

# **Ambivalence of past and present**

## **Interview with Antoine Leperlier**

### **by Jean-Marie Lhôte (february 1999)**

A theatre director has a dual perspective on dramatic works from the past which depends partly on his own feelings and partly on the way he interprets the spirit of the time; thus across the centuries works live and are reborn through the confrontation of past and present. It is the same for painting, sculpture, music and other arts where cognizance is a source of vital energy and consolation. Similarly, contemporary works also have need of dual stance: if the historical and the current are not blended, the former assumed certitudes cause them to wither and the latter dispels them in trendiness.

This dynamic dual vision should be applied to some artists more than others, if the spirit of their work is not to remain inaccessible. One such is Antoine Leperlier who is a singular position since in him the blending of past and present occurs at all levels - technical, social, aesthetic, even philosophical - as may be understood from the simulating encounter published here. It should be stated that his personal history has predisposed him to this perception of time. It is not so usual to come from a line of artists these days, with a great-grandfather like Emile Decorchemont, teacher at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs at the turn of the century, skilful sculptor who grasped the possibilities of pâte de verre as soon as it was rehabilitated by Henri Cros; with a grand father such as François Decorchemont who followed on as inspired technician and colorist, evolving from object to stained glass. Such ancestry could have been indifferent to the young Antoine, yet he was engrossed by it; he classified his great-grandfather's papers and developed a passion for archeology; he helped his grandfather in the workshop and inherited not just the equipment but also an artist's knowledge and awareness handed on like a relay baton.

It often happens that the path before one does not seem at first to be the best. Painting, art history and archeology hold the student's interest until the knot is tied again and he returns to his line of descent. Antoine Leperlier and his brother Etienne combined their efforts to produce works in common, but after a few years their artistic demands drew each of them into his own individual way.

Antoine Leperlier is inhabited as much by theory as by practice; his thought is expressed verbally, rooted in the words which convey it, developed around a hard core; it is a way for him to substantiate his being. All the listener has to do is be attentive, not break in suddenly, to allow the chain of ideas to emerge; the occasional quiet word is enough to keep the conversation going. This is why the following text is only demarcated by sub-titles and devoid of all needless questions or remarks which might interrupt the tempo. This is also why the sporadic observations and details have been separated from the main body of the text.

Starting from a technical standpoint, referring to his situation with regard to his peers, basing the relationship between art and craft on aesthetic considerations, Antoine Leperlier gradually raises the level of thinking to the expression of the ultimate meaning of the quest whose essence he impacts to us; such is the progression of this interview in the form of a manifesto

Jean-Marie Lhôte

## Two ways to glass

Pâte de verre was reborn with Henri Cros in the late 19th century. When his work as a wax sculptor led him into doing research into encaustic paints, Cros delved into ancient Egyptian techniques and discovered, so he claimed, secret recipes for pâte de verre. He thus forged a link with Antiquity bypassing the history of blown glass and its manufacturing tradition. Thus one leaps from ancient Egypt and its sacred figurines in pâte de verre straight to Cros, spanning the tradition of the alchemists who made false precious gems or enamels.

What is really interesting about Cros is that he consciously drew out the thread of this lost tradition, burrowing into old texts and working in secret like an alchemist in his den, deliberately entrenching himself in the ancient world to gain both inspiration and a vision of work on matter and symbolically loaded elements (cf. his «Histories of water» and «Histories of fire»). What we see here is an approach which is more to do with art and intellect than with craft.

The story of my grandfather, François Decorchemont, is different but in some ways similar. A painter very much influenced by impressionism, he found his way to pâte de verre after some unfruitful research on ceramics. His father Emile, a sculptor of the same generation as Cros, working with Jerome whose interest in Lalique pâte de verre jewelry is well-known, encouraged him to start studying this medium. The composition of his ceramic clays being very close to that of Sèvres bone china, he added some flux to obtain a waste glass. For three or four years he made very opaque glass which he colored and stamped into moulds, like a «slipware» ceramic, before making his cire perdue moulds and gravity-filling them.

All through his life, François Decorchemont was only concerned with techniques insofar as they were a means to an end for his work as a colorist. He purified the matter to make it take on colour and light. I think this relationship with matter and means can be compared to that of Cros who wanted to find a non-perishable matter to replace wax.

Glass and its production technique were for them means to the end of making works of art. The pâte de verre technique was developed at the beginning of the century for purposes that were aesthetic rather than economic.<sup>1</sup>

## Heavyweight processes

This tradition is essential for me and conditions my own methods. Technical demands are based on aesthetic demands. Taking techniques to their limit, knowing nothing has been overlooked, really means something when you create your own means. Obviously I don't make claims for the job in itself and I accept that processes can be simplified if they are nothing more than heavyweight techniques with no aesthetic aim. What I am trying to point out here is the consistency of the means and the artistic project. I feel the means of the art are devalued in the contemporary approach to artistic expression in the same way that the means of production are subordinated to the principle of yield. The instrumental rationale only actually targets excessive renewal of consumer goods. The means of production are subject to the same logic and are on the level of the target in view.

