

REMARKS ON THE BROADENING OF ESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Today, esthetic thought takes pride in the fact that it no longer scorns familiar objects nor any form of everyday culture. Refusing to limit its domain to Fine Arts, it analyzes the products of artisans and industry, urban environment, costumes and customs, tattooing and *graffiti*. It thus confirms a tendency of contemporary creativity that rejects the separated status of art and defies the regulations of good taste.

Is it still a matter of “esthetic” thought? Will we soon see, on the contrary, all normative claims dissolve in a vast sociology of the imaginary and significant forms? Is the effacing of the limits of Art going to rob of meaning the traditional attitude toward masterpieces, or must we expect that this attitude will now be proper to any object? The drastic broadening of the field now offered to creativity may have two contrary and equally radical consequences: the volatilization of esthetic solicitude or its generalization. In any case, it seems excluded that we can keep to that middle course that up until now separated objects destined for esthetic perception from those to which it would not have been fitting.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

THE WEAKENING OF THE FRONTIERS OF ART

Roger Caillois brought up the point that non-figurative painting confuses the distinction that not so long ago was established between the artist's work and a natural object. From expressive deformations to knowing disorder, the plastic arts progressively eliminate recognizable structures, dilute form, determine to represent nothing identifiable, adopt accident and line for their discourse. The artist comes to desire that the painting be done without him; he limits himself to protecting its hazards, so that the work may find again the innocence and anonymity of nature. The human product thus becoming indiscernable from thoughtless confusion, it would not only be arbitrary to restrict the domain of the esthetic to the area that art formerly reserved for itself: its delimitation has become impracticable, and Caillois thus thinks it necessary to propose, because of its repertory of all possible forms, the title of "generalized esthetics."¹

His demonstration, which has special bearing on the frontier (evanescent) of painting and geological or vegetal phenomena, could be reproduced for purposes of artistic activities that he does not bring up and that, seemingly, are today on the way to losing the marks of their separation. The examples of music and the theater would further generalize, if we may say so, the generalized esthetics of Caillois. It is true that "nature," when it is considered as an englobing totality, leaves nothing to the imagination that could surpass it in generality, and it is undoubtedly in this way that Caillois would like to understand it. However, this word often designates only the non-human reality of the world, and in addition it happens that Caillois prefers to compare painting to matter and abstains, at least in the text under consideration, from comparing the other arts and social life. Now, it is possible that we could see literature distinguishing itself with more and more difficulty from oral tradition, narration of dreams or even from certain conversations. It would appear that composers wish to exercise the ear to hear musically the sounds of the city, the rhythms of machines,

¹ Roger Caillois, *Esthétique généralisée*, Gallimard, 1962. Reprinted in *Cohérences aventureuses*, Gallimard, Coll. Idées, 1976.

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the everyday noises and silences. Between the theater and other social rites, what sure division may be made, when the first abandons specialized auditoriums and the latter are organized in mobilizing all the equipment of the spectacle? Augusto Boal calls "games for actors and non-actors" the exercises he proposes to carry out in any place whatsoever; in particular, he calls "invisible theater" the one he causes to be acted out in the subway, on a ferry-boat or in the street, for spectators who are unaware that it is a matter of prepared scenes intended to arouse their reactions.² Reciprocally, the news of the day or electoral campaigns come to the front of the stage, disguise their greenrooms and recruit actors who are often involuntary.

While the established arts do away with the guide lines of their former autarchy, photography and television are actively negating the distinction that could still exist between what is worth seeing and what does not deserve even a glance. The most elementary tourist will soon know the essential maxim for a good trip: everything is photographable, and he will be aware that his sole duty is to avoid the photogenic object. Television, in its turn, juxtaposes the extraordinary and the everyday, alternates information and artistic ambition; it fuses them in the banal flow of novelty. One could say that with photography the eye is everywhere on the alert, and that with television, on the contrary, a medium that "neutralizes everything" for a blasé spectator,³ the eye is always tired (although we rarely look at our photos and insist on looking at television). Both, however, contribute to the same effect: the abolition of the difference between the object deliberately presented to esthetic appreciation and the one with quite another intention.

If the old frontier of art is on the point of disappearing, the question arises as to what the cause is, the attitude towards esthetics or a perception that is indifferent to the delights of the beautiful. Are we devoted to a generalized esthetics or to a general decline in sensitivity to art?

