

THE ROLE OF CHANCE
IN TODAY'S ART

In recent years it has frequently been pointed out that one of the salient characteristics of contemporary art, that is, abstraction, is the fact that it is not bounded by local traditions or cultures, but has rapidly affirmed itself and spread throughout the civilized world. This phenomenon, the international quality of abstraction, it seems to me, has not yet received the attention it deserves. In general, people have contented themselves with noticing it and, according to the circumstances, either enjoying or mistrusting it. Those who see in abstraction an elevated form of culture, to which the entire human race should adhere in order to achieve a rapid ascent toward a higher common destiny, are pleased. Their opponents also judge the phenomenon from a "cultural" point of view, but they find it a typical phenomenon of mass culture, of the sort of culture that breaks up true and proper culture into utilitarian and demonically hypnotic forms. Both optimists

Translated by Therese Jaeger.

and pessimists make the same mistake: they attribute a merely mechanistic significance to what they call culture, considering it a means of transmission and diffusion. According to them, the internationalization of abstraction is due to the simple fact that today, with television, radio, airplanes and illustrated papers, ideas and novelties travel more quickly than in the past. It would be as valid to maintain that the people of the earth have not all in turn been simultaneously Platonists or Buddhists or Christians only because Plato and Buddha and Christ could not send telegrams or grant interviews to newspapers.

To explain the universal diffusion of abstraction, it is enough to remember that this particular form of art had to be born, as has always been the case with art at all times, out of the special perspective in which reality was seen. Not a method chosen by chance or by the caprice of the artist, but precisely the perspective which is, at a given historical moment, common to a given human society. I am not saying something new when I point out that people today—regardless of particular religious or other beliefs, and apart from culture heritage and social organisation—have no other perspective for looking at reality than as an object of scientific knowledge. By this I don't mean to say that we and our contemporaries, of whatever race, education and profession, are all without distinction involved in scientific work as a team, hardly less specialized than that of the professional scientists. Our role as "scientists" is reduced merely to that of being placed in a world which we can perceive only rationally, no matter which of its aspects is offered to our sight or other senses—or to all five senses together. And this is true not only where the reality surrounding us impresses us tangibly with traces of the rational appropriation which man has made. Not only, that is, where mountains *are* mines, rivers are sources of electric power, the earth an operative basis for tractors and chemical fertilizers; but also in the heart of virgin forest land and, tomorrow, in the heart of a lunar crater: in other words, wherever we would not know how to take account of the multiple possibilities of reality except on the basis of the cognitive density which it presents to the mind.

It is superfluous to underline the fact that the point of origin of this "scientific interpretation" of reality goes back to an essential phase of Greek thought, and has therefore a much longer

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and fuller history than that of science itself. The point to which attention must be drawn is that only today has this method of looking at reality become a norm throughout the world and for every human being. Which makes it impossible to speak of it as a "culture" in the historical sense, and in particular to speak of it under any of the categories in which history has taught us to consider human doings. It would be indeed a mistake to believe that it is a matter of a "vision of the world" caused by concrete events of a spiritual or practical order, as Christianity could have been, for instance, or one of the technological revolutions of the primitive world. The scientific orientation which is the basis of the contemporary world is without doubt the extreme extension of something historically definable, that is, Western thought, but it is not the result of any moment or situation in it which was historically given: it is simply its destiny.

In explaining the cause of abstraction it is, therefore, not necessary to call on contemporary physics simply because its concepts elude any intuitive representation. The fact that physics cannot render in terms of images the ultimate reality to which it tends (and nevertheless is able to deal effectively with that ultimate reality) does not make more intelligible the motives behind a painting which does not represent anything at all, but just for that reason, is obliged to give this "nothing" a real presence much more cumbersome than any illusive representation of reality. It was not relativity and quantum theory that canceled the appearances of the world out of painting, but rather the same thing which made these scientific discoveries possible: or, simply, the way in which each one of us faces the real. This method, which is also called that of objective representation, can be synthesized in the most elementary formula we know: the world is composed of objects, and these objects are a part of reality because we are able to represent them in an objective way with their proper characteristics of weight, circumference, form, color, etc., rather than because we see them.

