

Tool, Realism, Spectacle

About various kinds of tools

There are two categories of tools. There are tools that *allow us to do*, tools that *make possible* what we often hadn't even thought of before, that create new freedoms, that open up new adventures. These tools are pure affirmation. Nothing of what they are existed before them, and after them, the world is no longer the same. Their function was not known, it was in no way defined before they appeared, and of course, it was even less agreed upon. In fact, at first they had no function at all, and it was only the sad virtue of a narrow use, *the force of habit*, that finally gave them one. These tools do not replace anything and besides they are irreplaceable.

And then there are the tools that *serve us*, that is to say which, in a certain way, *replace us*, *which allow us not to do*, and which basically live a little and even sometimes a lot in our place. They lighten our pain, of course, but they also relieve us - at least partially - of the worry of living. These tools don't

allow us to do something more, something that we didn't know yet. No, on the contrary, they essentially allow us not to do something that we already know. What they do, any human being could do before they existed, but they do it as well and even better than us and most of the time faster and stronger than us. These tools are pure negation since something had to exist beforehand for them to exist and this something beforehand, in a certain way, they deny it. So the automobile (since we *are* naturally auto-mobile), so the dishwasher, the washing machine, etc.

And, of course, between these two extremes of *tools that allow us to do* and *tools that allow us not to do*, there is the whole range of ambiguities as Charles Fourier would have said.

Realistic tools and their subversion

We can, without too much risk of being wrong, describe the tools that replace us as **realistic**. Like the realist painter, they redefine what they replace and therefore *imitate* it and reduce it to what they know how to do of it. Thus, *doing the dishes* is reduced to what the dishwasher can do. The pleasure with which I caress this plate, these cutlery that I have chosen and that I love, that of the dazzling transparency of my glasses, that of pooling the tasks of putting the dishes and the kitchen in order. after friendly feast, *all that once was to be lived, moved away into a representation*, disappeared and found itself evacuated towards the sewer with the rinsing water at the end of the cycle. From being a part of the common or family life the task of *doing the dishes* has been reduced to a pure convention.

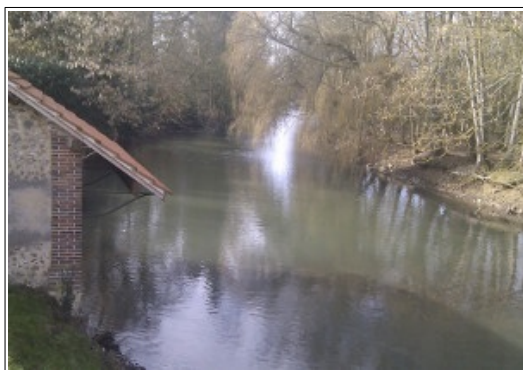
Before the dishwasher, doing the dishes could be anything you wanted: a suffering, a daily and repeated boredom, a game where you sent each other the plates to wipe like flying saucers, the pretext for a quarrel as a couple, the opportunity and the pleasure of breaking one's own dishes or those of the other, a moment to make love, perhaps the

verge of an assassination. All of this has been reduced to a pure convention: doing the dishes is what the dishwasher does, period. And the only adventure we still have left is that the machine may break down. Still we will not accept this adventure. This breakdown will makes the machine unfair to us, the machine has broken the rules, it has not fulfilled its contract, it betrays us and leaves us, perhaps even just before our guests arrive... Such a thing thing saddens us, depresses us or makes us angry. It rarely leaves us indifferent.



We can resume the exercise with the washing machine. I live in a region where, not having so many opportunities for local pride, we decided to preserve old *washhouses*. These places where women used to come to wash and rinse their clothes by

the river, the pond or the pond, summer and winter alike, with their hands in cold, not to say icy, water, their knees kept dry and warm in their *carrosses*, wooden boxes filled with straw or hay, these places were the occasion for all meetings and all discussions between women, absolutely free from the company and the gaze of men. These places *constituted* the community of women. They were the equivalent of the bistro for the males and in reality a veritable town council of petticoats, certainly not devoid of real power.