² Augusto Boal, *Jeux pour acteurs et non-acteurs*, Maspero, 1978.

³ Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut, *Au coin de la rue, l'aventure*, Le Seuil, 1979, p. 185.

THE "INTERESTING" STRANGENESS OF THE EVERYDAY

Photography and television assume an eye that is solicited by everything and astonished by nothing, seduced by everything and retaining nothing. They are rivals in installing a sort of average perceptive curiosity, a generalized fluctuating contemplation. They extend to the universal the reach of a category that is located as far from the marvelous as from the indifferent: that of the "interesting." It is as though the extension of the field available to the impression of beauty must be accompanied, through this impression, by a reduction in intensity. The interesting still arises from the order of the esthetic, but it represents its most extenuated degree. Close to the "curious" and the "piquant," the interesting attracts but does not captivate; it excites but is not able to wound or stimulate. We consider interesting, for lack of a stronger expression, the works that we must have noticed before we are authorized to turn away from them. All of daily life is now on the way to arousing this distractedly applied interest.

Analyzing the recent prestige acquired by the everyday, Jean-Pierre Keller speculates on the new relation that today's man has with his familiar universe.⁴ The city has become "urban landscape"; utensils rapidly become collectibles. This gaze, that "strips the usual of its finality" and introduces everywhere distance, is the esthetic regard. To qualify it, Keller adds the mention of the "point of view of posterity." The object is esthetic that becomes strange or, better yet, seems strange to us. Now, such is the property of the objects of the past. By regarding our environment with the "eyes of the custodian of tomorrow" we consequently render the world amenable to the esthetic view. Life is seen "from the view point of its presumed future." Our daily life is affected by unreality, as if we had already left it. "We now comprehend our actions and thought from the point of view of posterity, as 'ways and customs,' and our objects as archaeological remains."

Such is the first meaning that can be attributed to the hypothesis of a generalized esthetics. Each object and each situation

⁴ Jean-Pierre Keller, "Aesthetic Perception in Everyday Life," *Diogenes*, No. 100, 1977.

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lends itself to an esthetic perception, whether it be kept at the least distance, cut off from the finality that it originally had, or withdraws into strangeness. This conversion, that Sartre repeatedly designed as a project of irrealization, occurs all the more when the present is considered as a virtual past. Ruins, that is, the strange remains of a forgotten finality, are without a doubt the privileged object of this esthetic inclination. With regard to the paintings of ruins, Diderot enumerated the “accessories” proper to fallen buildings: “A traveler carrying his meager possessions on his back, who passes; a woman bent under the weight of her child wrapped in rags, and who passes; men on horseback who are conversing, their noses hidden in their cloaks, and who pass. What suggested these accessories? The affinity of ideas. Everything passes; man and his habitation.”⁵ However, constructions that time has not yet destroyed may appear as strangely unreal as ruins: there is a theatricality in the large villas or hotels at the seaside whose shutters are closed in winter, and every city, if we walk through it at dawn, is as beautiful as a future ruin. A present event is estheticized in the very eyes of those who are living it when they have the awareness of being present at a historical moment, as was the case with Henri Beyle during the burning of Moscow: “I saw a great action worthy of Brutus and the Romans, worthy, in its grandeur, of the genius of the man against whom it was done.”⁶ Now, the newspaper and television have taught us to regard all our daily existence as the rough document of tomorrow’s history and to see ourselves as travelers who who pass in a dated décor.

A “GENERALIZED POETICS”

But is not also this esthetics, in its turn, dated? Time spares none of our dwellings, not even those where our thoughts have taken root. The ideas of distance or withdrawal, of strangeness, of unreality through the rupture of familiar finalities have com-

⁵ Diderot, *Essai sur la peinture*, Gallimard, Pléiade, 1951, p. 1145.

⁶ Quoted by Victor del Litto, *La Vie de Stendhal*, Albin Michel, Ed. du Sud, 1965, p. 183.

posed the system of an esthetics that has become spontaneous with us but to which we would be mistaken to grant an intemporal necessity. The hypothesis of a generalized esthetics could be based on completely different principles, as the conception of Roger Caillois proves.