To represent objects in an objective way is to explain them to ourselves [Heidegger]. To think of reality objectively, that is, *beyond* the simple appearances through which it manifests itself to us, is indeed the only way in which it is possible for us to conceive of reality today. Today; and therefore today the artist

creates abstract paintings: because, like everyone else, he is caught in the net of objectivity, and objectivity inevitably forces us to break down the “wall of the visible”—that is, it puts us in the presence of the effective properties of objects, but not of objects as things: present things, simply offered to one’s sight.

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One might object that it is true that we conceive of the real on the basis of its objective properties and not of its appearance to the sight; but that such properties are incontestably exact, and can be reduced to the most precise concepts of weight, circumference, volume, energy, etc. Now, even if we admit that the abstract painter cannot, as a man, leave this objective conception of the real out of consideration (and therefore conceives of it beyond phenomenal appearances), as an artist where will he find, once he has passed beyond the “wall of the visible,” the exact elements or tangible models to which he must refer in order to transfigure this objective reality? Perhaps in weights, in circumferences, in the formulas of chemists or equations of physicists?

There are those who try to convince themselves that this is indeed the case: that abstract painting is the image of that which we don’t see, but perceive intuitively or know in the abstract: of the microcosm or the macrocosm, of the explosions of the nebulous and infinite chemico-physical reactions of our nerve cells. But I am convinced that we can be satisfied with a far less adventurous explanation, for which it is not necessary to disengage ourselves from our knowledge of art, that is, esthetics.

Esthetics too, in the course of its relatively brief history, has confronted its own object, art, precisely as an object, in an objective form. It verified the history of this object, it measured, so to speak, the object’s extension in time and space, its characteristics, its essential attributes, its ideal *values*. Finally it advanced theories on art’s essence itself, and of course it could represent this essence to itself only in objective form, thus coming within reach of the insuperable limit of objective thought: its inapplicability to being. Indeed, no esthetics has resolved what is called the mystery of art, just as no science has succeeded in gathering the essence of the things behind objects.

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When we speak of esthetics, or of the thought which makes art its object, we do not of course mean only the esthetics of the philosophers but also, if not indeed above all, the objective way in which mankind today conceives of art. This attitude has not always been the same. The Greeks, for example, thought of art with so little objectivity that they were forced to call it *techne*, a word whose literal translation would be "production," and which at that time certainly had a more noble meaning, but generically meant pretty much what it does now. Today, however, we have gathered in this room,* and in this room we are celebrating a rite which would have shocked the sages of ancient Greece. We are speaking in a manner that is abstract, but nonetheless objective, about art. And the more abstractly we speak of it, the more we objectivize it. We represent it to ourselves in terms of value, of form, of quality. And these abstract attributes, which are however the pertinent ones, help us to collocate it in our real world, together with the objects about which, as objects, we know everything or almost everything, but which we do not know in their being as simple things. In the other rooms, at the same time, we celebrate other rites. Visitors go up and down admiring canvasses. These canvasses are part of a museum. This museum cannot be different, in essence from other museums, and in particular it cannot be different from the museum in its proper and original sense, that is, the museum of ancient art. The museum of ancient art is a fairly recent invention, with no relationship to *antiquaria* or to the princely collections of the Renaissance or the Baroque Age. The museum of ancient art was born when mankind became aware that works of art of the past maintained their own ideal value beyond the historical period in which they were materially produced. And this value constitutes their true meaning to such a degree that the various accessory meanings, ascribed to the works by those who produced them, can be ignored. What does it matter, for example, that Fra Angelico painted in order to serve his own religious faith? His works are works of art in that they do not express only these and similar passing

* With slight modifications, this is the text of a lecture held in March, 1960 at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome. The reader should kindly bear this in mind when the occasion is explicitly mentioned.

values, limited to an historical period, to the life of one man, or to the place and light of a far-off morning. Faiths and historical periods pass, the life of men comes to an end, places are modified and every morning is the same as the next. But the work of art remains, freed of all this dross, finally free to radiate its own value into the centuries, like the carbon that has continued for millennia to pulsate in its invisible heart with throbs of radioactivity. Thus the museum was born, the place where works of art, although ancient and from different times, all live the same life and communicate the same message from one work to the next. The message of pure form and pure color, of absolute value, of esthetic feeling. And so, too, was born the museum of modern art: because, evidently, if this is the place where works of art best display their unchangeable meaning and their pure values, they may as well go to the museum immediately, fresh from the hands of the artist.