The ready-made broke with art production methods based on the 19th century middle class moral value of visibly well-done work; in a way this was the precursor of the new production method where the work has lost all value and the mark of the hand is eliminated. The work appears from nowhere, masking the toil and sweat of those who made it, human labor is taboo.

I think it is just as pointless to want to return to the work traditions of former times as to try and perpetuate the absence of the work in art or affect indifference as the attitude appears today. Indeed, whereas Duchamp broke with a production method to create another one, Warhol only formalized and embraced it.

From this point of view and in a strategy of preserving the autonomy of art, I would try and prevent my technical means from being assimilated by such a rationale by upholding their «heaviness» rather than sticking to the logic and being swallowed up by it.

This brings us to all that has widened the gulf between art and craft since the academic distinction between «mechanical arts and liberal arts». The major argument for established art as against craft art, to disqualify it, is mainly that one cannot stay in touch with a concept if its concretization is deferred and mediated by heavyweight processes; so handicraft, bogged down by its matter and techniques, can never attain and preserve the purity of the conceptual idea. We are here under the dominion of a purely idealistic and conceptual ap-

proach to the work of art, an approach which in itself helps to maintain the historic division of roles while masking the reality of what work is actually about, not just transforming matter but also an intellectual exercise unconstrained by matter.

Could not a work of art be, on the contrary, the context where the artistic project is confronted with matter and technical means, together creating the impetus for the creation of new concepts and forms? Obviously, provided one is not confined to a perspective of respect for a craftsmanship tradition and stringent rules defining skills and their evaluation. Doesn't the inalienable, non-assimilative character of a work of art lie in the singularity of its material and its potential revealed by creative research to transcend the divisions that «Fine Arts» academies have always wished to see respected? <sup>2</sup>

## **Power of the establishment**

Though rejection of the trade had a meaning when art was being challenged at the beginning of the century and though there was a whiff of heresy and scandal then, it must be said that the persistence of this attitude within the stronghold of the establishment itself has nothing subversive about it now, on the contrary, such support for the production method of goods signals the end of any possibility of autonomy for art. In its gilded cage, art is confined to the status of puerile amusement under the knowing and benevolent eye of the guardians of the orthodoxy of its own derisiveness. If it were still at all possible to scandalize in the field of fine arts, could this not now be by making assertions for the means of craftsmanship?

Art has become mere cultural merchandise. Cultural policy aims to harden this position. Art is profitable because it is integrated into the cultural sphere as a support for brand image promotion and communication. Maybe it has never had any other function since it was institutionalized. Cultural institutions form public taste by controlling communication between power and the masses.

This cultural entity developed when religion lost its power, it took over the governance of the collective imagination, aiming to empty art's existential and polemical nature of its substance.

The seizure of art by the Establishment, especially for the last fifteen to twenty years, is one of the most significant elements in the social function of art. It had already been taken, but the operation has been formalized and amplified. Its purpose is to hedge the field of art by setting out the aesthetic bases of its definition while keeping the age-old divisions intact.<sup>3</sup>

## **Art trades**

What we should ask is whether the accepted establishment or socio-cultural definitions of art and the craftsman, historically dated definitions of the forces of production, can be applied to the conflicting situation of a creator faced with the demands of personal expression to be reconciled with his technical means and his medium.

With regard to this I am a bit puzzled about «Masters of Art» <sup>4</sup>. I agreed to be a candidate while trying to say that what I felt was important was not the trade, to save the noble trade, but rather the evolution of definitions about art, creation and craft means.

This new institution is designed to safeguard trades in danger of extinction and the transmission of traditional skills. I fear that the project is self-destructing, for how can you hope to save what is actually being toppled by an uncontrolled and cynical free enterprise law of selection based on the accumulation of goods and almost mandatory consumption of junk. Our era should be compared with the one which saw the start of the factory period and the end of the mediaeval guilds. It's difficult to reconcile the salvage of the moribund and a notion of the future.

It appears that the institution did not succeed - and how could it? - in opening up a new way to embody an intermediate province of creative artists working in whatever medium. Couldn't it have been an opportunity to become involved in our social evolution? Move towards what is on the way in rather than try and save what is on the way out.

Isn't there some way to be opened which would bring out the fact that skills can exist without tradecraft in the economic and cultural sense? This doesn't mean there is no longer any possibility of transmitting and learning.