On summer evenings, young men and women would meet there to laugh and socialize together, and the inscriptions on the walls of these washhouses still testify beyond the centuries to the perhaps brief but dazzling splendor of the loves of Rémi and of Marinette and those of Alphonse and Louise and, whether with the help of the traditional heart pierced with an arrow or not, of many other loves over time

and generations. With a little imagination, but perhaps without lying at all, we find ourselves dreaming that if the walls could talk, they would perhaps tell us that, later along in the course of these summer evenings, at the hid from prying eyes and with the complicity of the nearby water, more than half of the inhabitants of the village were very probably conceived there, year after year.

Part of the washhouses of which I speak and which nourished my childhood dreams were made of sheet metal, just as the washing machines are also essentially so, so that the secret of this transmutation of potentialities of the imaginary into this nothing that operates the washing machine is not at all a matter of material. Nor is it a question of function. The washing machine has been designed to wash clothes



and the wash-house too. But in the use of the wash-house, there is no replacement of a piece of human life by a pure convention. In addition, village tradition has created a host of unforeseen uses for the wash-house which have nothing to do with the initial function of the building. But while cats have invented a particular use for washing machines quite comparable to that of a television set for men - at least as long as the spin cycle is not engaged - men have not invented many uses for a washing machine other than washing their laundry.



If a surrealist, or let's say...Marcel Duchamp, had succeeded in suggesting the transformation of a washing machine into a place for amorous rendezvous, or a love room, it would be easy to find people to judge that this would be a surrealist act, a delicious way to misuse a washing machine. But this is exactly the type of subversion of the technical object "wash-house" that the young people of my village spontaneously invented by deliberately ignoring the realistic use of laundries which declares once for all that a "wash-house" is made to wash clothes and that's all.

And that easily translates into modern terms. Poor young people in my neighborhood, who are not rich enough to pay for drinks, even of a modest price, and therefore cannot meet in a café, have spontaneously transformed the self-service laundromat on the corner, where I go sometimes, into a meeting room. They have no choice but to meet there in winter when it's freezing outside or in any season when it's pouring rain.

They do just about anything they are allowed to do there, including an occasional small business of soft drugs. But I also saw them use it just as occasionally as a poetry workshop: one evening, I saw a young man there, who one might have thought illiterate, counting on his fingers the syllables of the

text of the rap song that he was writing in a small notebook. It was absolutely touching.

However, as the place closes at 9:00 p.m., it is quite impossible for these young people to use the place as a love room, nor is it possible for them to write traditional lovers graffiti on the walls, because such behavior would cause them to be permanently excluded from the place.

All in all, it seems clear to me that these young people are *subverting* the *realistic* use of this self-service laundry, since from time to time they are sent a somewhat muscular individual or even the police to restore the *realistic* order which requires that a self-service laundry is only used to wash clothes.

The tool as a passion

I have observed that tools usually engender two opposing types of attitudes: passion and hatred. Perhaps I should question myself more about passion since after all - although with a rather moderate intensity - it traverses me. But as I have encountered more difficulties with the supporters of hatred, I will especially make it my duty to understand what drives them...

It should first be noted that the technology enthusiast is not a realist. His purpose - at least once he has become sufficiently aware of the true nature of his passion - is not to use his favorite tool for its intended purpose, but for just about anything that comes to his mind. We can therefore say that the technology enthusiast, quite the opposite of what is said about him, is not a particularly adept of technology *as such*, but rather an adept of technology *as for himself*.

As long as we get rid for a moment of the obsessive image of the solitary obsessed man who polishes his car on Sundays, prevented as he is himself, for whatever reason, from dispensing such tender caresses to its wife or, failing

that, to his wife's rival, in automotive matters, we very quickly find ourselves confronted with the strange phenomenon of the personalization of transportation means, either individual or, with the help of painted tags, collective. A phenomenon of an entirely different nature.

Because the passion for personalization is not at all a solitary vice. On the contrary, it makes people socialize. Enthusiasts need to find tools, spare parts, paints, ideas and above all, peers with whom to share judgments and admiration of the artworks. As we know, it builds a whole world. There is no real difference in facts or attitudes between the [Facteur Cheval](#) or my ex-neighbor [Picassiette](#) and most Apaches who outrageously customize their car or motorcycle. Except maybe the genius, but still, it's to be seen.