I do not know of any situation more paradoxical than that which must certainly be the order of the day for every scrupulous director of a museum of modern art. I will demonstrate it to you immediately. The museum is full, and so are its vaults, but painters continue to paint. An enlargement of the building becomes necessary; an architect comes and studies the best way of doing this. Naturally, it is not a question of adding only one or two galleries; it will be necessary also to construct more, which may remain empty at the moment but will then be ready to receive the art of future years. There it is. We are so sure of our way of thinking about art, and so convinced of the exactness of the objective criteria by which we evaluate it, that we can easily make our manner of thinking and evaluating pre-exist art itself, and that which it will be tomorrow.

It is necessary therefore to conclude that, in its own way and in its own order, the art of today has in the attributes and values which we confer on it as many "objective properties," and those no less correctly deduced properties, as those pertaining to every other phenomenon of reality. The thought which thinks of art in terms of its "objective properties" is fundamentally the same thing as the thought that thinks of mountains in terms of their height, of distance in terms of kilometers, of bodies in terms of their atomic and cellular constitution. Abstract painting is the extreme

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consequence of this manner of thinking of art; just as progress and the present planetary civilization are the consequences of the manner of thinking of reality.

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The analogy, indeed the substantial identity which we have recognized between the thought which objectivizes reality and the thought which objectivizes art, seems to be shattered by a new difficulty. To think objectively of the real means to think of it in terms of a cognitive density which is very profound, but nevertheless has clearly marked limits. In the case of the mountain, for example, one begins with its height and ends with its physical constitution, which can be reduced to the atom. But in this sense there can be no doubt that all mountains are equal, and the objective representation that we make of Mont Blanc, for example, is no different from that which we might make of Kili-manjaro, except for a simple difference of the numerical factors expressed in the two representations. Now, if abstract art is derived from the objective idea of art, why aren't all abstract canvasses the same, identical one with the other just as all mountains are, when objectively represented?

The question can be resolved in a formal way. We could say, for example, that among the objective values of art there is also originality, and that therefore the difference between one canvas by Pollock and another—and in a broader sense between Pollock, say, and Mondrian or any other abstract painter—is only an exterior difference, in which that value of originality is expressed which is *common*, that is, *identical* for all works of art. But evidently at this point we must break our train of thought, to escape from the maze of mirrors in which we have been caught. For this means, too, that the canvasses are different from one another as are the mountains and everything else we look at. Even if it were a difference without value, we feel that the denial of objectivity, the denial of the nothing which has a mathematical formula for a face, can sustain itself solely by this *non-value*.

And so inevitably we turn from the illusory profundity of objects to the surfaces of things. A surface most tender to the penetration of objective knowledge; but barred and impenetrable

where it covers the abyss of being. And so we turn to the surface of painting, this varied, spotted surface, offered to the senses like any other existing object. Like any other existing object, tender to the sounding-rod of objective knowledge; impenetrable in its essence. But disposed in these two contrasting and almost incompatible directions by the hand of man.

What do we mean? Simply that abstract painting is like an object of the real world, but that among all the real objects it is the only one that shows us a decisive break between its objective being, that which is offered to our objective thought; and its objective being as a *thing*, a thing uniquely based on its appearance, and revealing its appearance and its presence—here, now, in this aspect and no other—to be decreed by its being.

We have more than one proof to nourish our conviction that abstract painting is related to the world of reality, to the point of *representing itself* as an object, in accordance with our objective idea either of art or of the real, and at the same time trying to *present itself* as a *thing*, that is, as the means toward a decisive consideration regarding the actual essence of art and the basis of this essence in being.

