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About the Destruction, Continuation, and Transformation of Art

Frank Maet
Leuven University

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Abstract: In his article "About the Destruction, Continuation, and Transformation of Art" Frank Maet offers an answer to the question raised by Arthur C. Danto's thesis how to discern art from non-art? Maet considers art from the perspective of a technologically mediated reality and he distinguishes three different views on contemporary visual art: the destruction, the continuation, and the transformation of art. Maet considers these three artistic views as different strategies to deal with our current technological condition and evaluates the merits of each of them. He argues that our thoroughly designed reality turns the strategy of artistic destruction into a dangerous and sometimes even life-threatening strategy and that existing theories of art advocating the continuation of art fall short in taking into account popular and commercial products. According to Maet, we have to opt for a radical transformation of the concept of art and redefine art in light of the current digitalization as a specific kind of technology.

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Frank MAET

About the Destruction, Continuation, and Transformation of Art

In contemporary art, we are confronted with works of art presenting destruction and self-destruction as creation. Often these works differ in no real sense from plain vandalism against art and even from vandalism per se. Taking these expressions of violence against art as a starting point, I turn to Arthur C. Danto's thesis of the end of art and the fundamental question of how to discern art from non-art. I consider this question from the perspective of our currently thoroughly designed reality. Nowadays almost everything is designed: our nature and our lives. This makes it difficult to distinguish what is fabricated from what is not, and it blurs the difference between art and non-art. Both artistic and non-artistic products are technologically designed. In this article, I propose three different views on contemporary art: the destruction, the continuation, and the transformation of art. I consider these three artistic views as different strategies to deal with our current technological condition.

In 2004, one of the cleaners of Tate Britain threw away — accidently — a bag of rubbish that was part of an installation by Gustav Metzger ("Cleaner" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3604278.stm>). The act of the cleaner is not an isolated event in the art world. For example, in 2001 a work of Damien Hirst was disposed of: the installation consisted of trash such as beer bottles and ashtrays (the idea was to represent the chaos of the studio of the artist) and the cleaner thought that the bottles and ashtrays were leftovers of the opening of the exhibition the night before (Blackstock <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/oct/19/arts.highereducation1>; Vasagar <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/oct/20/arts.highereducation1>) and in the 1980s a work of the German artist Joseph Beuys was destroyed. Beuys' work, entitled *Fat Corner*, consisted of five pounds of butter installed in the corner of his office at the Düsseldorf Art Academy and the janitor put the "butter" in the trash (Gayford <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aVSpjjkkQaRI>).

A closer look at these works of art reveals that their representations refer to destruction or decay and thus the disposition of the artwork suggests double irony. The installation of Metzger at Tate Britain was a re-creation of the *First Public Demonstration of Auto-Destructive Art* and, according to the artist, the bag of rubbish represented the finite existence of art. Metzger had founded "auto-destructive art" in 1959 because he "wanted to bring destruction, decay and loss into an art form" (Pollard <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8325665.stm>). The tendency to destruct is crucial to the history of modern and contemporary art: from the twentieth century onward, the history of modern art is a history of one style reacting to the preceding one and art often disrupts common aesthetics. At least this was the case with the avant-garde movements such as futurism, dada, and surrealism. Much of this art was meant to be anti-art with the artists attacking the art establishment. This destructive tendency even goes further when artists destroy works of art as an act of art. The erasing of a drawing of Willem de Kooning by Robert Rauschenberg in 1953 is perhaps the most famous example. Today, art vandalism has become popular in the art world. In a 2006 *New York Times* article entitled "Conceptual Artist as Vandal: Walk Tall and Carry a Little Hammer (or Ax)" Alan Riding describes some recent examples as follows:

