrical abstraction found institutions and collectors ready, willing, and able to support it, and it was in Europe that Rauschenberg had enjoyed a warm reception.<sup>39</sup> Yet his backers interpreted this recognition as a collective domination of Europe by the U.S.A. From one side of the Atlantic to the other, then, Rauschenberg’s oeuvre underwent a series of reinterpretations which suited the interests of a gallerist and a pavilion curator as they joined the battle for global cultural dominance. The U.S.A. would eventually win this

<sup>35</sup> See Annie Cohen-Solal, *Leo Castelli et les Siens* (Paris : Gallimard, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> See for example. Wetzel, Roland & Dumett, Mari (ed.), *Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Tinguely: Collaborations* (Basel: Museum Tinguely / Kerber Verlag, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Rauschenberg exhibited with the surrealists in 1959; in 1960 he met the Nouveaux Réalistes, exhibiting and working with them, between Paris and New York.

<sup>38</sup> On this subject see Johnson, Steven (ed.) *The New York schools of music and visual arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> The first museum to acquire his work was the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, in 1964.

battle, but only at a rather later date than canonical histories tend to indicate: it was in the 1960s, and largely thanks to the phenomenon of transfer that intensified with the much trumpeted exportation of pop art (in the form of work by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Tom Wesselmann) to Europe from 1964 onwards in the wake of Rauschenberg's Venetian coup; as a result, pop art was soon adopted as a new national art by the art lovers of U.S., as Catherine Dossin has so convincingly shown.<sup>40</sup> This new art form vehicled an image of a modern, emancipated, young, and dynamic society, and spread internationally as part and parcel of the global fascination with the 'American Way of Life' that it seemed to herald. Rauschenberg himself cared little for the New York scene and after 1964 preferred to travel outside the U.S.A.<sup>41</sup> If the art of States won the symbolic victory in the battle for artistic domination, this was not due to any intrinsic strength, nor was it the result of the nation's economic superiority, nor of its position as the self-appointed 'defender' of 'democracy' in the Cold War: it was down to an effective strategy put into effect by the country's dealers and museums that promoted a new, New York-based generation, from neo-dadaists to pop artists, that reinterpreted the European welcome of neo-dada, shamelessly mediated Rauschenberg's grand prix in Venice in 1964 as a national triumph, and finally bet on the commercial success of an affordable and sexy pop art.

The geopolitics of meaning and of resemanticization are as powerful as ever, and the role of art in these logics remains solid. The monarchies of the Gulf states perhaps best exemplify this phenomenon today, having pivoted in just a few short years from the financial and economic pages of newspapers to the culture section, despite the fact that their headline projects remain for the most part empty shells and

3D-renderings rather than concrete artistic realizations.<sup>42</sup>

## The Object, Every Which Way

After this panorama, we must confront an aporia: that of the object, of what exactly it is that circulates, of what can and cannot serve as a vessel for meaning. Artistic resemanticization, whether approached through reception studies, cultural transfers or circulatory and comparative, political, or sociological re-readings, is in general a matter of textual, oral, or discursive sources. It is less common to trace resemanticization through visual clues that point to circulations and the production of meaning—reproductions in auction and exhibition catalogues and in magazines, photographs of exhibitions, postcards, engravings, and so on. Rarer still are studies which deal with artworks themselves and on their direct visual and material properties. Must we therefore resign ourselves to leaving the original to one side when we study resemanticization? Surely not, when it is the work itself that serves, a priori, as the referent of meaning, however much meaning might vary. We must therefore question here what it is that an interrogation of the original work of art can bring to the study of resemanticization, and to what extent circulation is manifest in the object itself.