I think the matter should be discussed in these terms, either within or without the framework of the ins-

titution. Many people are aware of the existence of a category of artists which appeared in the Renaissance, encompassing creators of forms and means, from Palissy, Cellini and Donatello, and has even now to prove their existence in the province of the arts.<sup>5</sup>

## The hierarchy of values

That is a position I have tried to defend. I very soon realized that if it was understood, it was as the operation's artistic guarantee. It only needed a few masters of art to lay claim to creation for the concept to be applied to all. This concept of creation enhances the value of the project. An impact enabling craft to accede to a hierarchy of values which is never challenged. A «spin» in short, which still manages to allow confusion to reign.

What place does one actually give to the concept of «creation» in the art trades? We must know what we're talking about. When an antiques restorer says he is a creator because he can do exactly what Boule did in his time, I find that is taking the concept a bit far. Trades which flourished in the service of princely magnificence are inimitable in the sense that there are no more princes and so there is nothing left but to restore the heritage they left behind. And restoration is the predominant economic reality of the art trades today.

There are still great craftsmen, as there ever were, whose genuine professional skill should be recognized. But for me this has nothing to do with artistic creation, or at least not enough to assimilate the concept of creation into the field of craft. There is creativity, there is production capacity; there is effectively a capacity for finding the right form for the right purpose; plus there is a perfect understanding and culture of the trades of the past.

Should one compare such works with those of Picasso or Veronese? Can they be compared? No, they are not comparable. We must differentiate. There is a capacity for creation - creativity is better - in the art trades which requires a different mastery and rationale from that required by artistic creation in painting, sculpture, etc. Even if the intellectual, mental, processes are more or less the same. It is pointless to put them side by side in the debate, it only leads to confusion. The reality of the artistic, economic and historical treatment of the trades must be realized before we can start to think about how to operate their emancipation, and this should not have the aim of drawing the entire field into the field of artistic creation.

I think in any case, to open the way, the values of the Good and the Beautiful should be separated by deconstructing the system of values set up throughout history to perpetuate the division of roles. This does not mean breaking out of the hierarchy system of aesthetic values so much as out of the system of moral values which still applies. I don't find it's absurd to have a hierarchy in the arts any more than in the works themselves - choices are still open and criticism can play a decisive part - but I am shocked by this moral hierarchy applied to the arts. We should relativise our judgement with regard to other civilizations, like Japan for instance, where we find that painters are in the lowest position.

## The touchstone of creation

I don't say there are no creators of form in the art trades and that collaboration with designers doesn't produce objects of quality, I just don't think that's where the problem lies. Nor is it a question of upsetting criteria and definitions, so that craftsmen become artists, in the name of I don't know what extended concept of creation. No, what I think is essential and which could be discriminating, is that craftsmen, in the same way as we demand of artists, should be capable of feeling within themselves the necessity of confronting both themselves and the world, of using any means whatever, of facing up to taking an existential risk.

The divide between art and craft could be diminished by such an approach. When this requirement is shared by craftsmen and artists alike we shall be able to consider otherwise the two fields faced with the same challenge.

What is this risk-taking in fact? Producing without first having a market.<sup>6</sup> In other words, breaking with the system of transmission and the renewal of earlier systems, so that they may evolve. Our thinking must take on board an ability to break with the established order, economics, and social and historical organization of the trade.

The creating craftsman, designer or artist often create potentially for an existing «market», even if they don't actually hold it yet. As I see it, a creator should not target a market because the aim is not to corner it

- even though we cannot ignore the fact that any production is a potential part of the economy. In this case the challenge, I mean the creative energy, is not part of economic dynamics in the sense of «surfing» demand at any cost and jumping on the fashion bandwagon, but is to move in the direction of exercising one's own freedom. It's a question of facing a world which is being gradually revealed and requires new ways to do so. For me, the bases of the social role of the artist are drawn from this experience which opens up the pathway to knowledge.

Many craftsmen and contemporary artists deliberately belong to or are placed in a pitiless economy. This often makes them lose sight of the real challenges of creation, of why one makes art. I don't think the question is without point.

## Emancipation and establishment

The emancipation of certain artists or craftsmen who happen to be borderline with regard to these definitions helps to confirm my intuition. (It would be a good idea to compare such emancipation with that of the Renaissance artists.) They have turnover problems, market problems and creation problems, meaning creation without a market. The production is neither directly nor potentially in demand, in other words it is unheard of, not in the sense of «new» in the «tradition of newness», but «not necessary» to the functioning of the established institution and the existing market.

