

The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition

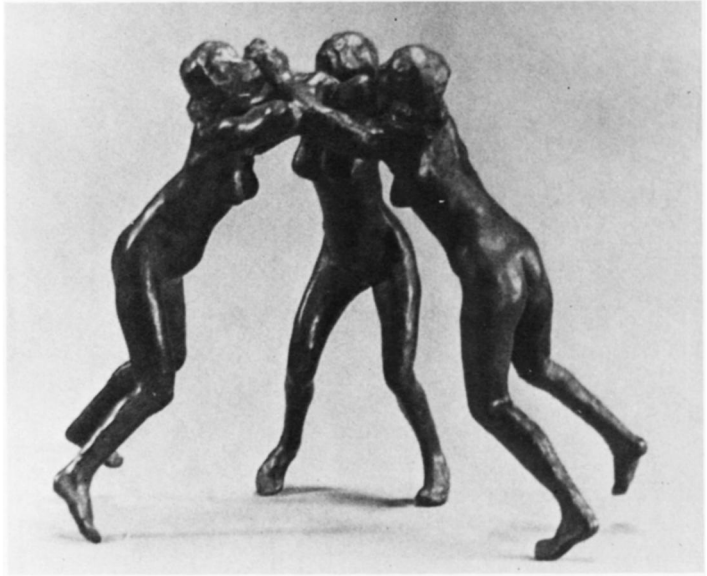
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This summer the National Gallery in Washington installed what it proudly describes as “the largest Rodin exhibition, ever.” Not only was this the greatest public gathering of Rodin’s sculpture, but it included, as well, much of his work never before seen. In certain cases the work had not been seen because it consisted of pieces in plaster that had lain on the shelves in storage at Meudon since the artist’s death, closed off to the prying eyes of scholars and public alike. In other instances the work had not been seen because it had only just been made. The National Gallery’s exhibition included, for example, a brand new cast of *The Gates of Hell*, so absolutely recent that visitors to the exhibition were able to sit down in a little theater provided for the occasion to view a just completed movie of the casting and finishing of this new version.

To some—though hardly all—of the people sitting in that theater watching the casting of *The Gates of Hell*, it must have occurred that they were witnessing the making of a fake. After all, Rodin has been dead since 1918, and surely a work of his produced more than sixty years after his death cannot be the genuine article, cannot, that is, be an original. The answer to this is more interesting than one would think; for the answer is neither yes nor no.

When Rodin died he left the French nation his entire estate, which consisted not only of all the work in his possession, but also all of the rights of its reproduction, that is, the right to make bronze editions from the estate’s plasters. The Chambre des Députés, in accepting this gift, decided to limit the posthumous editions to twelve casts of any given plaster. Thus *The Gates of Hell*, cast in 1978 by perfect right of the State, is a legitimate work: a real original we might say.

But once we leave the lawyer’s office and the terms of Rodin’s will, we fall immediately into a quagmire. In what sense is the new cast an original? At the time of Rodin’s death *The Gates of Hell* stood in his studio like a mammoth plaster chessboard with all the pieces removed and scattered on the floor. The arrangement of the figures on *The Gates* as we know it reflects the most current notion the sculptor had about its composition, an arrangement documented by numbers penciled on the plasters corresponding to numbers located at various stations on *The Gates*. But these numbers were regularly changed as Rodin played with and

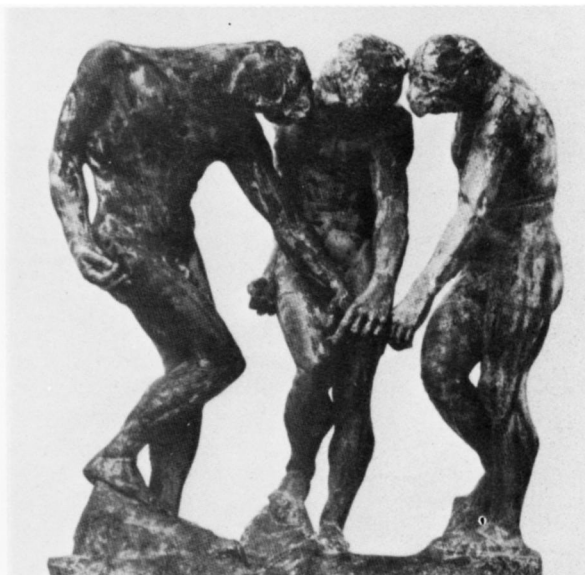


Auguste Rodin. The Three Nymphs.

recomposed the surface of the doors; and so, at the time of his death, *The Gates* were very much unfinished. They were also uncast. Since they had originally been commissioned and paid for by the State, they were, of course, not Rodin's to issue in bronze, even had he chosen to do so. But the building for which they had been commissioned had been cancelled; *The Gates* were never called for, hence never finished, and thus never cast. The first bronze was made in 1921, three years after the artist's death.

So, in finishing and patinating the new cast there is no example completed during Rodin's lifetime to use for a guide to the artist's intentions about how the finished piece was to look. Due to the double circumstance of there being no lifetime cast *and*, at time of death, of there existing a plaster model still in flux, we could say that *all* the casts of *The Gates of Hell* are examples of multiple copies that exist in the absence of an original. The issue of authenticity is equally problematic for each of the existing casts; it is only more conspicuously so for the most recent.