In 1999, for example, two Chinese artists, Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi Ianjun, jumped on "My Bed," a work by the British artist Tracey Emin comprising an unmade bed accompanied by empty bottles, dirty underwear and used condoms, that was on view at Tate Britain. The following year, the same two artists urinated on the Tate Modern's version of "Fountain," noting that Duchamp himself said artists defined art. A British artist, Michael Landy, held what he called "Break Down" in an empty department store in London in 2001: in this happening, he destroyed all his possessions, including art donated by friends. Two other British artists, the Chapman brothers, were accused of vandalism in 2003 when they added the faces of clowns and puppets to the 80 etchings in an edition of Goya's "Disasters of War" that they had purchased. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/07/arts/design/07duch.html>)

The destructive tendency towards art and the common imagination within the art world often has a positive and even utopian dimension. The avant-gardes wanted to free culture from conventional constraints. In the above-mentioned examples, the artists wanted to draw the attention to the finiteness of art (in the case of Metzger) and the chaos of the artist (in the case of Hirst). Paying

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attention to the vulnerability and relativity of art is thought provoking because these aspects are usually ignored. Also, these artistic interventions open up space for new findings. However, distinguishing the results of the artistic interventions from non-artistic products becomes difficult. We cannot consider the works of Metzger and Hirst as *trompe-l'oeil*-s since the products are no imitations of existing objects. The sack of rubbish used by Metzger differs in no way from a non-artistic sack of rubbish and I posit that these types of works question the existence and the legitimacy of the art world and remind us of the work of Marcel Duchamp. By selecting existing industrially made products, such as a urinal, a bottle rack, and a snow shovel, and exhibiting them in an art museum, Duchamp questioned the status of art (see Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh). From the 1960s onwards, many artists continued creating conceptual experiments similar to those of Duchamp and returned again and again to the question "what is art?". But how should we understand and theorize this evolution?

Danto theorized about the phenomenon of art becoming indistinguishable from non-art in his "The Artworld" and in *After the End of Art*. Discussing the design of Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Danto argued that they were similar to that of the commercial products which could be bought at the supermarket and contended that the products shown in the art gallery no longer referred to art. Danto identified the era of art with the time period between 1400 when Renaissance artists became conscious of being artists instead of mere artisans and the 1960s. During the centuries following the Renaissance, there was an evolution of visual art in the way artists imitated and represented reality, recognizable by distinguishable formal, visual traits. Also, more and more works of art self-consciously referred to a proper history of art. According to Danto, the evolution of the visual representation of reality came to an end in the 1960s. From then on, works of art no longer refer to the history of art exclusively and Danto argues that art has turned into philosophy: in order to understand the presented objects as art, the viewer needs to turn to thought and move away from sense perception. Danto, calling the art made after the 1960s post-historical, is convinced we need to work out a theory for the art created after the end of art.

Danto's theoretical framework helps us to understand the confusion of the cleaners and the destruction of art that causes the confusion. The cleaners were misled by the indiscernibility of art and non-art, whereas destructive artists wanted to change our idea of the concept of art by opposing and attacking the ideas of the mainstream. However, the indiscernibility of art does not merely lead to confusion within the context of the art world: since anything can be art, it is often not clear where the art world stops or begins. Art and what formerly has been considered as non-art merge. Artists build bridges, boats, and cars that are shown in art museums, but also function in the non-artistic world (see, e.g., Archer 228-32). Art vandalism is sometimes considered as art, as in the case of Gustav Metzger. On other occasions, it is regarded as a crime. Pierre Pinoncelli for example, a performance artist who wants to revive the ideas of Duchamp, destroyed one of Duchamp's most famous readymades, the urinal entitled *Fountain*, and was charged for vandalism (Lichfield <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pierre-pinoncelli-this-man-is-not-an-artist-466430.html>). When art and non-art become easily interchangeable, we finally lose the distinction between products of fiction and a non-fictional reality. This is what Jean Baudrillard suggests, namely comparing our world to a simulacrum and relating fiction with non-fiction in such a way that they become indistinguishable. We live in a thoroughly designed and mediatized world and we can no longer tell the difference between what is staged and what is not. In other words, with the limits of the art world becoming fuzzy, we meet the problem of the indiscernibility, which is what Danto refers to, also outside of the art world. In my opinion, the situation does not have to be considered a problem as long as it leads to enrichment and the opposition of art and non-art brings along new creative syntheses. However, the destruction of art is more problematic. When we move away from the difference between art and non-art in such a way that the constraints of an artificial and separate art world are overthrown, the act of destruction comprises a fictional or symbolic and non-fictional destruction of the world we live in. This happened, for example, when artists such as Stockhausen and Hirst declared the 9/11 terror attacks a piece of art: the suggestion is that we could interpret this act of destruction as symbolic: the World Trade Center towers, symbols of capitalism, were destroyed in a style reminiscent of US-American action films (see Allison <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11>; Schulz <http://www.welt.de/print-