This ground I am trying to position myself on is a rather shifting one which has been completely worked over during this century. It is a field in which art cannot be considered as a separate activity, nor defined by its means and materials, nor by its establishment recognition, nor by applying rules to it, nor by being formalized, even as radical or avant garde.<sup>7</sup> Let's say it is a field which already exists and will always do so, an intermediate field and consequently unidentifiable, defying all attempts at definition. This haziness is no doubt the reason for its strength, making it even more resistant to assimilation by the establishment because it flouts the hierarchy of its values. One is not in fact sure what to do with it and it embodies the contradictions which arise from the «crisis of contemporary art» in that it reveals not only the problems of defining aesthetic judgement criteria, but also, by implication, those of the crisis in the means of art.

One must not expect the art establishment to unite the arts and admit that an art of means and matter can coexist beside one of concept, since its legitimacy is founded on its capacity to make hierarchies and create differences.<sup>8</sup>

So it is from the creator subjects themselves, provided they want to, that we may expect the creation of a conceptual domain which will accept the unification of the arts - a refrain heard since the times of the symbolists. I believe that criteria, true aesthetic thinking, are produced by artists, in the sense that Baudelaire is an artist. The art establishment reminds me of those Jesuits without faith but whom the church needed for their rhetoric. They could define faith, even though they didn't have it. It's all a question of knowing who is in the right place to make an aesthetic judgement and decide what is or isn't art throughout the course of its historical development. This is no doubt why the establishment can't integrate the art which is happening unless it controls its production.

## Anatomy of a crisis

Dada is responsible for the lasting disarray in the values and the very concept of art. We could claim that the crisis of contemporary art is partly due to the Duchamp virus. However, when we consider his positions with regard to art, what he said about pictorial techniques, about craftsmanship, about the artist, what he said of the necessity to be serious in art, even if he was dealing in derision, in witticism, we are astonished to find this is all in a highly exacting context. He recognized great value in painters you wouldn't think to find in his hall of fame; who would have thought that one of the best painters for Duchamp was Dali? If one points that out to an art-is-dead fundamentalist, he will laugh in your face: «No, Duchamp was bottle racks, the ready-made, etc.» I don't believe that at all! The use of the «found object» as an artistic procedure was only one of the elements enabling him to set about deconstructing the art of his time, but we know that he never imagined it could ever be formalised without becoming ridiculous. If he were able to see latter-day productions of «found objects», I like to think he would smile sardonically.

Duchamp was in some way saying: you want art? I'll give you art! It was a way of shattering the old systems

while preserving the essence, the capacity of the creator to prevent it being touched. He seems to be saying, you'll never get hold of that, but you can get hold of these bottle racks and urinals which will fill your museums to bursting point. I think all his irony resides in the awareness that the only issue for art at that time was to demolish the foundations of its criteria, that he never stopped believing in derision and humor because, in his view, they could not become establishment and were at the time the only position from which to create new forms. How could he have known at a time when history painting still held sway that the destruction of art would become an academic exercise? This is probably where he underestimated the integrating capacity of a system which could take to itself this lethal weapon and thereby achieve the death of art, succeeding beyond the wildest dadaist dream.

This should make us wonder about the irony of history and its dialectics which fulfils, within the art establishment itself, what should have been a terrorist aim to destroy this stronghold of entrenched values. We could take the matter further and ask ourselves who benefits by this crime.

## Appearance and status of the object

The introduction of various forms of primitive art into our cultural world at the turn of the century opened up perspectives which did not previously exist. There had been well-defined categories for sculpture, painting, decorative arts, etc. Primitive art opened them up and extended them.<sup>9</sup>

The real culture of the object, represented in archetypes like the surrealist box or objects with a symbolic or oneiric meaning, has long been overlooked. And despite the output of objects, collages or assemblages, our academic values still haven't really been challenged.

I think the real worth of the recognition given to primitive art is two-fold: the first is formal, formalist, detectable in cubism and some abstract art where we find the reduction of forms of the primitives. This aspect refers mostly to African art. The second nourishes the surrealist tendency and comes from the South Seas.

The dialogue between the object and the collector has altered. The work is virtually in the eye of the beholder! The great strength of the surrealists is that they acknowledged everyone's ability to identify with an art or ordinary object provided it is not exclusively assigned a conventional meaning. The magical primitive art object gives its beholder a dimension he did not have before the encounter. Our perception of the real is extended through art by the medium of the symbolic object. I think this is where art's polemical capacity really lies. It is polemical at a latent level, wherever it opens up a new mental space by initiating another rationale and other sensations. In my view, these objects open doors we have closed or which are closed to us. For me they arouse that strange feeling of «deja vu» in the sense that they are the irrational manifestation of hidden or unacknowledged desires.