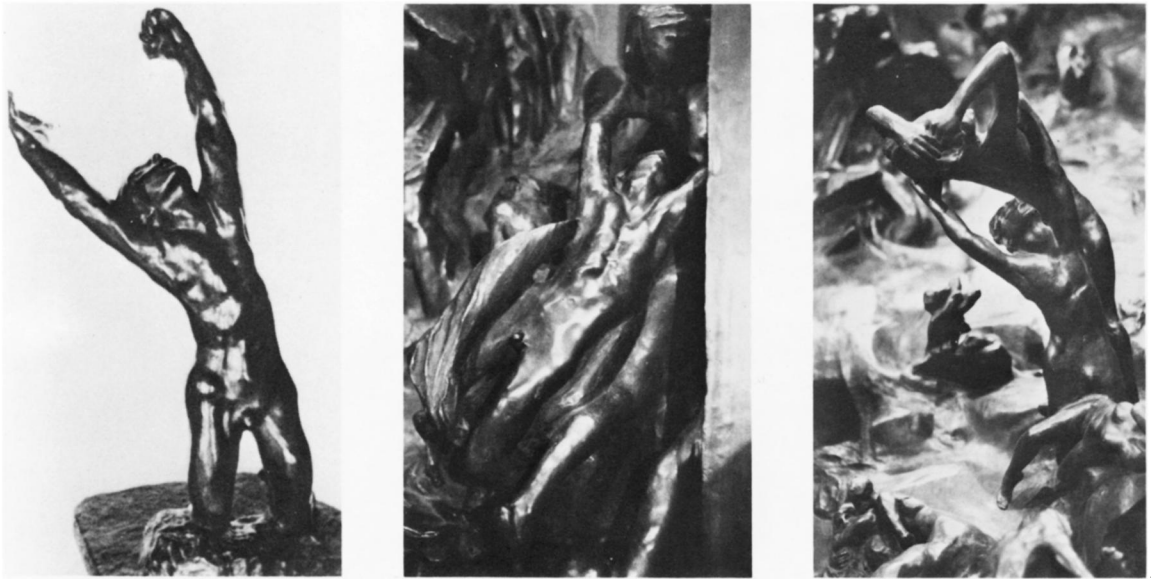
But, as we have constantly been reminding ourselves ever since Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," authenticity empties out as a notion as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple. "From a photographic negative, for example," Benjamin argued, "one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense."



Auguste Rodin. The Two Dancers (left). The Three Shades (right).

For Rodin, the concept of the “authentic bronze cast” seems to have made as little sense as it has for many photographers. Like Atget’s thousands of glass negatives for which, in some cases, no lifetime prints exist, Rodin left many of his plaster figures unrealized in any permanent material, either bronze or marble. Like Cartier-Bresson, who never printed his own photographs, Rodin’s relation to the casting of his sculpture could only be called remote. Much of it was done in foundries to which Rodin never went while the production was in progress; he never worked on or retouched the waxes from which the final bronzes were cast, never supervised or regulated either the finishing or the patination, and in the end never checked the pieces before they were crated to be shipped to the client or dealer who had bought them. From his position deep in the ethos of mechanical reproduction, it was not as odd for Rodin as we might have thought to have willed his country posthumous authorial rights over his own work.

The ethos of reproduction in which Rodin was immersed was not limited, of course, to the relatively technical question of what went on at the foundry. It was installed within the very walls, heavy with plaster dust—the blinding snow of Rilke’s description—of Rodin’s studio. For the plasters that form the core of Rodin’s work are, themselves, casts. They are thus potential multiples. And at the core of Rodin’s massive output is the structural proliferation born of this multiplicity.



Auguste Rodin. The Prodigal Son (left). Gates of Hell (center and right).

In the tremulousness of their balance, *The Three Nymphs* compose a figure of spontaneity—a figure somewhat discomposed by the realization that these three are identical casts of the same model; just as the magnificent sense of improvisatory gesture is strangely bracketed by the recognition that *The Two Dancers* are not simply spiritual, but mechanical twins. *The Three Shades*, the composition that crowns *The Gates of Hell*, is likewise a production of multiples, three identical figures, triple-cast, in the face of which it would make no sense—as little as with the nymphs or dancers—to ask which of the three is the original. *The Gates* themselves are another example of the modular working of Rodin's imagination, with the same figure compulsively repeated, repositioned, recoupled, recombined.¹ If bronze casting is that end of the sculptural spectrum which is inherently multiple, the forming of the figurative originals is, we would have thought, at the *other* end—the pole consecrated to uniqueness. But Rodin's working procedures force the fact of reproduction to traverse the *full length* of this spectrum.

1. For a discussion of Rodin's figural repetitions, see my *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York, Viking, 1977, chapter 1; and Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 322–403.



Auguste Rodin. Fugit Amor.

Now, nothing in the myth of Rodin as the prodigious form giver prepares us for the reality of these arrangements of multiple clones. For the form giver is the maker of originals, exultant in his own originality. Rilke had long ago composed that incantatory hymn to Rodin's originality in describing the profusion of bodies invented for *The Gates*:

. . . bodies that listen like faces, and lift themselves like arms; chains of bodies, garlands and single organisms; bodies that listen like faces and lift tendrils and heavy clusters of bodies into which sin's sweetness rises out of the roots of pain. . . . The army of these figures became much too numerous to fit into the frame and wings of *The Gates of Hell*. Rodin made choice after choice and eliminated everything that was too solitary to subject itself to the great totality; everything that was not necessary was rejected.²

This swarm of figures that Rilke evokes is, we are led to believe, composed of *different* figures. And we are encouraged in this belief by the cult of originality that

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rodin*, trans. Jessie Lemont and Hans Frausil, London, Grey Walls Press, 1946, p. 32.

grew up around Rodin, one that he himself invited. From the kind of reflexively intended hand-of-God imagery of Rodin's own work, to his carefully staged publicity—as in his famous portrait as genius progenitor by Edward Steichen—Rodin courted the notion of himself as form giver, creator, crucible of originality. Rilke chants,

One walks among these thousand forms, overwhelmed with the imagination and the craftsmanship which they represent, and involuntarily one looks for the two hands out of which this world has risen. . . . One asks for the man who directs these hands.³

Henry James, in *The Ambassadors*, had added,

With his genius in his eyes, his manners on his lips, his long career behind him and his honors and rewards all round, the great artist affected our friend as a dizzying prodigy of type . . . with a personal lustre almost violent, he shone in a constellation.