Whether the Facteur Cheval builds his [Palais Idéal](#) or whether Picassiette covers his house, his garden, his chairs, his tables, and his beds with a mosaic of broken crockery and glass, it is quite agreed to find that admirable. But if a madman covers his car or motorbike with the same type of mosaic - or worse - than the one used by the guardian of Chartres cemetery, then that ceases to be so. Why ? Because it is a car or a motorcycle - fetish objects of the "consumer society" - and not a house, an architectural object and therefore artistic and

"noble"..

Except that Picassiette's house, which I know well, is nothing more than one of those workers' houses from the beginning of the 20th century, and although Raymond Isidore built it with his own hands, it is basically not so far from the type of mass-production object that cars and motorcycles are today, and therefore, whether we like it or not, it is an object of mass consumption too.

Whatever may be the ardor, the aptitude for delirium or the genius of the artist, it is doubtful and sub-cultural to personalize your car or your motorcycle, but it is not so to personalize your own suburban house and to turn it into a submarine, a flying saucer landing strip, a Sistine Chapel, a Hindu temple, or any other building of a much more decidedly unidentifiable type.

The personalization enthusiast may be solitary, as is often the case with architectural personalizations, he may even be a bit mystical here and there, but whatever object is used as a pretext for his delusions, he is usually neither a sad man (or woman) nor a consumptive moron. *He's a dreamer.* It's not technology that devours him, but *his own dreams.*

The hatred for the tool

One cannot be grateful enough to Surrealism for having taken an interest in madness and for having done so not from the narrowly medical (and therefore realistic) angle which aims to free the madman from his madness, but quite the contrary to have done it according to this oblique genius which consisted in using the teachings resulting from madness to free the non-mad - and therefore also the mad as an immediate consequence. One cannot therefore blame Surrealism enough for not having persevered in this marvelous path which it had opened up and which no other movement of thought has been bold enough to take up since.

But even without this minimum of field culture that Breton and a few others happened to have, by simply taking interest in the signs, in the ordinary social representations of the madman, one could have seen that these had something to teach us about our relationship to the tool. Thus one of the most common images of the madman in the French society is that of a man walking around with a funnel on his head. (Note: this image was widely used in satirical newspapers at the time of the late Michel Debré)

This image reveals to us that one of the characteristics of the madman is *the ability not to use a tool in the conventional way*, that is to say, in the case of the funnel, to pour a liquid into a container whose entrance is a little too narrow. And I must insist on *the positive aspect* of this capacity, because it is by no means proven that a madman who walks around with a funnel on his head be hereby incapable of using this same instrument to pour water or wine in a bottle, just like those, reputedly sane around him. What characterizes the madman in the eyes of the crowds here is therefore not at all a lack, an infirmity, as would be the inability to respect a technical convention, but on the contrary the ability to go beyond this convention, that is to say to free himself from it. What this traditional image of the madman designates for us, here as on many other occasions, is therefore the index of a capacity for surpassing, the path to a possible freedom. And this alienation of which the madman speaks to us there, it is not his, but ours.

Let us observe things for a moment in their simple materiality: is this constraint which seems to belong to the tool, to the technology and from which the presence of mind of the madman frees us, really located in the tool, in the funnel object? When the question is put in rigorous and honest terms, everyone - except perhaps a few well-affected madmen - will

agree that *no funnel has ever been seen to compel a man to do anything*. But this is nevertheless what the way of speaking we use are suggesting. Do we have the words to say it otherwise? Do the tool, the machine, the technology, or the "technical system" constrain us to the point that we should free us from them? It's a bit sad to say it, but the weakness of our power of enunciation forces us there to state - without even shuddering - a real stupidity, a stupidity which bears witness to a no less real *animism* from which civilized humanity believed itself to be rid several thousand years ago.

Because indeed, it is not the funnel that constrains and confines the madman: *it is us*. Nor is it the funnel that compels us to that yellow laugh made of false condescension and genuine fear, by which we pretend to make fun of the madman, but which actually expresses our panic at the idea of the only power that we fear *on Earth as in Heaven*: the power of a *totally unleashed human spirit*.