“Natural appearances are the only conceivable origin of beauty. All that is natural or paired with nature is considered and felt as beautiful, all that reproduces or adapts its forms, proportions, symmetries and rhythms.” Man, being himself a creature of nature, feels the harmony of “that which manifests the laws that govern both the world and himself.” The impression of beauty comes from the sentiment of this collusion. “The same structures produce here the décor, elsewhere the ability to appreciate it...”

Caillois constructs his esthetic theory in exact opposition to the preceding system. We would make distance and detachment the first condition for the esthetic attitude; on the contrary, it is founded on collusion and complicity. We imagined it constituted of a retreat, of a movement of withdrawal; it is rather characterized by a “slow discovery,” and its typical movement is thus one of *rapprochement*. It kept the contemplated object in a radical separation, a primordial division rejected it to the margin of action; now beauty demands consent: the man who experiences it acquiesces in the “universal game” and “admits that he participates.” Esthetic perception, setting up for everything the modality of the spectacle, consecrated the division of the subject from the object; now this perception reveals, on the contrary, “an indivisible nature” and attests that its own exercise is an integrating part. Where the rupture of the usual finalities and the refusal of an external function were proclaimed, Caillois declares necessary to the esthetic experience the assent to the economy of nature. Finally, instead of defining beauty by the strangeness of things isolated in their *adulteration* he considers that ugliness appears necessarily beautiful in the heart of nature when someone undertakes on his own initiative to “adulterate” it.⁷

⁷ The quotations from Roger Caillois in the two preceding paragraphs are taken from *Esthétique généralisée*, more precisely, from the second part entitled “La Beauté” in *Cohérences aventureuses*, pp. 40-47.

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There is no doubt that the predilection of Roger Caillois for poetry, to whose model he has often given precedence among the other arts, has a certain weight in this inversion of categories that recently determined the esthetic detachment. Distance, strangeness, unreality would perhaps have come to compose the universe of a mind accustomed to the theater and would be more likely to seduce it than that a familiar of poetry. Nevertheless, the validity of the esthetics of Caillois goes beyond poems, in that it finds its object just as well in stones or masks, in myths or in dreams, and that, a stranger in principle to the arts of the spectacle, it is finally rebellious neither to fêtes nor to games.

Poetry demands “a quickened sensibility and the acuity of the analogical discovery.”⁸ By this we understand a sensibility on the alert to capture the fleeting analogy. Poetry grasps fluctuating relationships, capricious correlations, ephemeral coincidences in the world of sentient qualities. It reveals metaphorical connections, metaphor being defined as “the simultaneous evocation of two dissimilar data of the sensory universe, between which there is some kind of bond.”⁹ This concept contains two implications that have a direct import on the present study.

In the first place, as we have already noted, poetry as it is understood by Caillois opens to experience a perspective that is diametrically opposed to that of an esthetics characterized by contemplative distance. Here, an access is given to the hidden totality: the evidence of the fantasmal separation disappears, giving place to the presentiment of a “hidden identity.”¹⁰ In the second place—although in an immediately consequential way—at the same time that the separation between the subject and the object kept at a distance from the spectacle disappears, the distinction between the poetic and the real is abolished. Surrealism desired to find a perceptive mode anterior to the schism between the exterior and the interior, the objective and the subjective. However, the search for this fusion called upon the postulate of the surreal, which came to declare it impracticable within the order of the real. For Caillois, on the contrary, from 1933 “the opposition of the poetic and the real has become

⁸ Roger Caillois “Concerning Poetry,” *Diogenes*, 100, p. 126.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 118.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 126.

difficult to defend.”¹¹ Twenty years later he praised Saint-John Perse for a work in which “almost nothing is invented.”¹² “His purpose of truth is such that he takes great care to distinguish dream from reality. He separates himself from poets who find their advantage in making no distinction between the imaginary and the real, who work at it and find glory in it. He refuses to shuffle the cards; he is sure enough of his art to warn his readers of the danger of the illusion and prestige of the legend.”¹³ Fantasy and folly are not only pernicious; they are useless, because the real itself, that has no need to be embellished, lends itself to “objective lyricism,”¹⁴ is read as “naturally fantastic”¹⁵ and is an invitation at all times to “materialist mystique.”¹⁶

If the real is already intimately poetic, the restriction of the field of esthetics to literature or even to art could only be an aberration. In denouncing *Les postures de la poésie*¹⁷ or in drawing up the *Procès intellectuel de l'art*¹⁸ Caillois does not put a limit to his admirations, he does not intend to narrow down a prize list nor to exclude from the world of authentic works the dross that encumbers it. The recognition of a poetry proper to things motivates on the contrary the undefined extension of the domain offered to esthetic attention and justifies the fact that it be finally “generalized”.