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welt/article476671/Welle-der-Empoerung-ueber-Stockhausen.html>). However, the attack was not limited to a symbolic one: it was an act of terrorism thus both non-symbolic and non-artistic that destroyed the lives of many people. Thus I believe that Danto is right when he says that we need to develop a theory of art for the art after the end of art and that we need a new theory to be able to understand the new situation and its artistic dimensions. Within the post-historical condition of art, destruction is a dangerous creative strategy. When artistic destruction is no longer confined to the story of representational art, it attacks in a very direct way the world we live in.

According to Danto, it was Clement Greenberg who theorized the last step in the history of visual art. Focusing on art created from the 1860s onward, Greenberg claimed that art is self-critical and the goal of the modern artist is to define the essence of the medium of art. For example, the essence of painting, a dominant medium of art, is flatness and the history of modern art is a history of paintings looking for a representation of this flatness (Greenberg 90). The result is abstract art and monochrome paintings which show the flat surfaces of the paintings themselves. Contrary to Greenberg, Danto believes that after the 1960s an essentialist definition of art is no longer possible and that we need a new theory of art. Art theorists and critics Rosalind Krauss and Thierry de Duve both formulate art theories to explain the functioning of art after the 1960s, each critic elaborating on different aspects of Greenberg's art theory. The question is whether these views bring us to the new theory of art we need.

During the 1960s, many different movements, styles, and mediums emerged within the art world. Conceptual Art, in which the idea of art was more important than the materialization of the art, was introduced. Minimalist Art confronted us with art that was neither sculpture nor painting, but something in-between. The artist Donald Judd, for example, presented a series of painted boxes, some attached to the wall, as if they were three-dimensional monochromes. In Performance Art and Happenings artists wanted to bring art closer to life by presenting and organizing live performances and when artists started to experiment with televised images and recordings from 1965 onwards, this was the beginning of Video Art (see Archer). We can compare the heterogeneity of these styles with the different channels broadcasted by television, the most popular medium of the 1960s. Since then this heterogeneity has increased exponentially, following the growth of technological media. Krauss offers us a challenging analysis to view art as the contemplation of technological mediums: in line with Greenberg, Krauss recognizes in art a search to define the medium apart from its functioning. Contrary to Greenberg, she focuses on technological media and no longer on the traditional artistic media such as painting and sculpture.

To explain her view, Krauss refers to Marshall McLuhan, but she changes the latter's focus and replaces McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message" (20) with the saying "the medium is the memory" (Krauss, *Perpetual* 19). While McLuhan stressed the effects of the functioning of the medium and the changes it brings to our psychosocial lives, Krauss describes how media of technology are analyzed and shown within the art world. According to Krauss, a medium gains a certain freedom when it is no longer new or in use. When a technological medium becomes outmoded, it is no longer valued for its functional achievements, nor for its new effects–aspects on which McLuhan focused. Krauss argues that artists make use of this freedom to represent the medium in its true sense. She remarks, for example, how conceptual artists used photography although the medium of photography was no longer new and understands the combination of photographs and texts, which was common in Conceptual Art, as a reflection on the meaning of photography. In the work of the installation artist Marcel Broodthaers, who was fascinated by film, she recognizes a contemplation of the moving image (Krauss, *A Voyage*). She also writes about the work of the contemporary video artist James Coleman, who reuses outmoded dia-apparatuses (Krauss, "…And then Turn Away?").