What the despisers of tools, machines and technology hate - they say - is the constraint associated with them. And rightly so, because each technical object is indeed inhabited by a *spirit*. An extremely powerful spirit which is its planned use, its instructions for use, in short, the (very strongly recommended) way in which it is agreed to use it. And I will

add that in the absence of this spirit, the tool is *nothing*. Concretely and so to speak physically nothing. And this was nicely demonstrated by this South African film called "*The Gods must be mad*", in which an object as banal as an empty Coca Cola can, falling from a plane in the middle of the Kalahari desert and picked up by a Bushman suddenly was revealed as being dizzyingly deprived of any function and meaning. The spirit having left it, the Coca Cola can suddenly revealed as being much emptier than due to the simple absence of its contents: absolutely, radically and above all *semantically* empty. And even, despite all the attempts at interpretation honestly made by the Bushman society which had collected it, unsuitable for any use and ultimately clearly harmful to this society.

There are still mentally sane men on Earth who yet talk to their tools. Well aware that tools have a soul, it does not seem incongruous to them to address this soul to try to obtain the favors that are usually attributed to proper functioning. As we, unlike these primitive animists, no longer see the soul of things and consequently, do not mistrust it, we laugh at such primitivisms. But all the same we have kept enough of this primitivism within us to - spontaneous rationalists as we are - curse our machines as soon as they deprive us for a moment of the favors we expect from them: "Will you ever start up, you

damned thing...!".

So, we see that, basically, for our society as for ancient societies, *everything is spirit* and that therefore everything is man and that spirits never left us. They just passed below the threshold of our consciousness as evidenced by our innocence when swearing.

On the inhumanity of windmills

The tool, and even more so the machine, are often reproached for their inhumanity. And on closer inspection, what else could be inhuman? Certain conducts of certain men at certain times can be called inhuman, but that men in general or even that just some men can be as such, by nature, inhuman would obviously lead to a contradiction in terms it seems

Likewise, Nature, this strange and foreign mother, who makes us and envelops us, cannot be considered inhuman. One can call her indifferent, without pity, cruel, but no one would dream of attributing her inhumanity.

Neither tigers, nor wolves, nor lions, nor hyenas, nor even the plague are inhuman in the sense that extermination camps are inhuman. What is inhuman in the gas chamber is not located in the chamber. It is neither the chamber itself, nor the gas. It is an industrial protocol applied by men to other men and in which the machine or the tool serve as **masks**. As have served as masks, the wagons and locomotives, the railway tracks, the ticket offices and the tickets of the trains

which were used to lead men to mass killing. In the same way that one hides the face of the executioner to highlight the purely social nature of an execution - that is to say of a crime - and exempt from any fault the skilled craftsman who accomplishes it.

C'est cette même puissance, évidemment sociale et humaine, mais collective et anonyme, et qui par un étrange abandon de leur commune souveraineté se trouve projetée dans un au delà ou un en deçà des hommes, qui est à l'œuvre dans les protocoles techniques. C'est elle, ce *sérieux mortel des machines* dont parle Marcel Duchamp. C'est d'elle qu'est faite cette *banalité du mal* dont parle Hannah Arendt à propos d'Eichmann.

Cette inhumanité que l'on attribue à l'outil ou à la machine, et qui n'est évidemment que celle des hommes, mais dont ils s'absentent, est au fond de la même nature que les dieux, qui eux aussi peuvent être inhumains. De sorte aussi qu'il est bien inutile de combattre cette inhumanité dans l'outil puisque *c'est très exactement là qu'elle n'est pas*. On ne qualifie jamais d'inhumain que ce dont seuls des hommes sont capables.

It is this same power, obviously social and human, but

collective and *anonymous*, which, by a strange abandonment of their common sovereignty, is projected by men in imaginary areas beyond or below mankind, and this power is at work in the very core of technical protocols. Here lies, this *mortal seriousness of the machines* of which Marcel Duchamp speaks. Here too where is rooted this *banality of evil* of which Hannah Arendt speaks in connection with Eichmann.

This inhumanity, which is attributed to the tool or the machine, and which is obviously only that of men, but from which they are *absent*, is basically of the same nature as the gods, who themselves can also be inhuman. So that it is quite useless to fight this inhumanity in the tool since *it is very exactly there that it is not*. One only ever calls inhuman something that only men are capable of.