I think this dimension of the object is pretty well eclipsed by the predominance of the purely plastic object, or by the installation of an «educational», or even political or ecological, vocation; no doubt because it shatters the categories of fine arts and does not fly the colours of the concept but of the symbol which does not fear embodiment.

## Forms and arrangements

That said, in spite of these relationships, I have trouble in finding guides. And I can't place myself in a history of art, unless I make up my own. I wonder if I can't find references because I'm not a visual artist, even though I make forms and ask myself questions about them. I don't think I've really understood the logic of forms, their law, as if there were a science of forms! Or a spirit. I've always believed you have art at your fingertips. After having a practically industrial approach to designed projects, I've now reached a degree of improvisation.<sup>10</sup>

I was perhaps wrong in not giving myself an artistic education, even though I went to a visual arts college.

The style I would imprint on a form interests me less than the way I would arrange it. What interests me is creating relationships, as with collage, the interplay of elements. I concentrate on organizing apparently disparate parts in the free association mode. I jumble feelings about a visit to a monument with the drawing of an arch, still life elements with memories of childhood, impressions left by dreams or daydreams with things I have read, etc.

I am struck by the fact that, for some time now, colors seem banished from my work. I can't say this is the result of a plastic art decision. Some of my latest works combine the opacity of black metal and the transpa-

rency of glass; this wasn't done consciously in reference to the black-white relationship in the chapel of Dreux which so impressed me and touched me by its living austerity. It was only when I had made them that they awoke this emotion in me and made me remember it. The problem of creation for me is in finding an arrangement designed to express an indefinable emotion in search of a «global nature», a feeling similar to the work of recalling a memory «on the tip of the tongue» which, when it comes at last, is such a relief.

## Vitreous text

I sometimes find it hard to give reasons why I've adopted this or that direction in my works. Did I introduce text in reference to Galle's speaking vases. Perhaps, it wasn't that I didn't know them. I was aware there were poems on Galle vases, «vases of sadness», real modern «tombs», but I don't really think that is it. Perhaps it helped to reassure me: you can make glass and include text. When I started to include text, it was because I was afraid of not really being explicit. The text was required to explain clearly what it was all about, in the piece itself. Paradoxically, this could contribute to their «esotericism». It is not a title but a quote; it directs the eye across the work; in this way I try to displace their decorative art status while preserving the idea of it.<sup>11</sup>

The first quote on one of my works comes from Maurice Blanchot: «What is elusive while nothing is hidden». This thought has long found an echo in me. One of those feelings that are difficult to come to terms with intellectually. «What is elusive while nothing is hidden», it has to be, that is the sense; that is the way Blanchot's text works, nothing is hidden but everything eludes us. It makes all the more sense because I am in quest of meaning and I work with a transparent substance where nothing is hidden. I use forms in this quest, an approach to things I can't express verbally or in writing. My objects are a bit like images, the same as dream images, physical, synaesthetic sensations, like the impression of holding something when the hands are empty. Images which cannot be described because they must be felt.

The texts on my pieces, inclusion of letters in the glass, are perhaps also linked to the idea that one can vitrify, freeze a thought or words. That the object would contain a memory within it, like tombstones or inscriptions in stone. In any case it's linked to the way I represent memory to myself. They enable me to express this quest for sensations or feelings to do with the relationship I have with my memory, but also with the time which is part and parcel of us. I put this saying of Blanchot's round a sort of little temple, a little reliquary; it reveals in the very heart of the glass a void whose tangible, visible existence escapes us. A way of giving form to memory, as matter without material, where the memory is inscribed as an empty form which leaves a trace. The domain of the inexpressible, the elusive, but which forms the basis of presence in the world.

## Awareness of time

So with these sayings on my pieces, I am trying to call up what is inscribed in the object: time. Time as actually experienced, duration in a word. For instance, on a work I made, I engraved two sayings of Duchamp. One from 1910, «Try to discuss plastic duration», and the other from fifty years later «I want to express time in space».<sup>12</sup> It was a way of realizing the permanence of thought in the arrow of time. By marking Duchamp's preoccupation with time over 50 years, I was trying to show the suppression of time by thought, thought which can leapfrog time and create permanence, totality. This is how the memory works. A memory is always «here and now» in the awareness of its loss.

The aspect of Duchamp that really interests me is not the strolling player, «found objects» or amusing appearance, but his deep-seated intuition about space-time and the need for the artist to take account of this new approach to physical reality. I often compare Dürer's *Melancholia* based on the immobility of time and space in art with the melancholy of the picture «sad young man in a train» by Duchamp. In Dürer, space alone enters into the melancholic awareness of the vanities. Time has flown and melancholy is the result of the inability to represent and control it.