What are we to make of this little chapter of the *comédie humaine*, in which the artist of the last century most driven to the celebration of his own originality and of the autographic character of his own kneading of matter into formal life, *that* artist, should have given his own work over to an afterlife of mechanical reproduction? Are we to think that in this peculiar last testimony Rodin acknowledged the extent to which his was an art of reproduction, of multiples without originals?

But at a second remove, what are we to make of our own squeamishness at the thought of the future of posthumous casting that awaits Rodin's work? Are we not involved here in clinging to a culture of originals which has no place among the reproductive mediums? Within the current photography market this culture of the original—the vintage print—is hard at work. The vintage print is specified as one made “close to the aesthetic moment”—and thus an object made not only by the photographer himself, but produced, as well, contemporaneously with the taking of the image. This is of course a mechanical view of authorship—one that does not acknowledge that some photographers are less good printers than the printers they hire; or that years after the fact photographers reedit and recrop older images, sometimes vastly improving them; or that it is possible to re-create old papers and old chemical compounds and thus to resurrect the look of the nineteenth-century vintage print, so that authenticity need not be a function of the history of technology.

But the formula that specifies a photographic original as a print made “close to the aesthetic moment” is obviously a formula dictated by the art historical notion of period style and applied to the practice of connoisseurship. A period style is a special form of coherence that cannot be fraudulently breached. The

3. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

authenticity folded into the concept of *style* is a product of the way style is conceived as having been generated: that is, collectively and unconsciously. Thus an individual could not, by definition, consciously will a style. Later copies will be exposed precisely because they are not of the period; it is exactly that shift in sensibility that will get the chiaroscuro wrong, make the outlines too harsh or too muddy, disrupt the older patterns of coherence. It is this concept of period style that we feel the 1978 cast of *The Gates of Hell* will violate. We do not care if the copyright papers are all in order; for what is at stake are the aesthetic rights of style based on a culture of originals. Sitting in the little theater, watching the newest *Gates* being cast, watching this violation, we want to call out, "Fraud."

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Now why would one begin a discussion of avant-garde art with this story about Rodin and casts and copyrights? Particularly since Rodin strikes one as the very last artist to introduce to the subject, so popular was he during his lifetime, so celebrated, and so quickly induced to participate in the transformation of his own work into kitsch.

The avant-garde artist has worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic. He has also preached a variety of creeds. One thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality. By originality, here, I mean more than just the kind of revolt against tradition that echoes in Ezra Pound's "Make it new!" or sounds in the futurists' promise to destroy the museums that cover Italy as though "with countless cemeteries." More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. Marinetti, thrown from his automobile one evening in 1909 into a factory ditch filled with water, emerges as if from amniotic fluid to be born—without ancestors—a futurist. This parable of absolute self-creation that begins the first *Futurist Manifesto* functions as a model for what is meant by originality among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté. Hence Brancusi's dictum, "When we are no longer children, we are already dead." Or again, the self as origin has the potential for continual acts of regeneration, a perpetuation of self-birth. Hence Malevich's pronouncement, "Only he is alive who rejects his convictions of yesterday." The self as origin is the way an absolute distinction can be made between a present experienced *de novo* and a tradition-laden past. The claims of the avant-garde are precisely these claims to originality.

Now, if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that "originality" is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of

repetition and recurrence. One figure, drawn from avant-garde practice in the visual arts, provides an example. This figure is the grid.