Et c'est aussi que les hommes *habitent* les processus techniques comme ils habitent les masques. Les êtres humains pris et articulés au sein des processus techniques sont interchangeables, comme le sont les visages derrière les masques. Le masque comme la technique *sont faits* de cette interchangeabilité. Derrière le masque il peut y avoir n'importe qui, tout comme n'importe quel être humain peut (théoriquement) en remplacer n'importe quel autre dans un processus technique. Le masque comme le processus

technique survivent à tout ceux qui les ont un moment habités et par cela les rapetissent et les ridiculisent.*

Men *inhabit* technical processes in the same way as they *inhabit* masks. Human beings that are incorporated and articulated within technical processes are interchangeable, as are the faces behind masks. Both the mask and the technique *are made of* this interchangeability. Behind the mask there may be *anyone*, just as any human being can (theoretically) replace any other in a technical process. Masks, like technical processes, outlives all those who happened to once inhabit them for a while and thereby diminish and ridicule them.

Mais à l'inverse, il suffit que nous abandonnions un instant nos outils et nos machines pour qu'ils deviennent absurdes. Ils prennent aussitôt un petit air mortuaire et spectral. Ils sont comme habités de nos absences et moirés de nos ombres. *Nous hantons nos machines comme elles nous hantent.*

Mais le masque a deux côtés, l'un extérieur et l'autre intérieur. Et quoique, pour qui considère les choses de l'extérieur, derrière le masque il n'y ait au fond *personne*, pour qui est *dans* le masque, il en va tout autrement. Car les hommes n'utilisent pas seulement les masques pour se

cache. Ils les utilisent bien plus essentiellement pour se transformer, pour *devenir autres*. Pour qui s'en revêt - et au fond, qu'il le veuille ou non - le *masque est toujours une aventure de l'esprit*. Cet usage du masque qui ouvre sur l'esprit, construit une présence chaque fois neuve qu'il porte, la passion augmentant, jusqu'à la transe et à l'incandescence.

But conversely, it suffices that we abandon our tools and our machines for a moment for them to become absurd. They immediately take on a mortuary and spectral air. They are as if inhabited by our absences and shimmering by our shadows. *We haunt our machines as they haunt us.*

But the mask has two sides, one exterior and the other interior. And although, for those who consider things from the outside, behind the mask there may basically be anyone or even no one, for those who are inside the mask, it is quite different. Because men don't just use masks to hide. They use them much more essentially to *transform themselves*, to become others. For whoever puts it on - and basically, whether he likes it or not - the mask is always an adventure of the mind. This use of the mask which opens onto the mind, constructs a new presence each time someone wears it, a passion that may increase to the point of trance and incandescence.

It is the complete opposite of this anonymous and disembodied social power which first appeared in the technical process and which seemed so strongly woven with shadows. You can repeat the same technical process thousands of times, but you never embody the mask in the same way twice. Or you take it away.

Therefore, the mask having now taught us *by the madness it offers us*, a certain wisdom of the tool, what happens if we reverse the technical rituals as we have just reversed the mask? What happens is Art - or Science, or Technique - but all of this was at first one single thing, that the industrial age, the capitalist age has torn to pieces. What then happens is adventure, risk, the surpassing of ourselves by means of the machine and the tool. The same flamboyant presence that lit up the inside of the mask then fills the actors.

Yes, *the actors*. Because Jazz exists, and also Surrealism, both capable of having "*brought up a curious possibility of thought, which would be that of its pooling*". (Breton, Second Manifesto). And if in these two marvelous examples of automatism the experience of each participant is singular, it burns and is nourished by the experience of others and even more intensely by the *common* experience.

Realism and Spectacle

The people who are hurt by tools - so many of them these days - have a very natural tendency to run away from the company of tools. But running away, in a species as deeply gregarious as ours, is impossible, and everyone knows it. So they deny the best they can what hurts them and which they cannot prevent. They try to reduce their tool usage as much as they can. We often hear them say that the use they have of their car, of their computer, is nothing but strictly utilitarian. "*For me, this machine is only a tool*" they say...

They do not realize that this strange way of negation, this "*this is only...*" is very exactly the imprint and the manifest act of *Realism*, the intellectual gear that moves what they claim to be fighting. So that, this "this is only...", rings loudly, to whoever knows how to hear, that the fight they wanted to fight is lost, because by their mindless denial they have become the very enemy they wanted to fight — — assuming that they ever ceased to be a part of this enemy itself...