In line with Greenberg, de Duve defends a critical approach to art. Greenberg considered modern art as critical art and in his later work, he referred to Kant to explain his notion of the critique as the ability to investigate and define the limits of a specific medium (106) and contrary to Greenberg, de Duve does not focus on the medium, but on the viewer. According to de Duve, from the 1960s onwards, art can be made with everything and anything and he is convinced Duchamp is the model for this radical openness ("The Post-Duchamp" 27-28). Duchamp showed us with his readymades — already existing industrial objects, such as a urinal and a bottle-rack, which he selected seemingly at

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random and declared to be art — that anything and everything could become art. Duchamp made his readymades at the beginning of the twentieth century, but only from the 1960s onwards did artists start to experiment with his ideas. Art movements, such as Pop Art, Conceptual Art, and Minimalist Art all made use of readymades: in Pop Art, artists made new pictures on the basis of already existing photographs or cartoons, in Conceptual Art, readymades were often used to illustrate ideas, and in Minimalist Art, industrial objects, such as fluorescent lamps, were placed in a new environment.

While art can be made with anything and everything, it is up to the viewer to decide whether something is art or not. de Duve's analyses of the aesthetic judgment of art are based on the critical works of Kant. According to de Duve, art is a regulative idea: we cannot prove its existence or non-existence, but we can accept and use the concept of art to give meaning to our aesthetic feelings. It is the viewer — who can be "anyone and everyone" (de Duve, "The Post-Duchamp" 35) — who names and declares something as art or not, based on the viewer's aesthetic appreciation of the specific work of art. This decision is made with the knowledge of art belonging to the viewer. In this sense, anything and everything can indeed be art as long as the viewer recognizes it as such. de Duve also believes that when someone judges something to be art, this person wants everyone to agree with him. This is the Kantian *sensus communis*: a sense of community linked to the subjective judgment that turns it into an intersubjective one (Kant 89-90). de Duve wants to give the judgment back to the viewer and argues in this sense in favor of the democratization of the art world. In de Duve's vision, the public decides whether something is art or not.

The theories of Krauss and de Duve adjust partly Danto's thesis about the end of art, since they allow for the continuation of the history of art. Krauss shows us how the Greenbergian story line concerning the medium can be continued and broadened. If we follow the logic of Krauss, the end of art can be postponed endlessly: as long as there are new technological media, they will become outmoded and artists can use them apart from their immediate functionality. The art world will become a sort of refuge in which artists can take care of the neglected aspects of technological mediums. Contrary to Krauss, de Duve no longer focuses on the object of the work of art. Instead, de Duve focuses on the judgment of the viewer. Anything and everything can be considered as art and the appraisal of it depends on the aesthetic appreciation of it. This makes the future of art open-ended. As long as the viewer recognizes something in the art world as art, the history of art continues. Thus, both show that we are not confronted with a radical end to art, but only with the end of some features of it: the end of the search for purity in old artistic media, such as painting and sculpture, and the end of a hierarchical non-democratic definition of art. In other words, the end of the system of the *beaux arts* and the end of the power of the traditional and conventional academy. But is it sufficient to bring these endings under attention to formulate a new art theory?

Both Krauss and de Duve accept the official institutionalization of the art world. However, in *After the End of Art,* Danto suggests that the institution might have to change radically, together with art itself, noting "But the museum itself is only a part of the infrastructure of art that will sooner or later have to deal with the end of art and with art after the end of art" (17). This idea is not sufficiently taken into account by Krauss or de Duve. The same issue arises with the problem of the indiscernibility of art. The processes Krauss and de Duve attribute to the institutional art world are difficult to discern from what is happening today in the world of design and in non-artistic and commercial settings. Design is not only inventive in an illustrative way and the "official" arts are not always ahead of things. While Krauss considers, for example, the film stills of the artist Cindy Sherman as reflections on the position of art in relation to the effects of the medium film, art critic Camiel Van Winkel argues that there is no longer any difference between the practices of Sherman and the practices used in fashion photography. Moreover, Van Winkel points to the peculiar and self-conscious quality of a fashion model such as Kate Moss and he suggests that the photos in which she appears are more interesting and controversial than those made by Sherman.