A study of the changes in meaning of objects, and of their presence in objects at a time of globalized culture, benefits already from the contributions of a connected and global world history, in particular for the modern<sup>43</sup> and medieval<sup>44</sup> periods. Here it is a question of the recuperation of objects from distant lands, transcontinental fabrication for populations with an unsated taste for exoticism (a fashionable, European exoticism), the transition from one use to another: feathers from native American rituals that are incorporated into episcopal finery before entering cabinets of

<sup>40</sup> Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art* and "To Drip or to Pop? The European Triumph of American Art," *The Artl@s Bulletin* 3, 1 (Spring 2014.): 79-103. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol3/iss1/8/>

<sup>41</sup> Ikegami, Hiroko, *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the global rise of American art* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Alexandre Kazerouni, *Le miroir des cheikhs. Musée et politique dans les principautés du Golfe Persique* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, coll. Moyen Orient, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> See the exemplary work of Serge Gruzinski, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, and Romain Bertrand.

<sup>44</sup> Another exemplary work is Finbarr Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2009).

curiosities and personal collections and finally ethnographic museums, for example. Objects evolve through additions, removals, modification, repairs and updates in line with contemporary tastes: so many modifications in which the usage and the meaning, often inextricably linked, can change entirely.

Such transcultural approaches can inspire studies not only of individual objects and their circulation, but also of clearly identifiable motifs within works—the appearance of a particular kind of bird or of landscape in a particular kind of painting, for example. When the works in a given corpus are figurative, or when dealing with recognizable ornaments like the pre-Columbian motifs discussed in this issue<sup>45</sup> or the ‘Ghana Boy’ embroidery in a previous volume,<sup>46</sup> such an approach is highly pertinent. It can also help us think about questions of recuperation that have been fairly present in contemporary art since the end of the 1950s.

These methods do not, of course, directly pose the question as to the nature of the circulations of an individual object, except when it is possible to demonstrate that supplementary elements have been added discontinuously, at different moments and places. However, we can consider how, on a collective level, methodologies of tracking based on the traceability of material elements internal to artworks could allow us to envisage a long and broad history of the circulation of motifs between places and contexts. Such methodologies could shed further light on questions that are too frequently approached by way of under-theorized jargon, such as those relating to the diffusion of styles, or influence, as well as the circulation of artistic practices and the choice of materials (painting, sculpture, photography, tapestry) and the meanings associated with them.

Large databases such as ARTL@S, which indexes, dates, and geolocalizes exhibition catalogues, allow us to cross-reference material information

associated with artworks as they circulate (medium, format, reproductions) with elements that are rich in meaning such as titles, subtitles, names of artists, and articles by critics discussing them.<sup>47</sup> From this starting point, we can trace patterns of circulation over long time periods, and eventually shed light upon concrete trends and mechanisms of diffusion with which we should be able to test or improve upon the doubtful hypotheses that lie at the heart of the modernist canon. One example amongst many others could be the notion of cubism’s international spread outwards from Paris, that tends to disregard futurism, or the diffusion of impressionism, geometric abstraction, or lyrical abstraction.<sup>48</sup>

When it comes to resemanticization, words have an important role to play, particularly in the titles of works; it would be a shame to consider them as separate from the materiality of the work. The title is made up of words, of sounds, and many an artist has taken this into consideration. And just as many works of art contain words, plays on sounds and their interpretation are often important in the construction of meaning. For an example, we could return once more to *Fountain*. The signature ‘R. Mutt’ inscribed on the edge of the urinal appears frequently in traditional exegeses of Duchamp’s work.<sup>49</sup> The link has been made between the name and that of a major North American manufacturer of sanitary equipment, *Mott Iron Works*. In this light, the urinal signifies the death knell of artistic innovation in the face of the industrial forms of modernity. The fact that the Mott brand was a U.S. one has similarly elicited interpretations of the urinal as a derisive gesture aimed squarely at European tradition. Posterity has also encouraged us to read ‘R. Mutt’ as an example of Duchamp’s love of wordplay, citing its proximity with the German word ‘*Armut*’, ‘poverty’. Here, we are told, is an allusion to the economy of means of Duchamp’s new aesthetic. From a circulatory point of view, however, and taking into account the various phonemes that can be associated with ‘R.