It is also appropriate to observe carefully the premise of this movement of generalization: poetry leads the mind to “find for itself the concordances or recurrences that exist between the data of the universe and that, if named or only suggested, implant seeds in the imagination, bringing to it, because of their unexpected rightness, a liberating and fruitful joy. In this, poetry

¹¹ Roger Caillois, “Spécification de la poésie,” *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, No. 5.

¹² Roger Caillois, *Poétique de Saint-John Perse*, Gallimard, 1954, p. 137.

¹³ *Idem*, p. 140.

¹⁴ Roger Caillois, *Ca'es d'un échiquier*, Gallimard, 1970, p. 218.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 60.

¹⁶ Roger Caillois, *Picrres*, Gallimard, 1966, p. 108. These last six references are taken from Roger Little, “Pour une esthétique sévère: Roger Caillois lecteur de Saint-John Perse;” and from Pierre Calderon, “Roger Caillois l’impatience, ou un singulier art poétique,” *Sud*, 1981.

¹⁷ Roger Caillois, *Les Impostures de la Poésie*, Lettres françaises, Buenos Aires, 1944; Gallimard, 1945.

¹⁸ Roger Caillois, *Procès intellectuel de l'art*, Marseilles, Cahiers du Sud, 1935.

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appears as a function of the emotion and does not belong solely to literature. In fact, a poetry exists which is peculiar to things or to what feelings confer on them.¹⁹ The esthetic essence of things is thus not held in reserve as though it were waiting to be glanced at. Its seduction is not lurking beneath ordinary appearance, ready to leap at our eyes. The world is not a stage on which already-costumed marvels would be produced. The poetry of things requires the intervention of the poet, even if he neglects prosody and has no concern for literature. Things, taken one by one, do not have a grain of esthetic emotion. They begin to vibrate under the effect of an analogical discovery. They are revealed as poetic by the active gaze that follows their metaphoric connections. The generalized esthetics of Caillois does not affirm that an already-constituted poetry inhabits each object but that a poetics in action can awaken the concordance of the world.

THE ARTISTIC ANTICIPATION OF EXPERIENCE

Nature, to be beautiful, thus demands the movement of the human eye, discoverer of analogies. This preciseness (absent from *Esthétique généralisée*) allows the clear distinction of the theory of Roger Caillois from the conception that was brought up in the beginning and that reserves a passive status to the spectator of the universe. However, it does not affect this essential affirmation: the number of objects that can attract the esthetic attention is infinitely larger than the number of works of art, and there is a precedence of principle of the first with regard to the second. Caillois certainly does not make use of the classic doctrine that would have art take nature as a model, but he stresses that nature includes art and that the beauty of the former must thus be defined independently of the properties of the latter. Art does not imitate nature: it is a particular instance of it.²⁰

That there is a poetry of things and that it owes nothing to the action of poems, that there is an esthetic quality of the

¹⁹ Roger Caillois, "Concerning Poetry", *Diogenes* 100, p. 126.

²⁰ Roger Caillois, *Esthétique généralisée*, p. 25.

world and works come afterwards is a theory that Alain Roger finds unacceptable.²¹