First of all, if we decide to place abstract painting in its proper historical perspective, or rather to arrange its various stages in order of importance rather than of chronology, we realize that its moment of origin springs from reality, rather than from the merely formal moment of the “first” or second or third abstract canvas. The moment of origin can be identified in the lightning-like intuition which brought Marcel Duchamp to conceive of his *ready-mades*. The *ready-mades*, as you know, were simple objects: a book, a spool of thread, or perhaps even a latrine. As objects they were, so to speak, the carriers of their own objectivity, relating to use, to practical meaning, to their simple physical constitution, and to all the other objective elements which constitute for us the idea of a book, a spool of thread, etc. Duchamp, on the other hand, wanted to give them value as sculptures or as symbolic objects; he wanted them to pass over from their own objectivity to the objectivity of art. The passage, of course, did not occur, because evidently it is not sufficient to send a spool of thread to an exhibition in order to give it those *values* which we consider artistic. Nonetheless, for a short time, a time of shock and sur-

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prise, objects remained *adespoti*, they were not fully valid either in their own objectivity or in that of art. In an experimental manner, as in a laboratory, Duchamp succeeded therefore in making objects fall from their objective horizon, and provoked them into projecting themselves as things, or rather (and this was the limit of the experiment) as the representations of things.

The annals of Dadaism are full of similar provocations of the real—provocations understood, I repeat, to deprive objects of their cognitive density, in order to force them into their original and essential measurements as simple things. And I repeat also, because no one will ever insist upon it enough, that the *ready-mades* of Duchamp, the photographic experiments of Man Ray, the ink-blots of Picabia or Arp's bits of paper are far more valid as the beginning of contemporary abstraction than all the more or less abstract canvasses painted between the two wars. Indeed, what is contemporary abstraction (considered in its entirety and in its principal lines of development: from *action painting* to *tachisme* to the non-objective and the most recent directions, however one decides to call them: painting of gesture, of material, and so forth), what is this "second" wave of abstraction, if not a sort of reversal of Duchamp's paradoxical experiments? Instead of being based on real objects, it is based on something whose constitution is no less real than theirs: that is, on art thought of objectively, on the canvas created for a museum, on the canvas that is—according to a celebrated definition that has been blocking the road of art for nearly three quarters of a century—"a flat surface with forms and colors arranged in a certain order." It takes off from this object and in a certain way provokes it into departing, or falling from, its own objectivity, from the system of formalistic, ideal or merely psychological values constituting it as an object. It provokes this object with all the means at its disposal: but however iconoclastic and antitraditional these may be (ink-blots, rips, holes, etc.) they always end by re-introducing into the order of objectivity, as far as possible, new determinations of the oldest values, such as originality, for example, or novelty or artistic freedom. However, there is a moment in which these provocations seem to reach their goal, and the horizon of objectivity cracks, and the painting falls through the trap-door of its own objective auto-representation onto the bare earth of the

world, to become a thing among things. *This moment is left to chance.*

One cannot understand what painting is trying to say today, without recognizing that it speaks the language of chance. And it is truly a mystery that, throughout these years of critical furor, no one has dared ask himself about something that contemporary painting hardly attempts to conceal: the fact that it is ruled by chance, and expresses itself in haphazard forms.

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The word "chance" (Italian *caso*) is derived from the word "to fall" (Italian *cadere*): originally, therefore, "chance" means "fallen from," which is different from "fallen" (that is, from the simple consequence of falling) inasmuch as it maintains a relation to the place *from which* the falling began but does not locate anywhere the place *onto which* it has fallen. This meaning is maintained in all modern languages: in German, for example, chance is called *Zufall*, that is, "falling towards:" it, too, leaving indeterminate the place in which the falling occurs and is accomplished. The Latin etymology is rather complicated, since in addition to the root of "falling" there is also that of the word "cause." Just the same, it is exactly this ambiguity which illuminates for us the place where the falling of chance begins, that is, the ordered horizon of causality. Therefore in Western thought everything that is arbitrary and undetermined is synonymous with chance: since chance takes off from, abandons or falls from, the order of causes. Thus, for Lucretius, atoms sometimes deviate spontaneously from the vertical line of fall, accidentally producing worlds and things. And so, for Bergson, chance is the feeling of marvel that fills us every time we encounter a mechanism in which we believe we find a finality—which, however, is not there.