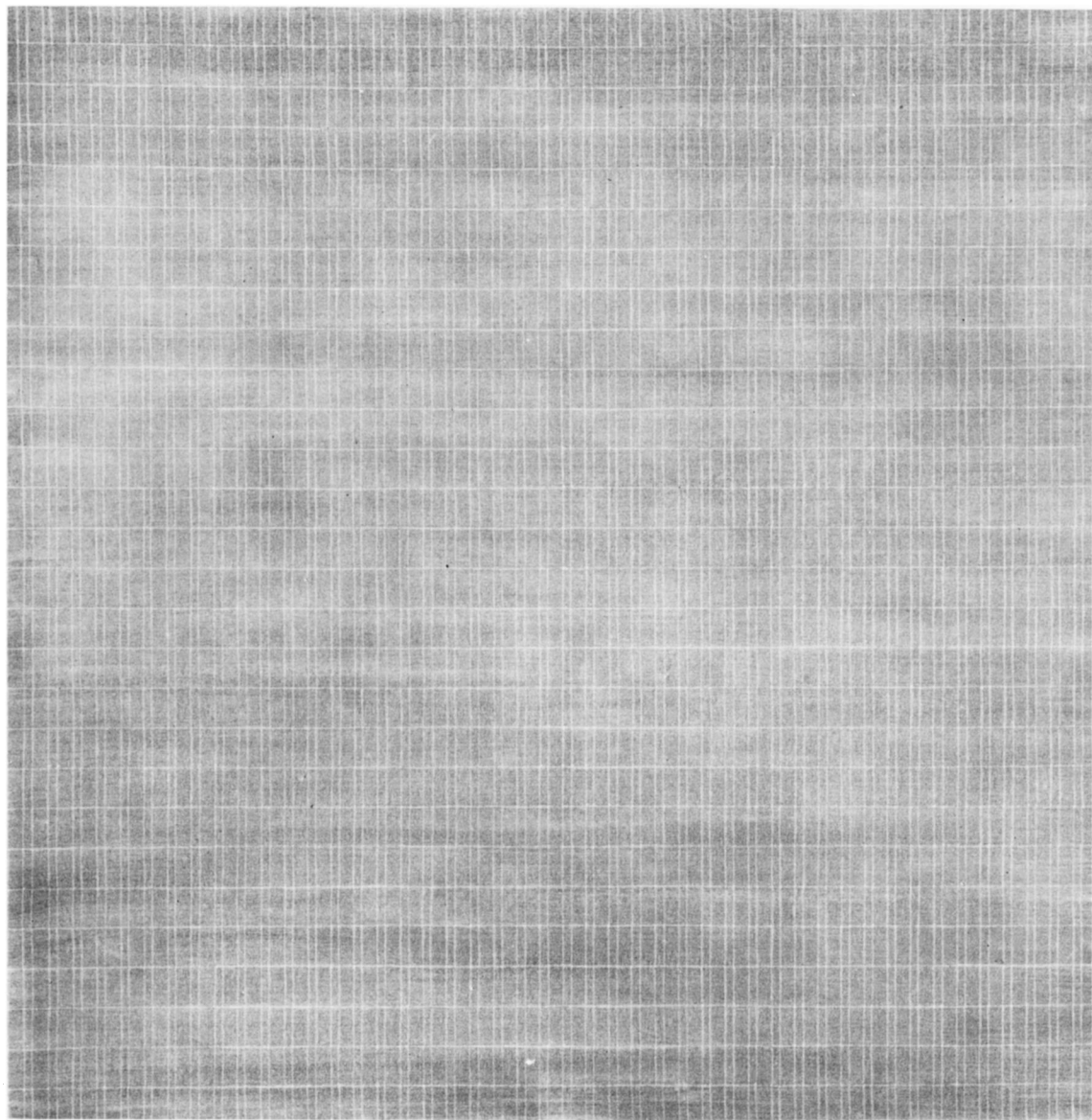
Aside from its near ubiquity in the work of those artists who thought of themselves as avant-garde—their numbers include Malevich as well as Mondrian, Léger as well as Picasso, Schwitters, Cornell, Reinhardt and Johns as well as Andre, LeWitt, Hesse, and Ryman—the grid possesses several structural properties which make it inherently susceptible to vanguard appropriation. One of these is the grid's imperviousness to language. "Silence, exile, and cunning," were Stephen Dedalus's passwords: commands that in Paul Goodman's view express the self-imposed code of the avant-garde artist. The grid promotes this silence, expressing it moreover as a refusal of speech. The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but—more importantly—its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the visual, and the result is silence.

This silence is not due simply to the extreme effectiveness of the grid as a barricade against speech, but to the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusions from outside. No echoes of footsteps in empty rooms, no scream of birds across open skies, no rush of distant water—for the grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature onto the bounded surface of a purely cultural object. With its proscription of nature as well as of speech, the result is still more silence. And in this new-found quiet, what many artists thought they could hear was the beginning, the origins of Art.

For those for whom art begins in a kind of originary purity, the grid was emblematic of the sheer disinterestedness of the work of art, its absolute purposelessness, from which it derived the promise of its autonomy. We hear this sense of the originary essence of art when Schwitters insists, "Art is a primordial concept, exalted as the godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and without purpose." And the grid facilitated this sense of being born into the newly evacuated space of an aesthetic purity and freedom.

While for those for whom the origins of art are not to be found in the idea of pure disinterest so much as in an empirically grounded unity, the grid's power lies in its capacity to figure forth the material ground of the pictorial object, simultaneously inscribing and depicting it, so that the image of the pictorial surface can be seen to be born out of the organization of pictorial matter. For these artists, the grid-scored surface is the image of an absolute beginning.

Perhaps it is because of this sense of a beginning, a fresh start, a ground zero, that artist after artist has taken up the grid as the medium within which to work, always taking it up as though he were just discovering it, as though the origin he had found by peeling back layer after layer of representation to come at last to this schematized reduction, this graph-paper ground, were *his* origin, and his finding it an act of originality. Waves of abstract artists "discover" the grid; part of its



structure one could say is that in its revelatory character it is always a new, a unique discovery.

And just as the grid is a stereotype that is constantly being paradoxically re-discovered, it is, as a further paradox, a prison in which the caged artist feels at liberty. For what is striking about the grid is that while it is most effective as a badge of freedom, it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom. Without doubt the most formulaic construction that could possibly be mapped on a plane surface, the grid is also highly inflexible. Thus just as no one could claim to have invented it, so once one is involved in deploying it, the grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention. And thus when we examine the careers of those artists who have been most committed to the grid, we could say that from the time they submit themselves to this structure their work virtually ceases to develop and becomes involved, instead, in repetition. Exemplary artists in this respect are Mondrian, Albers, Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin.

But in saying that the grid condemns these artists not to originality but to repetition, I am not suggesting a negative description of their work. I am trying instead to focus on a pair of terms—originality and repetition—and to look at their coupling unprejudicially; for within the instance we are examining, these two terms seem bound together in a kind of aesthetic economy, interdependent and mutually sustaining, although the one—originality—is the valorized term and the other—repetition or copy or reduplication—is discredited.

We have already seen that the avant-garde artist above all claims originality as his right—his birthright, so to speak. With his own self as the origin of his work, that production will have the same uniqueness as he; the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes. Having given himself this warrant, he goes on, in the example we are looking at, to enact his originality in the creation of grids. Yet as we have seen, not only is he—artist *x*, *y*, or *z*—*not* the inventor of the grid, but *no one* can claim this patent: the copyright expired sometime in antiquity and for many centuries this figure has been in the public domain.

Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid *can only be repeated*. And, with an act of repetition or replication as the “original” occasion of its usage within the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation. That so many generations of twentieth-century artists should have maneuvered themselves into this particular position of paradox—where they are condemned to repeating, as if by compulsion, the logically fraudulent original—is truly compelling.