<sup>45</sup> Vaudry, “Les recueils d’ornements latino-américains.”

<sup>46</sup> Victoria L. Rovine, “Style Migrations: South-South Networks of African Fashion.” *Artl@s Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (2016): Article 4 (<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol5/iss2/4/>).

<sup>47</sup> [www.artlas.ens.fr](http://www.artlas.ens.fr)

<sup>48</sup> I am citing an ongoing, unpublished project using Biennial catalogues.

<sup>49</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see my work, *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1848-1918*, 677-682.

Mutt', readings can differ. A German pronunciation of 'Mutt' could well give us the word 'Armut', but only on the condition that the 'R.' initial be pronounced in English; yet Duchamp's accent was not English, but French. 'R-Mutt', re-read as a German word pronounced with a French accent gives 'Ehre-Mut'. 'Ehre und Mutt' is a German expression that Duchamp could well have known from his stay in Germany at the height of Pan-German nationalism, when it was a common slogan meaning 'honour and courage', one on a par with the notorious 'Blut und Boden', 'blood and soil'. This political interpretation suggests Duchamp decided to plaster the macho, bellicose, and racist slogan of the enemy of the day on a urinal, and thus to transfigure Germany's war heroes into a band of inglorious—incontinent—males. It could also have been an ironic posture on the part of Duchamp, a means of critiquing the neutralist positions of certain avant-garde milieu or even the pro-German photographer Alfred Stieglitz. All this illustrates how the sonority of a word incorporated into an artwork can differ across different sites of exegesis and have a genuine impact on the understanding of a work and its evolutions.

As for the title, we already know that the 'fabrication' titles plays a decisive role in the reception of any artwork.<sup>50</sup> Changes to a title inevitably lead to alterations in the production of its meaning. We have shown elsewhere how this can take place using the example of the changes made to the titles of works by Paul Signac as they were exhibited in Paris and in Brussels. In the former city, the titles pointed to a desire to integrate Signac's work into a tradition of French landscape painting. That same year, just a few months later, the same paintings were shown once more in Brussels in exhibitions linked to the Salon des Vingt, this time with symbolist inflected titles that explicitly referenced the musical activities of this Salon.<sup>51</sup> Calling upon the methodologies of

translation studies and linguistics could aid us to better understand the role of resemanticizing translations, helping us to differentiate between conventional translations and more telling choices. To do so would lead us towards more recent studies on the effects of translation within the history of art itself and the various differences in comprehension that result,<sup>52</sup> according to whether a given work is interpreted in line with a concept drawn from the artist's language or from a translation which could modify the meaning of the concept in question. To the extent that the history of art and of aesthetics has often followed or sought to follow evolutions in the domain of philosophy, the task at hand here is a daunting one. An update is needed, for example, to studies of the effects of approximate translations in the constitution of philosophical schools: this is particularly pressing for German philosophy in France,<sup>53</sup> and for 'French Theory' in North America,<sup>54</sup> whose jargon has become an essential requirement for any art historical writing that aspires to even the slightest gloss of 'sophistication'.

Artistic resemanticization is not a field of endless possibilities, 'limited' as it is to the materiality and reality of artworks: reinterpretation can only go so far, and resemanticization remains subject to the existence of certain—dare we still use the term?—*facts*: colour, size, materials, form, contrasts. However, this holds true only in instances where artworks have not been overtaken by their more famous or more visible reproductions (black and white images, flattening, loss of sense of scale, texture, or material, etc.).

(October 2007), 857-885. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-historique-2007-4-page-857.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> The history of art has depended on translation since its origins, from Greek and Latin translations for the antique period, Latin and Italian and their variants during the Renaissance, French for Les Lumières and modern art, without forgetting the long domination of German in the discipline's historiography until the mid-20th century before the advent of anglophone hegemony. See Iain Boyd Whyte, Claudia Heide, « Histoire de l'art et traduction », *Diogenes*, 2010/3 (n° 231), p. 60-73. DOI : 10.3917/dio.231.0060. URL : <http://www.cairn.info/revue-diogene-2010-3-page-60.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> One of the first works published on cultural transfers mentions the transfer of texts and philosophical notions from the German-speaking world to the francophone one: Michel Espagne & Michael Werner (ed.), *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe-XIXe siècles)* (Paris : Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988).