Seeing chance in this perspective does not, however, illuminate an essential point for us, which is to know how chance behaves in regard to itself, how it behaves in the place and circumstances in which its *falling from* stops and is produced. At this point it helps us to understand the word *automaton*, as the Greeks called chance. *Automaton* of course does not mean automaton or automatic in the sense of something which moves mechanically ac-

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ording to fixed plans. The concept of movement does not enter into the Greek word in any way, much less the concept of mechanical movement. Even in Aristotle's sense, which is probably the source from which we have obtained the words *automaton* and *automatic*, *automaton* stands for chance in its real and proper meaning, i.e., for that which does not respond to its own finality, but to some other purpose which is not contained within itself. Responding to an extraneous purpose is therefore, for Aristotle, to act haphazardly. On the other hand, even this interpretation leaves us in the dark as to the method effectively followed by chance in order to develop its own action. *Automaton* is composed of *auto*, "oneself," and *maton*, which is derived from the verb *maomai*. *Maomai* has various meanings, including to wish, to desire, to seek. It is a matter of determining which of these meanings helps us to understand the original meaning of the word "chance." The root of *maomai* is *men*, from which, through the common Indo-European foundation, are derived the German *Mann* and the English "man." In an even earlier form *men* and *maton* go back to the Sanskrit *matab*, which means thought—in the general sense of the thought that remembers, from which are derived the Latin *mens*, *memini*, and the Greek *mimnesko*. *Maomai*, therefore, expresses a seeking which is indeed a search for something remembered, and at the same time the precariousness of this search, almost more motivated by the desire to remember than by the remembrance itself. *Automaton*, chance, is therefore that which seeks itself, is not supported by its own finality, and which only remembers darkly, whence it has fallen, that is, the ordered horizon of causality.

Dispossessed, unstable and inconsistent, chance forlornly seeks itself. It does not possess its own foundation, but is, as it were, in a perpetual struggle not to return to that from which it has fallen. As long as the search for itself lasts, chance exists. When it stops, there is no longer chance; the laceration which it produced in the cloth of normality is mended and cancelled; the "from where" becomes once again "where," and, in this location "where," chance begins once more to ascend the stream of objectivity.

The part played by chance in contemporary painting begins, perhaps, to appear in its proper light. Chance, in its search for itself, is that which forces us to remain on the far side of the

“wall of the visible.” The painter who drops a splotch of paint onto the canvas entrusts himself to chance; and doing so he offers us for a brief moment the opportunity to turn our backs on the ordered world of objects—and above all on the object which is the canvas itself, inasmuch as it is founded on the order of objective values in which alone we, in our situation, can think of art. For a brief moment; indeed, neither can the painter think of art otherwise than by thinking of its objective values, nor can his casual splotches exist except in relation to this horizon of values from which they have fallen and to which, in order to remain casual, they must continue to refer.

Therefore, sooner or later, casual blotches cease to be casual; they reenter the ranks of objective values and become a pretense of painting, of beautiful painting, a form of shapelessness, merely decorative excursions. Therefore every great artistic success in these last years has been a success that went all the way, that closed more roads than it opened. Pollock, Fautrier, Hartung, to name only these few, represent indeed just so many limits beyond which one cannot go. The roads which they opened lasted as long as chance could move about on them freely. They closed when chance became a norm, a fixed rule, an esthetic value. Just the same, it would be absurd not to recognize that their work puts us in view of a decisive rent in the horizon of objectivity. It is due to this type of painting that we begin to understand, today, that our reality has initiated a fatal reflux from the world of objects and is now trying to oppose to it, if only with a casual splotch of color, the ancient “wall of the visible” of simple things.