But it is no more compelling than that other, complementary fiction: the illusion not of the originality of the artist, but of the originary status of the pictorial surface. This origin is what the genius of the grid is supposed to manifest to us as viewers: an indisputable zero-ground beyond which there is no further model, or referent, or text. Except that this experience of originariness, felt by

generations of artists, critics, and viewers is itself false, a fiction. The canvas surface and the grid that scores it do not fuse into that absolute unity necessary to the notion of an origin. For the grid *follows* the canvas surface, doubles it. It is a representation of the surface, mapped, it is true, onto the same surface it represents, but even so, the grid remains a figure, picturing various aspects of the “originary” object: through its mesh it creates an image of the woven infrastructure of the canvas; through its network of coordinates it organizes a metaphor for the plane geometry of the field; through its repetition it configures the spread of lateral continuity. The grid thus does not reveal the surface, laying it bare at last; rather it veils it through a repetition.

As I have said, this repetition performed by the grid must follow, or come after, the actual, empirical surface of a given painting. The representational text of the grid however also precedes the surface, comes *before* it, preventing even that literal surface from being anything like an origin. For behind it, logically prior to it, are all those visual texts through which the bounded plane was collectively organized as a pictorial field. The grid summarizes all these texts: the gridded overlays on cartoons, for example, used for the mechanical transfer from drawing to fresco; or the perspective lattice meant to contain the perceptual transfer from three dimensions to two; or the matrix on which to chart harmonic relationships, like proportion; or the millions of acts of enframing by which the picture was reaffirmed as a regular quadrilateral. All these are the texts which the “original” ground plane of a Mondrian, for example, repeats—and, by repeating, represents. Thus the very ground that the grid is thought to reveal is already riven from within by a process of repetition and representation; it is always already divided and multiple.

What I have been calling the fiction of the originary status of the picture surface is what art criticism proudly names the opacity of the modernist picture plane, only in so terming it, the critic does not think of this opacity as fictitious. Within the discursive space of modernist art, the putative opacity of the pictorial field must be maintained as a fundamental concept. For it is the bedrock on which a whole structure of related terms can be built. All those terms—singularity, authenticity, uniqueness, originality, original—depend on the originary moment of which this surface is both the empirical and the semiological instance. If modernism’s domain of pleasure is the space of auto-referentiality, this pleasure dome is erected on the semiological possibility of the pictorial sign as nonrepresentational and nontransparent, so that the signified becomes the redundant condition of a reified signifier. But from *our* perspective, the one from which we see that the signifier cannot be reified; that its objecthood, its quiddity, is only a fiction; that every signifier is itself the transparent signified of an already-given decision to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign—from *this* perspective there is no opacity, but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.

This is the perspective from which the grid that signifies the pictorial

surface, by representing it, only succeeds in locating the signifier of another, prior system of grids, which have beyond them, yet another, even earlier system. This is the perspective in which the modernist grid is, like the Rodin casts, logically multiple: a system of reproductions without an original. This is the perspective from which the real condition of one of the major vehicles of modernist aesthetic practice is seen to derive not from the valorized term of that couple which I invoked earlier—the doublet, *originality/repetition*—but from the discredited half of the pair, the one that opposes the multiple to the singular, the reproducible to the unique, the fraudulent to the authentic, the copy to the original. But this is the negative half of the set of terms that the critical practice of modernism seeks to repress, *has* repressed.

From this perspective we can see that modernism and the avant-garde are functions of what we could call the discourse of originality, and that that discourse serves much wider interests—and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions—than the restricted circle of professional art-making. The theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art. And throughout the nineteenth century all of these institutions were concerted, together, to find the mark, the warrant, the certification of the original.⁴

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That this would be done despite the ever-present reality of the copy as the *underlying condition of the original* was much closer to the surface of consciousness in the early years of the nineteenth century than it would later be permitted to be. Thus, in *Northanger Abbey* Jane Austen sends Catherine, her sweetly provincial young heroine, out for a walk with two new, rather more sophisticated friends; these friends soon embark on viewing the countryside, as Austen says, “with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste.” What begins to dawn on Catherine is that her countrified notions of the natural—“that a clear blue sky” is for instance “proof of a fine day”—are entirely false and that the natural, which is to say, the landscape, is about to be constructed for her by her more highly educated companions:

. . . a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in every

4. On the discourse of origins and originals, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon, 1970, pp. 328-335: “But this thin surface of the original, which accompanies our entire existence . . . is not the immediacy of a birth; it is populated entirely by those complex mediations formed and laid down as a sediment in their own history by labor, life and language so that . . . what man is reviving without knowing it, is all the intermediaries of a time that governs him almost to infinity.”

thing admired by him. . . . He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distances—side-screens and perspectives—lights and shades;—and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape.⁵

To read any text on the picturesque is instantly to fall prey to that amused irony with which Austen watches her young charge discover that nature itself is constituted in relation to its “capability of being formed into pictures.” For it is perfectly obvious that through the action of the picturesque the very notion of landscape is constructed as a second term of which the first is a representation. Landscape becomes a reduplication of a picture which preceded it. Thus when we eavesdrop on a conversation between one of the leading practitioners of the picturesque, the Reverend William Gilpin, and his son, who is visiting the Lake District, we hear very clearly the order of priorities.

In a letter to his father, the young man describes his disappointment in the first day’s ascent into the mountains, for the perfectly clear weather insured a total absence of what the elder Gilpin constantly refers to in his writings as effect. But the second day, his son assures him, there was a rainstorm followed by a break in the clouds.

Then what effects of gloom and effulgence. I can’t describe [them]—nor need I—for you have only to look into your own store house [of sketches] to take a view of them—It gave me however a very singular pleasure to see your system of effects so compleatly confirmed as it was by the observations of that day—wherever I turned my eyes, I beheld a drawing of yours.⁶

In this discussion, it is the drawing—with its own prior set of decisions about *effect*—that stands behind the landscape authenticating its claim to represent nature.