In my opinion, de Duve is right in bringing the ever-growing democratization of the art world to our attention. The art world creates more and more opportunities for people who do not belong to the professional art world to present their work within the artistic context. Also, visitors to the art world get increasingly more involved in the decision-making processes in the professional art world through contests and such. Nevertheless, people with an education in art or art history remain in charge of the

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art world and are still the ones deciding what is art and what is not. In that sense, a hierarchy still exists even with the process of democratization that occurs. The processes of participation and decision in the art world do not really differ from the processes of participation in relation to popular and commercial events, such as song contests and the presenting of film and television prizes which are broadcasted. For example, access to the museum today is organized with the help of the internet and social media. Also, the voting of the public leading to public prizes is organized and stimulated by social media. Thus, I posit that the democratization process itself seems to be much more a product of technological evolution than of the history of art: if we want to find out what generates an interpersonal aesthetic liking in our present-day culture and if we want to come closer to what people associate today with the idea of art, we will have to take into account the new events produced by our technological culture because they are expressions of our current culture which are happening independently from the official art world. Nevertheless they can incorporate the idea of art.

The influence of technology on art is not a new phenomenon: technology has always influenced art. In ancient Greece no separate word for art existed: art was called *technè* as they were products of technology, during the Middle Ages art was craftsmanship serving religion, in the Renaissance art became a specific discipline and artists started to write treatises on art, etc. (Shiner 19). Modern art, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, was a culmination of technical developments, but modern artists also turned against the technological inventions of the time such as photography, which enabled us to make direct representations of reality (see Hobsbawn). As a result, modern art became increasingly separated and differentiated from the practical and technical skill. Instead, it was associated with freedom from functionality and an entire artistic culture was constructed based on this conception and on the cultivation of the idea of art for art's sake. The abovementioned strategies for the destruction or continuation of art are also related to this modern idea of art. From the 1990s onwards, we are confronted with a growing digitalization of all sorts of information and this evolution also affects the content and functioning of the art world: sooner or later works of art are translated into data (see, e.g., Manovich). However, we should not forget that digitalization is the result of a technological development corresponding with a capitalist economy and that one of the consequences is that art today will always be partly commercial; in addition, the artist himself/herself is often commercially produced. Saatchi, for example, a well-known media tycoon, is responsible for the introduction and promotion of BritArt, with artists such as Hirst, Sarah Lucas, and many others (see Adams, Jardine, Maloney, Rosenthal, Stone). In the age of digitalization, not only is everything translated into data, but also data function within networks driven by commercial ends. However, this does not mean that all artistry is lost, since we still have to create a world for ourselves within the technological and economical system. Thus, the question is no longer how we can distinguish artistic products from technologically and commercially produced ones.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) helps to clarify the transformation of art I am describing. According to Benjamin, in the beginning of the twentieth century photography and film made it possible to depict and reproduce existing works of art. The public related to these reproductions of works of art independently from the original work. Also, from the 1900s onwards, mass media integrated into the art world and became art themselves. The arrival of these new technological media within the art world urged us to rethink the criteria and philosophy of art. Benjamin stressed the fact that ideas of originality and authenticity could no longer be associated with works of art in the age of technological reproduction: photographs and films are products of a technological process which can be repeated. Therefore, the material results of these technological media are not original, nor authentic in a direct way. These works do not confront us with recognizable physical traces of a human being, as is the case in painting. Furthermore, Benjamin argued that while the public of the cinema is entertained, it can also be educated and thus, today, we need to reconsider Benjamin's analysis and ask the question how digitalization transforms the concept of art. As already mentioned above, digitalization makes it possible for the public to relate to works of art in a new way: with the growing amount of technological tools such as iPhones, digital cameras, iPads, etc., we are able to record works of art in numerous ways and we can manipulate the recordings by making use of all kinds of computer programs. Everyone can make his/her own films and since almost everything can be translated into data, everything can be recombined with anything

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else. This gives way to a two-fold evolution: aspects of art can merge into different domains and we see for example how the signature of Picasso and Magritte is used in the design of cars. On the other hand, every aspect of reality can be recorded and manipulated in such a way that it turns into a work of art. For example, video artists Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno recorded — in *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* — soccer star Zinedine Zidane during a match and turned it into an art film. In the film they used some footage of the television broadcasting of the match, but the overall style of their narration is reminiscent of historical works of art such as the paintings of Francisco Goya and films by Andy Warhol.