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This perspective, I admit, seems designed to disconcert us rather than to give us quiet confidence in contemporary art. Accustomed as we are to assured bold judgments, to intemperate admiration and disparagement, our inquiry as to the part played by chance in present-day painting may seem to many to be a comfortable excuse to cross over into a position of doubt, without taking a stand either for it or against it. If painting haphazardly is a good thing—I already hear people telling me—let us sing the praises of chance and found a Chair of Casual Painting at the Academy

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of Fine Arts. But chance is precisely *not* a value in any sense, either good or bad; if it were, it would cease being chance and become a project or a program. Chance, I repeat, falls spontaneously from the horizon of values and of objectivity. Or, rather, since we ourselves are this horizon, constituting its *subjects* insofar as we are men, (and now, as our destiny seems to demand, questioning its validity), it is our doubt that makes chance fall. In another sense, we could say that chance is a gift: the ultimate gift of the real, thought of objectively, that is conceived in the only dimension in which it is possible nowadays to think of it.

But then, if this is really how things stand, chance should not pose its enigma only in painting; but wherever our objective representations of the real are wavering. And indeed, if we look about us, we are quite disconcerted by the extent of the territory wherein chance plays its games, more or less openly and completely unopposed.

You will pardon me if I remind you that this is the era of photography as well as abstract painting. At first, it might seem that there is no bond between the two. However, they have something in common, something which I would call a nausea of the optical world, of the passive transcription of the visible. Do not think of the photographs in the family album; the photographs which interest us in this case are those of the great photographers, of the professionals who possess and know how to manipulate filters, lenses, exposure meters and all the rest. We might expect that with all these instruments of the most refined technology the great photographer's job would be greatly facilitated. And this could certainly be true if his job was to fix that which he sees in technically impeccable photographs. However, the exact opposite is the case. The most sensitive instruments help him to register on film the vastest possible range of effects, reproducing the same subject an infinite number of times. Then, in the dark room, he will take advantage of the perfection of other complicated instruments, and always with the same purpose: to avoid that optimum of optical rendering which his camera, used according to the rules, would give him without trouble. Trial and retrial; among a hundred more or less similar negatives, one stands out that is like none of the others, and not even like the subject which, in nature, had caught the interest of the photographer. What does his work, then, consist

of? Simply of predisposing conditions for a chance success, of letting chance enter into the orderly proceedings of a purely technical maneuver dependent in each of its phases on precise and extremely rational scientific knowledge. They say, and I don't think this can be denied, that the photographic image consists of a mechanical transcription of everything that can be seen by the human eye. That means an extremely realistic image, almost more realistic than reality. Nonetheless, if this transcription is to afford us the slightest emotion, it must present reality to us in a way in which we have never seen it before, in a combination of visible elements that are all very real, but held together only by chance.

In a general way, one can say that wherever, and by whatever means, one tries to extract a drop of emotion from the sealed face of objective reality, one does not know how to do it, or at least one does not do it, except by provoking and making possible the manifestation of chance. The great demiurge of chance, for example, is the director; not only the cinema director, but also the stage director: a personage completely unknown in times that were, otherwise as rich as ours in dramatic productions, but who today attracts even more attention than the actors or the author. The director is, basically, a photographer without a camera, who therefore tries to arrange his real objects directly in an unplanned combination, so as to shake them out of the lethargy of their own objectivity. In other times, acting meant moving and speaking on the stage according to conventional and inflexible rules. Just as the acrobat knows that in order to keep his balance on a wire he must stand in a certain position and only in that position, so the actor knew that in order to play a specific part he had to make his voice "sing" and to carry himself in a certain way. The director, if he had existed, could only have reminded him of this—of something which was a novelty neither to the actor nor to the audience. Today, instead, the ancient canons of a fiction which one accepts as such, and which indeed, highlights its colors in order to make clear the break separating it from the real world—these canons have fallen; and acting knows no rule other than that of being natural, of verisimilitude and realism of expression. What does this mean? That it is really an exact copy of what people do and say in everyday life? Evidently not. It means, rather, that, no longer knowing how to draw from ob-

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jective reality schemes which could represent this reality to us with the unique force of dramatic synthesis, we are forced to entrust ourselves to a director who must search out, from the infinite twists and turns of this reality, a voice, a sound, a gesture which without being in the least unreal are *brought together by chance* in such a way that they succeed somehow in giving us the illusion that the world has some aspects which are still capable of moving us esthetically.