The 1801 Supplement to Johnson’s Dictionary gives six definitions for the term *picturesque*, the six of them moving in a kind of figure eight around the question of the landscape as originary to the experience of itself. According to the Dictionary the picturesque is: 1) what pleases the eye; 2) remarkable for singularity; 3) striking the imagination with the force of paintings; 4) to be expressed in painting; 5) affording a good subject for a landscape; 6) proper to take a landscape from.⁷ It should not be necessary to say that the concept of singularity, as in the part of the definition that reads, “remarkable for singularity,” is at odds semantically with other parts of the definition, such as “affording a good subject for a

5. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 1818, Vol. I, Chapter XIV.

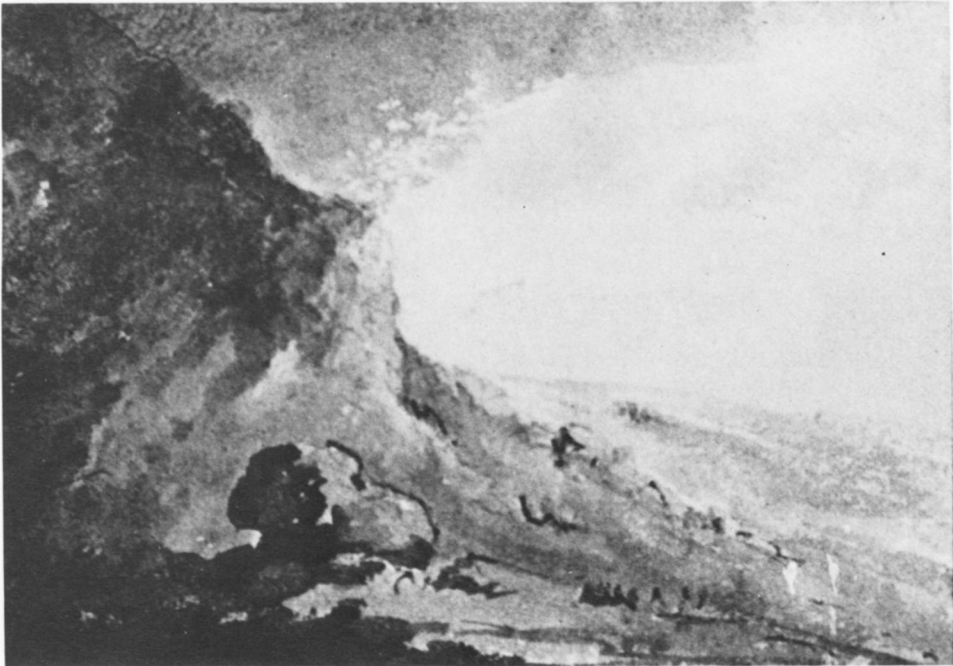
6. In Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 111.

7. See Barbier, p. 98.

landscape," in which a *landscape* is understood to mean a type of painting. Because that pictorial type—in all the formulaic condition of Gilpin's "effects"—is not single (or singular) but multiple, conventional, a series of recipes about roughness, chiaroscuro, ruins and abbeys, and therefore, when the effect is found in the world at large, that natural array is simply felt to be repeating another work—a "landscape"—that already exists elsewhere.

But the *singularity* of the Dictionary's definition deserves even further examination. Gilpin's *Observations on Cumberland and Westmorland* addresses this question of singularity by making it a function of the beholder and the array of singular moments of his perception. The landscape's singularity is thus not something which a bit of topography does or does not possess; it is rather a function of the images it figures forth at any moment in time and the way these pictures register in the imagination. That the landscape is not static but constantly recomposing itself into different, separate, or singular pictures, Gilpin advances as follows:

He, who should see any one scene, as it is differently affected by the lowering sky, or a bright one, might probably see two very different landscapes. He might not only see distances blotted out; or splendidly



William Gilpin. *Sketch for A Fragment*. 1764.

exhibited; but he might even see variations produced in the very objects themselves; and that merely from the different times of the day, in which they were examined.⁸

With this description of the notion of singularity as the perceptual-empirical unity of a moment of time coalesced in the experience of a subject, we feel ourselves entering the nineteenth-century discussion of landscape and the belief in the fundamental, originary power of nature dilated through subjectivity. That is, in Gilpin's two-different-landscapes-because-two-different-times-of-day, we feel that the prior condition of landscape as being already a picture is being let go of. But Gilpin then continues, "In a warm sunshine the purple hills may skirt the horizon, and appear broken into numberless pleasing forms; but under a sullen sky a total change may be produced," in which case, he insists, "the distant mountains, and all their beautiful projection may disappear, and their place be

8. William Gilpin, *Observations on Cumberland and Westmorland*, Richmond, The Richmond Publishing Co., 1973, p. vii. The book was written in 1772 and first published in 1786.



William Gilpin. The Waterfall. 1774.

occupied by a dead flat.” Gilpin thus reassures us that the patent to the “pleasing forms” as opposed to the “dead flat” has already been taken out by painting.

Thus what Austen’s, Gilpin’s, and the Dictionary’s picturesque reveals to us is that although the *singular* and the *formulaic* or repetitive may be semantically opposed, they are nonetheless conditions of each other: the two logical halves of the concept *landscape*. The priorness and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the picturesque, because for the beholder singularity depends on being recognized as such, a re-cognition made possible only by a prior example. If the definition of the picturesque is beautifully circular, that is because what allows a given moment of the perceptual array to be seen as singular is precisely its conformation to a multiple.