In Duchamp, the melancholy of the sad young man in a train should be considered in relation to the fact that the train is moving. This introduces movement into reflection on the world and the relationship to self, space and time are no longer separated, duration is part of time - that's what ready-made is!

It is likely that Duchamp had an idea of the relationship between movement in space and the development of self-awareness. In other words, what is a thought which unfolds as I ride or as the world goes round me, as time passes? It's said the idea of the *Grand Verre* (Great Work) came to him when he was driving with Picabia

from Zurich to Paris. My view is that he was probably wondering about the nature of thought unfolding during a journey. What unfolds in time is no less global, immediate and consistent, only it's in another dimension, the fourth dimension, for which the transparency of glass constitutes a metaphor. The immediacy of thought in the time which flies. Could there be a «geometry» of time?

## Time enclosures

What interests me in molding fruits or other items of vanity, things from childhood or the past which have a history, is to express time in three dimensions by means of analogy; working on the fruit without preserving its intrinsic form, crushing and arranging it into «controlled» chaos, reminiscent of the decorative bowls of fruit found in architecture or lampstands or Pompeian still lifes, gives me an image of «embodied» time, when it leaves a trace, casts a shadow, moulds it. In this sense I mould shadows of a moment. The glass solidifies the softness and its core reveals «shadows» in three dimensions.

I respect nothing, neither the substance of the fruit nor the decorative order, everything is laid down in a jumble, according to the idea one could have of time if it were accumulated or if it itself «took over» the fruit other than by letting it rot. Obviously it moves, is consumed, it's the decay of the flesh. To fix that moment of life, I vitrify the decay, the movement of being, in still life/still alive.

I try to express time more than space by a series of associations. The aspect of duration, the immediate experience, will be soft, fluid, curved and opaque. Memory, as the place where time is registered, will be like a great transparent void containing imprints, its aspect being rigid, straight and frozen. In a Platonic vision, this emptiness will be the location, matrix, of ideas enabling us to recognize the world. Memory starts to build up in infancy, but it can also be an ancestral memory, symbolical, structural, Jungian in some ways, consisting of great archetypes which are already there, preloaded in the brain. Deeply entrenched imprints - the passage of time cannot be erased - enabling us to relate reality to acquired experience.

This is what I am trying to portray in unorthodox representations, at a slight remove from the world of vanities, without trying to apply their strict symbolism, just slipping into the corpus. The text in the work acts as a sort of weaving together of two domains - actual and imaginary experience.

Glass is a substance of memory which is to time as marble and bronze were to space.

## Thwarting and lamenting

I feel imbued by this ambivalence of past and present, an ambivalence which anchors melancholy. My purpose focused on time and memory has now retrieved its roots in a childhood preoccupied by the discovery of the past and the traces I found at my grandfather's in my childhood world in the workshop. The grandfather was like a monument, and behind him were glimpses of the great-grandfather and great-great-grandparents; a whole lineage weighing down the household with the traces they left.

I've often thought art is a means of taking in the idea of death. Death is felt in our relationship with time and experienced in memory. We of course know that death lies before us, in the arrow of time, but we experiment it in a retrospective way. Awareness of death comes from the memory of the past. My works, rooted in traces, in remembrance, are a means of thwarting the passing of time. Holding moments in one's power by stopping them to enlarge our presence in the world. Once we have conquered space, there is maybe nothing left for us but to «reckon», pace out our time.

This idea came to me very early on and may be one of the reasons why I wanted to be an archaeologist - the feeling that what is past never comes back is so ingrained in me that it was like death.

It can't be an accident that the first book I bought was *Life and Death of a Pharaoh* by Christiane Desroches Noblecourt who was later to be one of my teachers at the Ecole du Louvre. I must have been about twelve or thirteen, I paid for it with my own money, 50 francs, I remember it well. It made a real impression on me, I wanted that book and no other and I read it over and over. I'd have loved to experience the fascinating discovery of footprints that Carter found when he opened the tomb of Tutankhamen. Such traces cancel time but also show that the work of time is the work of death. The feet will never walk in those prints again!

The imprint laments and weeps for its matrix. The sign of death lies in each imprint, in each trace of a period of time. It's precisely to sum up presence that I turn to originals to make my imprints, including texts. This contact with a source will always re-present the vanished «here and now». Actually it's an approach which is coun-

ter to a certain type of contemporary art and more generally with post-modernity. The source, the history, is disowned in the sense that, with Warhol for instance, originals are reproduced without a referent. The icons of our modernity appear as reifications of a world of display, a world without source whose only referent is itself; self-pro-claimed images of the invasive reality of wares which impose their tempo on the world. Disowning the link at source in its production and imprinting plunges us straight into cloning. If the «mothers» and «fathers» disappear, all that remains is a world dominated by the present, a self-engendered world endlessly reproducing identical copies.