The “Copernican revolution” of Wilde (“Life imitates art”) is a caprice: it tells the truth and soon perverts its discovery. It is true that the esthetic perception of the world is always informed with the souvenir of works of art, but estheticism is this persistent perversion consisting of taking as a pretext no matter what object to find an artistic reference. Alain Roger shows that beyond this pure recognition, in which the esthetes find their snobbishness and their pleasure, is at play, much deeper and unconsciously, a general “artification” of experience that merits the Kantian designation of “transcendental schematism.” Art *models* experience by transforming our perceptive structures; it forms at the same time the schemes of observation and those of conduct. This artification may be conscious, as we know from famous examples: “that of Goethe, perceiving the shoemaker’s stall as a Van Ostade; of Gide, admitting that he saw Rome through Stendhal’s eyes, in spite of himself; of Balzac, whose work is fraught with an intense and incessant pictorial and sculptural schematics.”²² However, an explicit reminder is not indispensable: like the transcendental imagination of Kant, art anticipates experience by projecting unconscious models. A too vivid memory of the works that inspired them would block their effectiveness. “Analogy, resemblance, reminiscence, so many ideas that (...) pervert schematization into simple association.”²³ We could not say with exactness which artists evoked for us the esthetic institution of the Sea, the Mountains, the Landscape, the Nude or Love (although Alain Roger mentions a large number of quite plausible sources.) An identification all the more uncomfortable—and undoubtedly useless—since in the number of these hidden models must be included many works that the art historian would not have dreamed of examining. To the objection that most men lack artistic culture Alain Roger answers that “chromos,” advertising posters or elementary school dictations, play here the same role as the works of the masters.

²¹ Alain Roger, *Nus et Paysages, Essai sur la fonction de l'art*, Aubier Montaigne, 1978.

²² *Idem*, p. 110.

²³ *Idem*, pp. 138-139.

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“There is no area, from the most natural to the most heavily cultured, that art does not schematize.”²⁴ In fact, the thesis of Alain Roger is as convincingly applied to the religious phenomenon as to the creation of the *adolescent*, to the representation of death as to the invention of the “canonical body” and, in spite of the restrictive title he gives his work (it is true that the subtitle is less modest), it would be difficult to find a sector of possible experience that he has neglected. Politics itself, which we are tempted to believe outside of all artistic incitation and for the most serious reasons, suddenly appears to respond to a sort of esthetic *provocation*; “it is probable that a number of conversions to Communism (at least among the young intellectuals of middle-class origin) are, in the beginning, brought about not by the study of theoretical texts (who reads them?) but by the overwhelming encounter with a work of art. *Mother*, by Gorki; *In Dubious Battle*, by Steinbeck; *The Battleship Potemkin*, by Eisenstein; the final pages of *Beaux Quartiers*, by Aragon; and *La Classe operaia va in Paradiso*, by Petri, have undoubtedly brought about more “I, too, will be a Communist!” than the spectacle itself of misery.²⁵ In fact, let us recall in support of the strong evidence already furnished by Alain Roger the example of Vladimir Ulyanov reading five times in the same year (1888, when he was 18) *Que faire?* by Tchernychevski and deciding to be Rakhmetov—an example all the more convincing since Lenin did not develop an attitude from it, he did not adopt a personage (on the contrary, Napoleon took himself for Caesar, who took himself for Alexander, who dreamt of himself as a god);²⁶ Lenin’s case does not illustrate estheticism but a very exact artification of conduct.

The esthetic mineralogy of Caillois thus inverts the terms of the process that must now be considered as likely. It is not the things of nature that give the idea of a general beauty, whose works of art would be only the second particularization. Works of art are primary, and what is beautiful in nature is schematized by art. To demonstrate the discomfort of the position defended in *Esthétique généralisée*, it suffices for Alain Roger to bring up

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 164.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 165.

²⁶ Michel Cazeneuve, Roland Auguet, *Les empereurs fous*, Ed. Imago, 1981.

the contradictions that naturalist esthetics imposes on itself: Caillois is constantly led to emphasize that looking at stones “is submitted to a veritable artistic mode” and he furnishes all the necessary arguments to establish that “this *writing of stones* is legible only through a cultural code, since the epigraphy of Caillois is continually placed under the sign of art, not hidden but manifest, if not encroaching.”²⁷

If there is no area that art does not schematize, we may expect that the whole of experience is estheticized (or that at least it is estheticizable). The thesis of *Nus et Paysages*, while taking the exact contrary view from that of Caillois, seems to lead to an esthetics that is no less generalized. Now, Alain Roger rejects this consequence and gives two different reasons to explain that “the judgment of taste, without being the exception, is nevertheless not the rule.”²⁸