There was a time when you could say that a refrigerator was just... a machine for cooling and preserving food. But it eventually turned out that it was also a machine for creating

holes in the earth's ozone layer. Denial is not a strategy that works.

In the world of Realism where the use of everything is defined and regulated, *each thing may only ever appears as it is supposed to be*. And each new tool brings with it a host of new constraints that begin to resonate in the future like a noisy string of saucepans. These constraints are not related to things, they are **social** because *nothing can ever constrain men except other men*. They are made up of accepted, agreed, recommended, required, legal and finally mandatory uses which no one is entitled to avoid under exclusion or sanctions.

Any tool, any machine, implements a *prediction*, and therefore forces us to *wait* for this prediction to be fulfilled. By dint of repetitions the expectations, from this hope they once were, were turned and solidified into boredom, and then into despair. But what else this waiting and this boredom are made of, except of our absence from ourselves, starting with this absence from the part of ourselves that we have left in the machine and by the virtue of which it works - "*without us*" - as claims the tale, in which all believe or pretend to believe. Realism, the Spectacle are only built of our desertions. So that boasting about reducing one's use of technical objects to what

is admitted, agreed, recommended, required, legal and obligatory, is almost like thinking it is possible to free yourself by humming frequently enough and with a bit of conviction "*Yes . Master*".

This is only... Here stand the sign and the antiphon of the master dis-enchanter, the subtitle and the pilot fish of each realistic image, this irony from which each realistic image throws at you: "*look, it works. ...*". And then, "this marvel was after all just that, only that". And from this "only that", all marvel seems to have indeed disappeared. There remains only the surprise of the effect, of the deception, of the trompe l'oeil, with which we are first enchanted and then to which we abandon ourselves. And in the end, "*everything that was directly experienced has receded into a representation*".

Squint your eyes though, and force your vision a little. Something still vibrates and throbs beyond the contours: this "that" which Realism shows us, it suffices to turn it on the other side to realize that Realism is itself no much, and that it is certainly no marvel. The marvel itself is still there, as usual, just a little beyond, behind the mask, the grimace. It is there, but simply, it is not, it never was, it will never be only that.

But by the way, isn't this "*look, it works...*" of

representation, just a pretentious version of the modest and faithful little song of the machine and the tool? Except that a realistic image is not just a a machine for to see. It is a machine to see the universe *as it must be seen*.

Umour and machines

Beginnings are often the occasion for a moment of visibility as to the nature of the period that will follow. A visibility that one hardly will ever recover until this period is over. The beginning of the so-called "Industrial Revolution" in the late 18th century and early 19th century was the occasion for a moment of some kind of debauchery of lucidity as to what was to come next. The initiators of socialist thought, from Saint Simon to Fourier then to Marx and Engels, all felt more or less as prophets, and rightly so.

Of course, from cowardice to abandonment and from lies to corruption, the word Socialism has now become an equivalent of the word *Treason*. This at the end of a huge activity of journalistic and even academic propaganda where the movement of workers emancipation ended up disappearing "under the carpet" of Capital where the clerks - that is to say properly the priests - of Capital and their masters now trample it with an - almost - unmixed satisfaction. So the official watchword of the time became "There Is No Alternative", which, as we can see every day, authorizes and justifies all excesses.

The beginning of the 20th century, which saw the widespread irruption of machines, was also - particularly among artists - the moment of a lucidity which, to say the least, seems today to have been strangely lost. From the machines that Picabia painted when he was tired of painting Spanish women, to Duchamp's necessarily humorous critique of the "deadly seriousness of machines", from the incorporation of technical objects in certain surrealist montages to the manifest emptiness of Tinguely's delirious mechanisms, it is indeed through a misuse as systematic as it is humorous that the irrationality, the absurdity, and ultimately the profound ridiculousness of each movement of Capital now shines out in the eyes of everyone.

All this contrasts with the almost *sacerdotal seriousness*, the *deadly* seriousness of today's technophobes who, having never worked on a construction site, are unaware that these schoolboy jokes of artists from the beginning of the 20th century have their origins in the daily lives of site teams, often freer from employer supervision than other workers confined to the barracks of Capital.

Pierre Petiot – Mars 2011