Let us leave the theater and return to our homes. It would seem that here, at least, within domestic walls, reality must present itself to us in a logical and coherent order, incorporated in objects, in things which as things should be based on a clear and manifest essence, because they exist for us and we helped make them. Our houses: the first dwellings in mankind's history, where there is no essential relationship between what they contain and the people who live in them. Because we construct them just as we would fabricate an aquarium for tropical fish, with fake rocks, fake coral, and plastic starfish and seahorses. And then we proceed to live in them like these fish, which need in reality only a certain temperature and the column of air rising from the bottom, but have no idea what to do with the fake tropical *décor*. So we surround ourselves with the pseudo-Etruscan vase and the Louis XV console, the Empire table and the Biedermeier armchair, the colonial bed and the Swedish bookcase, the abstract painting and the popular print. We want a fireplace to watch the fire, but we keep ourselves warm with central heating; we dine by candlelight but see by electricity. None of these objects owe their origin to our concrete existence; they were not made for us and we cannot in any way think of them as things expressing our faith, our plans, that which we demand from being alive and the answer which we insist on receiving. The Etruscan vase was brought about by the concrete existence of men who no longer exist. Its form was determined by a religious faith, a vision of the world, an entire society, a quantity and type of work, which do not correspond in any way to that which we today believe and know and do. And so it goes for every other object in our houses. What is it, then, that holds these objects together if not our detachment from them, and their consequent non-participation in our lives? Isolated, placed on the scene simply for esthetic enjoyment, these

objects are at best a collection; they are never essential and necessary forms of *living*, understood as the act which constitutes the prime and fundamental relationship between our *being* and the world. What is it, then, but chance, that carries them to our shore and detaches them from it, changes them and sweeps them away with the tide of time?

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The examples given, and the many others which one could give, must be accepted, like all examples, with a certain caution. The casual factor, as we have seemed to trace it in painting, photography, theater and contemporary furnishings, certainly does not constitute the essence of any of these phenomena, nor can it be considered as a sort of entelechy immanent in every present form of esthetic activity. The manifestation of chance presents itself, rather, as the remainder, the unburnt residue of an imperfect reaction, like that which unhappily seems to be produced in the world today—something between *knowing* and *doing*, between the real, conceived objectively, and the works with which we carry out this conception concretely. There is no doubt that from a metaphysical point of view knowing and doing are the same thing; but it is precisely in consequence of an incomplete action, of a not-knowing-how-to-do, that chance reveals itself as a gap in knowledge, as a flaw in objectivity. We will not say, therefore, that the open or hidden meaning of the above-mentioned activities can be relegated to an imaginary category of the casual; we will not even say that through the flaw produced by chance, reality finally shows itself to us in a non-objective dimension. We will limit ourselves to considering chance as a symptom of a defective act—of an act that, not succeeding in engaging the sphere of objectivity as a whole, gives it a means of placing itself beyond our rational control for a brief space, and for an even briefer moment. The final meaning of today's painting and of the other phenomena we discussed is certainly determined by forces much deeper and more complex than chance; nonetheless, chance emerges with its own force, or at least with its own turgidity of appearances, capable perhaps of permanently removing the needle of rational thought from the pole of objectivity.

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Let us allow a last example to clarify this point. Our age boasts, in comparison with the age immediately preceding it, a more lucid, vast and profound understanding of the art of the past. An understanding that expresses itself not only in a high degree of development of a particular discipline—the history of art—but also, if not above all, in the way in which we care materially for the conservation of our artistic patrimony by restoration. It is said, indeed, that restoration is the most eloquent sign of the critical understanding of a work of art: since in restoration one does not merely assure oneself of a work's simple physical existence but, *inseparably from this*, respects and where necessary reestablishes its fundamental and original condition. In this proposition the "theory" of restoration is summarized; a correct and impeccable theory if ever there was one. It is evident that we cannot have a good critical understanding of a work of art if the work itself is not free from retouching, interpolations and every other non-original element. This point of view is in perfect harmony with the historical approach to art, an approach that is typically ours. On the other hand, it would be a vain presumption to wish to establish *a priori* the necessary conditions for restoring a work of art to its original state, if these conditions were not inherent in the material structure of the work, and therefore such as could be scientifically determined, documented and restored. The scientific side of restoration is connected in this way to the historical, a union in which perhaps it is not mistaken to detect, even in this delicate cultural field, the spirit of Technique.