Now this economy of the paired opposition—singular and multiple—can easily be examined within the aesthetic episode that is termed *the Picturesque*, an episode that was crucial to the rise of a new class of audience for art, one that was focused on the practice of taste as an exercise in the recognition of singularity, or—in its application within the language of romanticism—originality. Several decades later into the nineteenth century, however, it is harder to see these terms still performing in mutual interdependence, since aesthetic discourse—both official and nonofficial—gives priority to the term originality and tends to suppress the notion of repetition or copy. But harder to see or not, the notion of the copy is still fundamental to the conception of the original. And nineteenth-century practice was concerted towards the exercise of copies and copying in the creation of that same possibility of recognition that Jane Austen and William Gilpin call taste. Thiers, the ardent Republican who honored Delacroix’s originality to the point of having worked on his behalf in the awarding of important government commissions, had nevertheless set up a museum of copies in 1834. And forty years later in the very year of the first impressionist exhibition, a huge Musée des Copies was opened under the direction of Charles Blanc, then the Director of Fine Arts. In nine rooms the museum housed 156 newly commissioned full-scale oil copies of the most important masterpieces from foreign museums as well as replicas of the Vatican Stanze frescoes of Raphael. So urgent was the need for this museum, in Blanc’s opinion, that in the first three years of the Third Republic, *all* monies for official commissions made by the Ministry of Fine Arts went to pay for copyists.⁹ Yet, this insistence on the priority of copies in the formation of taste hardly prevented Charles Blanc, no less than Thiers, from deeply admiring Delacroix, or from providing the most accessible explanation of advanced color theory then available in print. I am referring to the *Grammar of the Arts of Design*, published in 1867, and certainly the obvious text in which the budding impressionists could read about simultaneous contrast, complementarity, or achromatism, and be introduced to the theories and diagrams of Chevreul and Goethe.

9. For details, see Albert Boime, “Le Musée des Copies,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXIV (1964), 237–247.

This is not the place to develop the truly fascinating theme of the role of the copy within nineteenth-century pictorial practice and what is emerging as its necessity to the concept of the original, the spontaneous, the new.¹⁰ I will simply say that the copy served as the ground for the development of an increasingly organized and codified sign or seme of spontaneity—one that Gilpin had called roughness, Constable had termed “the chiaroscuro of nature”—by which he was referring to a completely conventionalized overlay of broken touches and flicks of pure white laid in with a palette knife—and Monet later called instantaneity, linking its appearance to the conventionalized pictorial language of the sketch or *pochade*. *Pochade* is the technical term for a rapidly made sketch, a shorthand notation. As such, it is codifiable, recognizable. So it was both the rapidity of the *pochade* and its abbreviated language that a critic like Chesnaud saw in Monet’s work and referred to by the way it was produced: “the chaos of palette scrapings,” he called it.¹¹ But as recent studies of Monet’s impressionism have made explicit, the sketchlike mark, which functioned as the *sign* of spontaneity, had to be prepared for through the utmost calculation, and in this sense spontaneity was the most fakable of signifieds. Through layers of underpainting by which Monet developed the thick corrugations of what Robert Herbert calls his texture-strokes, Monet patiently laid the mesh of rough encrustation and directional swathes that would signify speed of execution, and from this speed, mark both the singularity of the perceptual moment and uniqueness of the empirical array.¹² On top of this constructed “instant,” thin, careful washes of pigment establish the actual relations of color. Needless to say, these operations took—with the necessary drying time—many days to perform. But the illusion of spontaneity—the burst of an instantaneous and originary act—is the unshakable result. Rémy de Gourmont falls prey to this illusion when he speaks in 1901 of canvases by Monet as “the work of an instant,” the specific instant being “that flash” in which “genius collaborated with the eye and the hand” to forge “a personal work of absolute originality.”¹³ The illusion of unrepeatable, separate instants is the product of a fully calculated procedure that was necessarily divided up into stages and sections and worked on piecemeal on a variety of canvases at the same time, assembly-line style. Visitors to Monet’s studio in the last decades of his life were startled to find the master of instantaneity at work on a line-up of a dozen or more canvases. The production of spontaneity through the constant overpainting of canvases (Monet kept back the Rouen Cathedral series from his dealer, for

10. For a discussion of the institutionalization of copying within nineteenth-century artistic training, see Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the 19th Century*, London, Phaidon, 1971.

11. Cited by Steven Z. Levine, “The ‘Instant’ of Criticism and Monet’s Critical Instant,” *Arts Magazine*, vol. 55, no. 7 (March 1981), 118.

12. See Robert Herbert, “Method and Meaning in Monet,” *Art in America*, vol. 67, no. 5 (September 1979), 90–108.

13. Cited by Levine, p. 118.

example, for three years of reworking) employs the same aesthetic economy of the pairing of singularity and multiplicity, of uniqueness and reproduction, that we saw at the outset in Rodin's method. In addition, it involves that fracturing of the empirical origin that operates through the example of the modernist grid. But as was true in those other cases as well, the discourse of originality in which impressionism participates represses and discredits the complementary discourse of the copy. Both the avant-garde and modernism depend on this repression.

*

What would it look like not to repress the concept of the copy? What would it look like to produce a work that acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals, that discourse which could only operate in Mondrian's work as the inevitable subversion of his purpose, the residue of representationality that he could not sufficiently purge from the domain of his painting? The answer to this, or at least one answer, is that it would look like a certain kind of play with the notions of photographic reproduction that begins in the silkscreen canvases of Robert Rauschenberg and has recently flowered in the work of a group of younger artists whose production has been identified by the critical term *pictures*.¹⁴ I will focus on the example of Sherrie Levine, because it seems most radically to question the concept of origin and with it the notion of originality.