It's hard to see such a world governed by an awareness of the Vanities, the present is permanent and operative, death is counter-operative. I don't deny that Warhol had, to say the least, a clear and definite view of our civilization and that's where his meaning lies, but I don't see why it can't be opposed.

It must not be supposed that I would have been better suited to previous times and that, as is bandied about, we should turn the clocks back. I'm only too aware of the arrow of time to make such nostalgic wishes. I am melancholic, not nostalgic.

## Relics and tombs

I am more inclined to mould an object, to stamp rather than model, because my interest lies in the relic, not the effigy. It is vital to have a contact with the source. You cannot preserve it but the contact remains, its trace endures; this is the whole issue of the work's aura and enshrinement in space and time.

This is the spirit in which I mould still lifes, for instance, personal objects with a history, I imprint them. The enlarged texts on my works come from originals. I use photocopied documents when I can't get hold of the original. This preoccupation with sources isn't just symbolic or conceptual, it refers to a more fundamental quest linked to the question of lost aura.

It's about signifying the loss of something close, something like a symbolical restoration to its place of the aura things have lost, giving the molded object the value of a relic. That means combining their representation with the presence of their past. Awarding them the status of symbolically loaded objects. I'm often reproached with being too «serious». It's true I'm not playful, my derisiveness does not have the same foundation as that which aims at emptying the artistic activity or object of its substance. I make art like in the 17th century? Tombs? Yes indeed! But I know full well that they would never have done them like that in the 17th century. They are certainly lamentations. But not lamentations in the sense of tombs of the period, rather lamentation on the loss of meaning in art, a reflection on art itself. They are tombs which try to show that art has lost its ability to produce an aura.

That is what has been lost, and it is grounded in the idea that art will survive come what may, forever in its relationship with the memory it has of itself.

## Doing a deal with time

The alchemist tradition is very important in the attitude I have to my work, obviously not because I'm an alchemist - a pet journalistic reference whenever talking of arts from the fire. I work by vitrification, a sort of «imitation» of volcanic power, a process very like a natural phenomenon. I make objects similar to those volcanoes make by distortion. I involve a whole mythology of arts from the fire and my musings stress an approach to the phenomenon of creation as an imitation of the forces of nature. It's a source of musing rather than a direct influence.

I have adopted the alchemist's prerequisite of going as much to the oratory as to the laboratory, the time spent on reading, writing and drawing seems as important to me as that spent in the workshop and I insist on their equality. This how I feel the craftsman should be; he conceives his work, talks about it, positions it in its time, compares it with current aesthetic notions, etc. And then makes it with his own means. The issue of handicraft will only be resolved with an overall revaluation of the creative activity. It cannot be divorced from the prevailing issues of contemporary art.

There is a requirement which I call risk-taking, but there is also the capacity for time-wasting. For me, this is an important part of the creative process. An alchemist who spent all his life seeking to lengthen it would have wasted neither his time nor his life. From this point of view, one should feel that time is worked like matter. The artist works at lasting.

It's a kind of deal with time. Being able to take the time to make a useless object. I have no stake in the notion of «hard work» or «hard labor», rather the one which includes duration as an enriching record in the work.

Why does a primitive work of art have greater value for the collector when it has been used for ceremonial purposes, as opposed to one which has not, unless it is that is inhabited by duration?

In the end, the real challenge for my works as they come into being - an unattainable ideal - would be somehow to reach the unknown foundations of my own construction in time. The succession of works is a bit like an analytical phenomenon, like a long succession of trials: to find oneself gradually, starting with comparisons, repetitions, juxtapositions, believing that in the end I shall find the real necessity which urges me to do all this and that it will make up a whole. A desire to fill whilst I probably empty. Every time, it's as just as terrifying to see it going off in all directions, with no signpost, it slips through the fingers.

I am haunted by the analogy with a combat or rather a negotiation with initial chaos. Here we are at the heart of the issue of creation, the appearance of a world, the famous big bang...

## The power of lost memories

We live in a society which desperately wants to preserve memory, make memory. We argue proofs, for or against, make fetishes of traces, while destroying relationships and social ties which would enable us to pass on lived experience from generation to generation. We forget the shadow cast by memory on things and events. I'd much prefer a deformed account given to a grandchild by a grandfather with an uncertain memory to an objective account in the Auschwitz museum. The objectivity in educational transmission of memory erases more than it preserves, a dose of amnesia. A direct witness will never be as right as expert reports.