Having enumerated and distinguished the principles which guide restoration, and having recognized the rigor with which they are applied, it necessarily follows that at least the act of restoration should not be open to charges as being defectively carried out. Fortunately, we can go by rather precise criteria in judging the basis for such charges. They are the criteria which we consider valid with regard to restoration as it was carried out in the past—restoration, that is, which was an "interpretation" of the work of art *according to the taste of the moment*, a sort of "second" modern work made to grow with more or less *désinvolture* on the cast-off limb of the ancient work. Is it possible that restoration as practiced today—moved by an historical conscience more profound than ever, and guided by a precise scientific methodology—

has also committed the error of former times and, with all its respect for the original, given the works to which it is devoted a "contemporary" face?

By a figure's too smooth profile, by a too gelatinous *chiaroscuro*, they are now in a position to judge whether a certain painting by Raphael, for example, underwent restoration at the beginning or the end of the nineteenth century, at the hands of a restorer with neo-classic or pre-Raphaelite taste. So let us take the canvas and with the greatest care remove the retouching—being very careful at the same time to leave a certain opacity in the color which we reveal, caused not by the retouching but by the original paint which has darkened; in other spots, beneath the restoration, we find no trace of the old color but only a layer of preparative; in still other points we find not even that: only the wood of the frame or the weave of the canvas. After the final cleaning everything that remains from the original is in full sight; the painting is now composed not only of that which is left of the painting by Raphael, but also of the various accidents which have befallen it; the natural darkening of the paint, the no less natural network of little cracks that time has spread over it, the worm-holes, the abrasions on the painted surface; the sections eaten away down to the preparative and those that have been destroyed even further, down to the wood or the canvas. Our respect for the original does not allow us to interfere with this surface, created by accident, except very slightly. It is out of the question that one should mask it again with retouching; we must limit ourselves to the most prudent registration of effects: to be sure that the wood or canvas appear as such and not as blots of color; that the gaps, while remaining gaps, fall on the space surrounding the work and not on the image itself; that every other accident is seen immediately to be a hole, spot, crack or burn, and does not deceive the eye as a possible suggestion of form. The final result will be that Raphael's painting, far from seeming a chaotic ruin, will not only speak to us in the fullness of its original message, but will have acquired, so to speak, a supplement of reality: a fuller physical presence, an "excès d'objet." An admirable result, doubtless; but are we sure that what makes us admire it today will not be interpreted one day as an unwanted addition due to our own taste? It is useless to deny it:

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these abrasions, gaps, cracks, this evidence accorded to the "material" of the painting, this "excès d'objet" have their exact counterparts in contemporary painting; it is unimportant that their origin is justified by respect for history and by our understanding of the original values of the work of art: it is certainly not for these motives that the surfaces of contemporary canvasses are so tortured. But if for a moment we place in parentheses the two diverse meanings of a hole in a painting by Raphael and in a non-objective canvas, it is undeniable that we find ourselves looking at the same hole, for whose presence, in that form and in that place, *only chance can be held responsible*.

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Here the question arises whether or not chance, even before becoming manipulated esthetically, contains in itself an esthetic value, whether or not it is "beautiful" in itself to the beholder. A question which certainly cannot be put to anyone who thinks of art objectively: since chance has no objective properties and therefore is not a "value." In this non-value, however, we have seen that there is concentrated all the residual power of *apparition* which still conserves the objective face of the real. Thus, while on the one hand art accepts chance, the non-value, seeing in it reality's final method of manifesting itself as pure and simple *appearance*, on the other hand it cannot stop converting the non-value into value, looking at chance esthetically or at least making esthetic use of it.

From the point of view of esthetic thought, we repeat, chance, the non-value, is unthinkable. Therefore, the artist tries desperately to bring it back within the boundaries of the creative act: making the casual blot reascend to the gesture which produced it. And then it is evident that the gesture can only exist *per se*, in the senseless figure of the ritual gesture. But also because of these errors and contradictions, if not above all because of them, for the first time in history art becomes open to the most basic questions. Let us be grateful that art itself grants us this.