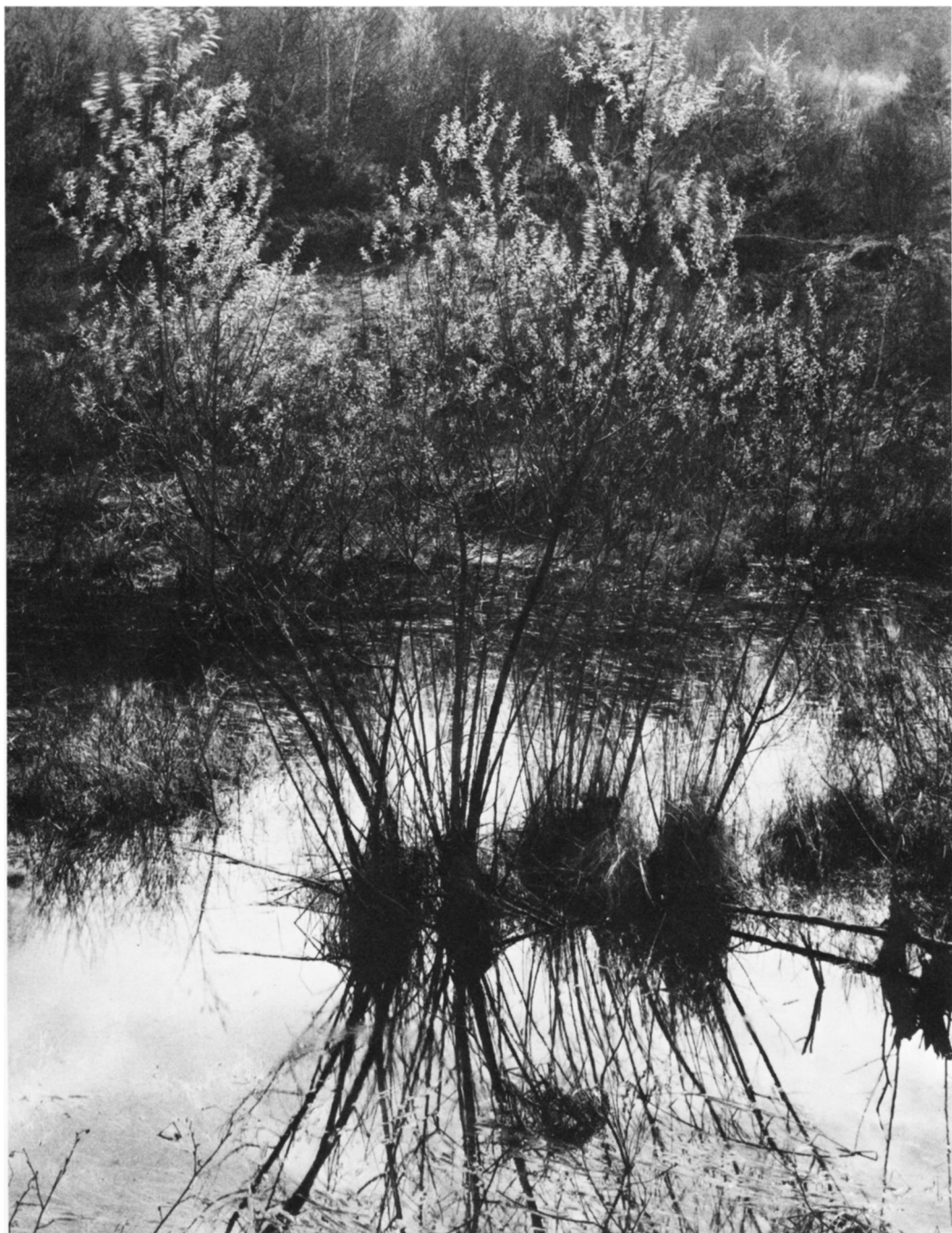
Levine's medium is the pirated print, as in the series of photographs she made by taking images by Edward Weston of his young son Neil and simply rephotographing them, in violation of Weston's copyright. But as has been pointed out about Weston's "originals," these are already taken from models provided by others; they are given in that long series of Greek kouroi by which the nude male torso has long ago been processed and multiplied within our culture.¹⁵ Levine's act of theft, which takes place, so to speak, in front of the surface of Weston's print, opens the print from behind to the series of models from which it, in turn, has stolen, of which it is itself the reproduction. The discourse of the copy, within which Levine's act must be located has, of course, been developed by a variety of writers, among them Roland Barthes. I am thinking of his characterization, in *S/Z*, of the realist as certainly not a copyist from nature, but rather a "pasticher," or someone who makes copies of copies. As Barthes says:

To depict is to . . . refer not from a language to a referent, but from one code to another. Thus realism consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy. . . . Through secondary mimesis [realism] copies what is already a copy.¹⁶

14. The relevant texts are by Douglas Crimp; see his exhibition catalogue *Pictures*, New York, Artists Space, 1977; and "Pictures," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979), 75-88.

15. See Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October*, no. 15 (Winter 1980), 98-99.

16. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York, Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 55.



In another series by Levine in which the lush, colored landscapes of Eliot Porter are reproduced, we again move through the “original” print, back to the origin in nature and—as in the model of the picturesque—through another trap door at the back wall of “nature” into the purely textual construction of the sublime and its history of degeneration into ever more lurid copies.

Now, insofar as Levine’s work explicitly deconstructs the modernist notion of origin, her effort cannot be seen as an *extension* of modernism. It is, like the discourse of the copy, postmodernist. Which means that it cannot be seen as avant-garde either.

Because of the critical attack it launches on the tradition that precedes it, we might want to see the move made in Levine’s work as yet another step in the forward march of the avant-garde. But this would be mistaken. In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide. The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact. What makes it more than a journalistic one is a conception of the discourse that has brought it to a close. This is a complex of cultural practices, among them a demythologizing criticism and a truly postmodernist art, both of them acting now to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition. It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication.

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