In other words, the concept of art has been "remixed." Within a capitalist economy, all products, whether they end up in the art world or in an explicitly commercial context, are related to the functioning of this economy and are affected by it. This also invites us to think further on how we want to direct the effects of this development and this brings us once again to the question raised by Benjamin: how can or should we combine entertainment with a critical attitude today? I propose to understand art as a sensible form of data that suggests a way to experience and construct our reality. So, taking the perspective of our present time into account, we can consider art as a specific kind of technology that shows us how to be present in our time since art represents human creativity at a given time period where we look at ourselves and create an image of ourselves with the use of technological media. Works of art help us to create a self-image and to become more conscious about this creative process and through this we can cultivate the existing technology and make it more reflective and imaginative and thus more artistic. This way we can consciously and creatively make this technological reality more of our own. As far as we are aware of the fact that we are manipulated by new technologies, we can in turn use that consciousness to adapt these technologies. In relation to digitalization, it can be considered an art to compose data in such a way that they represent ourselves at best.

In conclusion, cultural products such as films, books, theater plays, and pop music illustrate patterns of behavior in specific situations: they embody ways to deal with emotions and expectations and they present a worldview. The artistic quality of these works depends on their capacity to stimulate our imagination and understanding of our time. From this point of view, it no longer matters whether the object belongs to the entertainment industry or to the institutional art world. As mentioned before, all works of art have become partly commercial whether they are made to be commercial or not, they function in a technological system that corresponds with a capitalistic system. The way we perceive ourselves is influenced by the economically driven technology: we imitate the looks of film and television stars, which are artificially manipulated, and we copy their behavior. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If we are conscious about this situation, we can see it as an invitation to take commercial products seriously and create more critical films and television series without neglecting their commercial nature. In today's "remixed" world reality not only impacts on the difference between fiction and non-fiction, but we also need to take responsibility for the construction of technology and perhaps art is well suited to guide us in this task. A world constructed and manipulated by technology also makes increasingly room for human imagination: we change and construct our world to realize our imaginations, but sometimes this leads to excesses and to realities we do not want as can be the case with the strategies and occurrences of planned or mistaken destruction. Therefore, it is important to take the power of the imagination seriously not by giving it unlimited freedom, but by considering it in the light of the current condition. When we regard art as a sensible form of data that shows us how to construct our reality, then every work of art is a proposition concerning the way we want to treat data. In a world full of data, we have to create new combinations that shed new and interesting light on the existing data. Discerning what art is means selecting the sensible pieces of reality with which we choose to design our identity. By consciously situating art, as maker and as viewer, in the technological and economical conditions of our time, we can start thinking about all kinds of possible interactions between art, technology, and the economy and thus about the way we want to shape our world.

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Author's profile: Frank Maet teaches history of philosophy, ethics, philosophy of art, and history of modern art at
Leuven University. His interests in research include postmodern aesthetics, art theory, philosophy of technology,
and post-Kantian philosophy. Maet's recent publications include "The Creation of New Public Places, a Critique on
Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel," *New Public Spheres: Recontextualizing the Intellectual* (Ed. Sara Mels, Peter
Thijssen, Christiane Timmerman, and Walter Weyns, 2013) and "Back to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida: Some
New Considerations Concerning Art and Its Truth," *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* (Ed. Fabian
Dorsch, Jakub Stejskal, and John Zeimbekis, 2011). E-mail: <frank.maet@luca-arts.be>