First, even where the action of an artistic model is exercised, two levels of this socio-transcendental function must be distinguished: “There is restricted schematism (esthetic) when the artistic model creates a judgment of taste (...); there is a generalized schematism (non-esthetic) when the artistic model schematizes perception and experience in general but without judgment.”²⁹ Why, in this second case, is esthetic conscience absent? It is the phenomenon of *representation* that, according to Alain Roger, introduces the decisive factor: “When artification is effected in the element of representation, it is expressed esthetically (restricted schematism). If it operates in general experience, without the possibility of representation (...) the esthetic attribution is not produced. Thus, in the domain of customs and institutions from which, let us note, we have extracted our examples of generalized schematism, artification is massive, while esthetization tends to disappear.”³⁰

On the other hand, the complete generalization of esthetic perception is blocked because the artistic models are lacking. As unexpected as this restriction may appear—explicit formulas having clearly indicated the contrary—Alain Roger believes that

²⁷ Alain Roger, pp. 136-139.

²⁸ *Idem*, p. 178.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 139.

³⁰ *Idem*, pp. 180-181.

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“entire segments of nature are not (yet) or no longer schematized.”³¹ These sectors escape artification. “Each culture has an artistic patrimony that is sometimes considerable but that never covers the totality of possible experience. To this is added the fact that each individual has only a part, often modest, sometimes minimal, that increases the extent of what may be called the non-esthetic fallow-land.”

GENERALIZED ESTHETIC OPERATIONS

With regard to the first obstacle to the complete generalization of esthetic perception, according to Alain Roger (experience is sometimes incapable of reaching the element of representation) we may ask ourselves if it is not brought about by an esthetic conception that is too narrow. Does esthetization apply only to what is representable? If Representation is the central category of the esthetic experience, it is surely necessary to renounce extending it to actions and customs, unless we cede to narcissism. However, does not the example of Roger Caillois show that a true esthetics may be conceived that would do without ideas of detachment, distance, separation, that would cease to keep its object visible at a distance, that would dispense with the *mise en spectacle* to whose model the age of Representation has given priority?

As for the second obstacle (experience is sometimes deprived of the knowledge of works that would have been able to schematize it), Alain Roger avows that the process of artification, for him, can only occur beginning with a saturated culture, a finished history, a *patrimony*. The works must already be there, completed and diffused, for common perception to borrow constituted schemas from them; if a sector of nature is not already treated artistically or an individual is ignorant of the works that have been derived from it, this is fatally “non-esthetic fallow-land.” Taking art seriously (Alain Roger does so and gives it the most ambitious function that we can imagine today) should we not rather place ourselves at the moment in which the works were born, in which they explore their means?

³¹ *Idem*, p. 180.

We would perhaps discover that the processes they experiment with are within a general enough reach that they could as well apply to the perception of nature or to the orientation of conduct as to the elaboration of the works.

If, in Caillois' theory, nature may appear as the element that is initially *given* (but this impression must be corrected, as we have seen, by noting that the poetic perception of nature is active), the theory of Alain Roger makes art in its turn *given*. As contrary as they may be, we may thus oppose to them, to the one as to the other, the hypothesis of an esthetics that would conceive both art and the world as yet to be accomplished, simultaneously and according to the same principles.

The refusal of redundance, for example, is an exigency that is not taught us by nature (it is rather fertile in contingent repetitions), nor by art (the cultural confusion that informs our viewing confers the same prestige to baroque plethora as to classic ruins). However, this refusal can arise just as well governing our conduct as our taste in music. Roger Caillois confessed, in a fine abridgment, that he held to this principle whether it was a question of daily environment or sexual conduct as well as literature: "I detest mirrors, generation and novels; they people the universe with redundant beings who preoccupy us vainly."³²

In the same way, the analogical impression is without doubt one of those operations within general reach that find their application, with a single movement, in the perception of the world exterior to art as in the construction of works of expressly artistic status. In Mexico, from before Cortez, that is, well before the establishment of the separation of the Fine Arts, riddles concretized capricious coincidences that we consider today as having poetic power, creator of metaphorical connections. "What are the ten stones that we carry on ourselves? They are the nails of our fingers." Sahagún, who reports this Aztec riddle, quotes also this one, among many others: "What is a mirror in a house built of pine branches? It is an eye with eyelashes like pine branches."³³

³² Roger Caillois, *Rencontres*, P.U.F., 1978, p. 56.

³³ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Histoire générale des choses de la Nouvelle Espagne*, extracts translated into French, Maspero, 1981, pp. 277-278.