How are we to express these «shadows» attached to all objects and memories? Shadow of an instant, a moment. I can't conceive of representing an object or event or being without their being tied to this essential bit of life cast in them and borne by them. The exhibition at the Evreux museum will be a trial of this. I shall display in a showcase imprints of certain objects exhibited in the rooms, so that they will appear a bit like the matrices of the museum objects. These have been reduced to the status of stuffed animals and have lost their sources. We no longer know what they are: carved flints don't mean anything anymore. What's that thing hanging up on strings? I shall try to express the idea that presenting these objects like this makes them lose their aura, the «time shadow» attached to them, in other words, everything that constitutes their presence in the world. They lost it as soon as they were «museumed». This display will be something of a «lamentation», the tomb of the archaeological object, lamenting what has become the collector's item or item of curiosity. A hollow within the transparency of the glass will reveal the matrix of lost time, the lost shadow, the trace which is as hard to grasp as a minute. The intention is to make a negative curiosity cabinet, a «collection» of what is missing, what is lost! And fill a display cabinet with it.

I shall also vitrify «rays» of light as they would be if arrested for an instant on the shaft of Gallo-Roman columns. The whole world is recalled in light. It retains the memory of all that has bathed in it. Its imprint will be marked in bands of five centimeters over the whole length of the column shafts. Thus we shall have as sort of negative imprint of light in glass. All the meaning of the composite object lies in the glass imprint adhering to the column, its source object. It's a metaphorical way of reconstituting the «here and now» of a column. Just as an object cannot be separated from its shadow in space, an object or being cannot be separated from its time.

This installation will cause confusion about the status of objects themselves: if the imprints are left in place, there will be no more archaeological objects, they will be objects of art; if these are divorced from their columns, they will no longer be objects of art but the memory of what they were during the exhibition.

They will just be pieces of glass reminding us they were once works of art. And the columns restored to their archaeological object status will retain the memory of the presence of the shadow that was once tied to them. Time is recorded in duration, movement, in a body or matter. This is the central element of my thinking.

1. The fascination of glass lies in its transparency. This is felt by everyone but the uniqueness of it is not always really perceived since many artists try to achieve an absolute limpidity which tends to ignore the fact that glass has a soul. A soul which has gone through different states under the effects of heat when a more or less rapid firing and fast, slow or abrupt cooling create tensions within the work which remain as visible marks afterwards. Far from being flaws, these marks can take on a meaning in addition to that of the engraved characters, for the delight of amateurs to be found in a handful of galleries.

2. This two-sidedness of the artist comes as a surprise to those who thought that an artist is someone who cultivates unity. Yet there is no shortage of examples. the architect, sculptor, painter and even dancer turned choreographer or musician composer, not to mention the film director, all need executive instruments and yet the best amongst them are no less «artists».

3. Indeed, how can one fail to agree with this opinion expressed with such healthy vehemence? Though it should be remembered that the function of culture is so to speak to «digest» art, purge its anti-establishment values. Art opposes, asserting the irreducible part of the individual against society, while culture designates, classifies, arranges the most revolutionary theses tidily in the history of ideas. Very few escape this hijacking (Sade, perhaps, but for how long?). Then again, culture is a consolation and represents, like art, all degrees ranging from vulgarity to nobility.

4. The title of master of art, maitre d'art, created by the Ministry of Culture, is awarded for life to a number of professionals in the art trades who are thus distinguished for the excellency of their skills. Thirty-one masters of art have been nominated since 1994 by the Minister of Culture on the recommendation of the Arts Trade Council, an consultative organisation designed to ensure artistic and economic durability and encourage the development of art trades. A work entitled Maitres d'art presents five of these award winners, including Antoine Leperlier; it contains an introduction by Jean-Marie Lhote with the heading Semeurs d'empreintes (Sowers of impressions). This work was to be the first of a collection, though there has as yet been no sequel. (Paris, Reunion des Musees Nationaux, September 1997.)

5. Apart from this severe judgement on the strange institution of the masters of art, there is an important observation to situate the subject: the idea that, to reach the summit, the artist, member of the «trades» family or not, must not only be a creator of forms, but also a creator of means, that is capable of finding the techniques to be used for the materials best adapted to the desired expression.

6. Another fundamental observation, rarely so clearly expressed. Though the term «risk-taking» is widespread amongst artists and craftsmen, it is usually used very vaguely; here it is formulated with uncompromising precision.

7. We may be allowed to think that there is a wide underground movement in this direction. Personalities, writers, perhaps not always great artists or poets but who cares, cultivate these values in secret, as is borne out by the number of limited issue, sometimes fleeting, photocopy publications.

8. Unfortunately an old question in France and the west as a whole, the lack of consideration given to manual work in relation to that of the mind. In the inequality between head and hand, it is not sure that the part held by spectator sports these days is the best way of finding the right balance.