<sup>54</sup> François Cusset, *French Theory. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris : Éditions La Découverte, 2003).

<sup>50</sup> Pierre-Marc de Biasi, Marianne Jakobi & Ségolène Le Men (ed.), *La Fabrique du titre. Nommer les œuvres d'art* (Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> B. Joyeux-Prunel, "L'internationalisation de la peinture avant-gardiste, de Courbet à Picasso : un transfert culturel et ses quiproquos", *Revue historique*, CCCIX/4

Objects are also actors, in the Latourian sense that holds objects to be active parts of the wider networks that participate in actions.<sup>55</sup> Why should a work of art not participate in the creation of meaning, first and foremost its own, and in its modification by way of transfers? The arrival of certain works (as with other kinds of artefact) in new contexts can introduce a difference—or even a conflict – that will have an impact on its existing meaning. What an artwork vehicles is, of course, not intrinsic to itself, since difference is most often perceived by way of comparison with something else: this is the case for the majority of artworks that make up modernism’s chronology of rupture, from *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* and its exhibition at the Salon des Refusés in 1863 (under the title, *Le Bain*, which was more provocative) to Monet’s 1873 *Impression, soleil levant* or the brightly coloured canvases of the fauves at the 1905 Salon d’Automne. Yet without the presence of the work itself, none of these impacts or meanings could come about, nor could the boomerang effect that leaves a durable impression on an artefact. The artwork, the artefact which circulates—that which is seen, compared, interpreted, lost from view but memorized, reproduced, exhibited once again, compared and reinterpreted according to memories of what has been said, seen, understood or misunderstood, memories that can be stronger or fainter, more or less accurate—circulates according to the complex and turbulent system of signs, meanings, and memories by which an observer’s attention is caught. The artwork is thus an actor in a social game, both by its appearance and the meaning attributed to it at a given place and time and by the semantic richness of its circulatory history.

## The Palimpsest

We can thus consider an artwork that circulates – perhaps every artwork, then – as a palimpsest, in every sense of the term: as a *text* created from

multiple texts written and rewritten one on top of the other, by many hands, with older and more recent words next to one another, inflecting and altering one another’s meaning; and as an *object* that has passed from one cultural or material context, one owner or artist, one era, to the next; that has been recopied (reproduced) in one way and then in another, preserved and observed, then scratched away, repurposed, shown in this way and that, here and there; that is today conserved, often jealously (in a museum or a collection for an artwork, or in a library for a palimpsest)—but also reproduced, analysed, interpreted and reinterpreted.

To consider the artwork as a palimpsest and not only as an image is to open up the possibility of searching its materials and components for traces of its circulation and the changes that it has undergone, elements that could also be revealing in terms of the evolutions in its content and its meaning. Working in such a fashion is far from common in the history of art; ours is a field which, despite the many pages dedicated to the return of the object,<sup>56</sup> tends to study photos or reproductions—mouldings at best—of original objects that are often inaccessible, and whose transformation into images—no matter how great the quality of these—can mask the effects of time and circulation. By way of example, we could look the presence of a fly in Dürer’s *Feast of the Rosary* (1506), which resulted in a number of articles before it was shown that the insect was only added some time after the painting’s composition.<sup>57</sup>

In a palimpsest, one image can obscure another: if images are sometimes double, this is not necessarily because of their intrinsic properties, as in the case of anamorphoses and potential images, expertly detailed in 2009 by Dario Gamboni and Jean-Hubert Martin, demonstrates so well.<sup>58</sup> It is also because it is far from impossible that two

<sup>55</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to the Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> For the modern period, see the excellent article by Charlotte Guichard, “Image, art, artefact au xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle: l’histoire de l’art à l’épreuve de l’objet”, *Perspective* 1 | 2015. URL : <http://perspective.revues.org/5805> ; DOI : 10.4000/perspective.5805.