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We could avoid invoking the hypothetical—and always fluctuating—particulars of esthetic sensibility, as well as the properties of the object intended to excite it, if we began by defining each time the *operations* that we propose to hold as esthetic. Now, it would probably seem that several of the operations of which artists have made themselves the specialists are equally practicable outside the sphere that they had not long ago attributed to themselves. The economy of means and the refusal of redundancy, the analogical discovery and the metaphoric resemantization of symbolically dead objects, the restitution of meaning in the reign of the insignificant: so many activities that are indefinitely generalizable.

We must still ask ourselves, however, if the *mise en représentation* may not be considered as one of these operations. Although certain principles may open to esthetics a field that is quite general, it would suffice that an axiomatic decision—as legitimate as any other—take the element of representation as a criterion of the esthetic experience for it to meet inevitable limits. In effect, to transport instantly the present action or the immediate environment into the unreality of representation would be “to take toward life the point of view of death,” according to an attitude that can only be momentary (even though Jean-Pierre Keller thus characterizes the crepuscular self-consciousness of our era).

To give an idea that he had of an absolutely pure theater. Antonin Artaud dared to compare it to a round-up by the police.³⁴ This deployment, similar to the evolutions of a ballet, but dismally terrible, this staging that releases a painful solemnity, this tightening of the circle and, finally, the haul intended to capture a group of women and that carries emotion and astonishment to their limits...: “Never has a finer staging been followed by such a denouement. Certainly, we are as guilty as the women and as cruel as the police. It is truly a complete spectacle. Well, this spectacle is the ideal theater.” Artaud meant to say that theater is not a game, that it is a true reality, that each spectacle must be even, unique, unprecedented, entire, that its interest resides in this character of gravity, that it is addressed

³⁴ Antonin Artaud, “Le théâtre Alfred Jarry,” *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. II, Gallimard, 1961, pp. 11-14.

to the entire existence of the spectators. However, in spite of what he has said, the theater remains in the element of representation—"esthetic" in this, if you like. It does not give us reality itself: at the most, according to Artaud, it gives us a "world touching the real;" and Anne Ubersfeld, to point out that everything that happens on the stage is stamped with unreality, justly remarks: "Even if the actor were seated on the knees of the spectator, invisible footlights with a current of 1000 volts would separate them."³⁵ This is why we must resign ourselves to understand if not share the indignation with which surrealists received the comparison used by Artaud;³⁶ we cannot view a police round-up as we do a play, however serious is the idea we have of the theater.

What is called "the element of representation" is the imaginary. It is not composed of the class of fictional objects; it is, properly speaking, an "element," a milieu, a modality. The imaginary is the unreal mode by which any object is affected when it is "represented." If we agree to reserve the qualification "esthetic" to the operation that makes unreal beings and situations by assigning them the imaginary as milieu, it is only too obvious that the perception of the real—and, with it, the satisfaction of desire and transformation of existence—is absolutely opposed to the esthetic perception.

However, the imaginary lends itself to several operations that it is important to distinguish here. The one just mentioned transports the real into the imaginary. Another, reciprocal, operation inserts the imaginary into the real. The novel, figurative painting and the cinema are typical illustrations of the first case. The wearing of strange costumes, ceremonies in general, symbolical gestures and the perspective that opens up here and there in a city are examples of the second. We hazard the proposal that the historical institution of Art delighted in the transmutation of the real into the imaginary and that it is up to us to reject it and reintroduce the imaginary into the real, if architecture were not there to attest to the fact that this latter task has always mobilized an entire sector of the Fine Arts themselves. Let us at least say that the imaginary is not neces-

³⁵ Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre*, Editions sociales, 1978, p. 47.

³⁶ André Breton, *Les Manifestes du Surréalisme*, Sagittaire, 1946, p. 107.

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sarily this dream world in which the perception of the real would lose itself; it is also what invades the body of things—from a candle flame, that “operator of images,” as Bachelard says, or from a street sign, if one knows how to read, as the surrealists did (but they attempted to establish, between the imaginary and the real, a relationship that perhaps would form a third type: that of their confusion).

Consequently, there are many different principles capable of founding a generalized esthetics. Solely, the principle of representing, of *mise en spectacle*, implies the restriction of its field of application. As if by chance, this is the one to which current thought is inclined to give precedence.

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