<sup>57</sup> Georg Ulrich Grossmann , “Le défi de l’objet. Le Congrès de 2012 à Nuremberg”, *Diogenes*, 2010/3 (n° 231), 207-220. DOI : 10.3917/dio.231.0207. URL : <http://www.cairn.info/revue-diogene-2010-3-page-207.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> *Une image peut en cacher une autre. Arcimboldo – Dali – Raetz*, Jean-Hubert Martin, Dario Gamboni ed., cat. exhib. (Paris : Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, 2009).

contradictory receptions can intersect and mingle with one another. The way in which Daniel Arasse explains Titian's *Venere di Urbino* (1538) using Manet's *Olympia* (1863) reveals the complex weaves of time and space that can sometimes take shape in the history of art.<sup>59</sup> Such back-and-forth movement between eras is more common than we might think, and implies more geographical transfers than we might imagine. No theory of the ready-made could have been retrospectively applied to Duchamp's *Roue de bicyclette* (1913) had the artist not travelled to New York and discussed his work with his friend Walter Arensberg or cracked his joke with *Fountain* in 1917 and Stieglitz's 'Madonna of the Bathroom' photograph. And what if this photograph had not been circulated in various Dada revues? Certainly little would have come of the ready-made had it not been picked up years later by the Parisian surrealists and André Breton in particular in the 1930s, at a moment when the relations of power were shifting within the movement as Dalí and dalínism grew in prominence after 1934. For the ready-made's semiology to truly take root, André Breton's late definition needed to be accepted; this was not a problem at the end of the 1930s as surrealism assumed a prime position in the international avant-garde and an enviable position spanning the most prestigious networks of art dealers. The ready-made would also need to respond to generational challenges, as it did at the end of the 1950s when an entire cohort of artists became aware of the creative and commercial dead end of abstraction. Duchamp would also have to first be acknowledged as a common reference for this new generation, a figure capable of federating young artists on both sides of the Atlantic along with those disillusioned by international surrealism, now ossified by Breton's Stalinist tendencies. The final condition for the ready-made's success was its description, explanation, and presentation to potential buyers—for the most part newly opened museums of modern art, keen to display history of art in the making and for whom the ready-made

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Arasse, *On n'y voit rien : descriptions* (Paris: Denoël, 2005).

represented an important and ideal ancestor. Between the steps of this epic of circulation and production of meaning—beginning in 1917, continuing through the 1930s and then the 1950s and 1960s, with a final twist back to modify the interpretation of an object created in Paris in 1913 (*Roue de bicyclette*) and recreated in the 1960s for commercial ends<sup>60</sup> – other spatio-temporal factors were at play, as the corpus of ready-mades was bolstered by new generations who dutifully cited Duchamp's original wheel.<sup>61</sup>

The palimpsest is also to be thought of in material terms, as time damages objects that must be repaired and reframed, or as a museum curator switches one plinth for another in line with the style of his exhibition space. The frame, in particular, can change a great deal: think of the contrast between a painting in a 'bourgeois', gilded, plaster frame and an unframed canvas. In the case of the history of Claude Monet's cathedrals, the objects tell quite the story for the observant and patient curator.<sup>62</sup> Placed with varying proximity to the work, labels and wall texts will differ from one exhibition to the next, according to the theme of the exhibition; the imaginary museum in which the name of the artist and the artwork are inscribed, which corresponds more or less closely to that of the visitor, will also contribute to the construction of meaning. All this makes the art object an unstable element—a troublesome, squirming child who refuses to sit still on its plinth inside the white cube.

For as long as circulation continues, the process of creation can be an ongoing one, and resemanticization does not end with an artwork's entry into the museum. The museum itself confers a meaning that is at least double: on the one hand, it bestows upon a work an aura of universality and of undisputable quality, ushering it into the canon,

<sup>60</sup> Having lost the original version, Duchamp apparently fabricated one in New York. A 1951 version at MoMA was created for Sidney Janis. A fourth was made in 1960 for the Moderna Musset in Stockholm by Ulf Linde and Ultvedt; a fifth by the artist Richard Hamilton in London in 1963. In 1964 commercial editions began: 8 were made by the Galerie Schwarz in Milan, with Duchamp's approval. Two supplementary editions were made for Duchamp and Schwartz. The last known example was created in 1964 and gifted to the Philadelphia Museum by Schwarz.

<sup>61</sup> In particular Robert Rauschenberg, in e.g. *Charlene*, 1954 (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)

<sup>62</sup> Bénédicte Trémolières, *Éléments pour une histoire matérielle de l'impressionnisme : les Cathédrales de Claude Monet*, Ph. D. diss. Univ. de Rouen & de Nanterre, 2016.

often with the (received) idea that it has a single interpretation or meaning; on the other, the museum functions as a site of pilgrimage, integrating work and artist alike into a spiral of collective, quasi-religious expiation, whether intentionally or otherwise. The notion that institutional consecration of an unjustly misunderstood artwork has come *at last* is inescapable, drummed into visitors by guides, audio tours, and wall texts...

Even when the artwork is supposedly removed from circulation by its entry into the museum, the world continues to circulate around it, and semantic evolution continues. What would the Joconde be without the space-time of tourists from the world over, the camera flashes and umbrellas jostling for position around a glass cube inaccessible even for children? She would perhaps not have become the icon that she is today: a sought-after presence, a must-see even when, in reality we see very little of her, an image that circulates, a story that is told and retold, a novel that is written and that becomes itself the framework of other tales, other dreams. And what about the artworks that have undergone various assaults and acts of violence within the museum, only to emerge with an increased symbolic power?

## Conclusion

To investigate resemanticization is to see artworks as perpetually restless objects; it is also, if we limit ourselves to reception studies alone, to risk transforming every discourse surrounding art or a given artwork into one of its reception. We hope to have shown here how this pitfall can be avoided through an approach that is material and contextual, and that foregrounds circulation in such a way as to go beyond a consideration of differences between a single point of departure and a single point of arrival. There can be no general theory of resemanticization in artistic circulation. Even the task of describing and locating sources, juggling text and image, spaces and times, and attempting to understand what is at

play in each, proves to be a highly complex one. Resemanticization involves multiple parameters which complicate considerably the historian's task: phenomena of ekphrasis that vary across places and milieux, spaces and times, languages, cultures, and histories; games of ambiguity and visual communication that must be pinned down despite a dearth of effective tools to do so; logics of translation and adaptation that act more or less subtly and inflect the meaning of words; strategies of adaptation and manipulation that are often relatively easy to identify—leading at times to an overrepresentation of studies revealing political, sociological, and commercial motivations for works' reinterpretation; projections of individual and collective desire; patterns of symbolic and memorial accumulation: the list goes on.

Yet this very complexity attests to the worth of studies which take into account multiple factors and dimensions, and which splice methods from the history of art with those from translation studies, geography, semiotics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy to create a hybrid approach that often reflects the skills and interest of the historian. A piece of information, a meeting, a word or a discourse, an exhibition, an appearance in a given place or a given image, an object, an encounter with an individual or another artwork—how do such factors create new ideas, new images, new words, new meanings? This kind of duplicative 'autophagy' might seem almost magical, but it must be studied, even at the risk of dispelling some of this miraculous aura; and anyhow, surely some magic remains present in the voyage through space and time that an investigation into circulation necessitates. Magic is also to be found in the surprises, in the contrast between the story as we know it and the story we discover, and in the acrobatics that we sometimes must undertake to carry out our task of reconstitution: so many elements that give a very particular flavour to the discoveries that we make along the way, and allow for a new appreciation of our objects of study.