

# An untimely position

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In an age when the 'conquest of space' is fast becoming a *fait accompli* with the advent of technologies that shrink distances to nothing, we are now witnessing a gradual conquest of time whose mastery, however, involves the domination of human minds and the duration.

More than ever, the question is " what to do with our time... before it's too late!

Personally, I have decided to invest my time in a technique and a material, namely *pâte de verre*. I lay claim to this paradoxical and untimely position as a 'heavy/lingering' attempt to use art to defy a world driven by the ever-faster pace of communications and the virtualisation of the real.

When he renounced the notion of 'doing art,' Marcel Duchamp wanted above all to disqualify the 'art of doing well' - or even the 'art of doing' -. For him art, as a specialized pursuit, had lost its power to achieve the goals of existence. Life had gone elsewhere.

Today, this renunciation has acquired an institutional status in the comfort of museums and art centers to the extent of forcing itself upon artists as the creed of art's 'immaculate conception.'

By complying with this dogma and agreeing to forfeit their means of production, artists have voluntarily abdicated their autonomy - their enjoyment of which has been challenged since time immemorial - while this same autonomy ceaselessly reasserted its claim to be the last scrap of freedom worth fighting for.

The modern utopia, seeking to break down the barriers between art and life, has recycled itself dialectically as it strives to impose aesthetic value on the commonplace. This initial and seminal intuition - or what remains of it - has grown dry in the theorising of aesthetic values in whose concepts it can glimpse but a pale reflection of itself, stripped of the sublime. It is true that art has integrated life through the mode of economic and commercial acceptance; it has teamed up with the merchandise-imposed 'life-style' cultural propaganda where artists define themselves as service providers, reduced to playing the role of mere creators of atmosphere or purveyors of entertainment, impertinent by necessity, invariably 'subversive' and 'critical.'

The truth of art is stifled in the disillusioned consumption of an infinitely contemporary creation, linking its destiny to the fate of commercial goods that have abolished the cycle of life and death, and mask the flight of time behind endlessly repeated promotions.

This voluntary, force-fed amnesia sweeps away the essential challenges of building a life, in which desire comes to grips with time and risk - for its own greater fulfilment - to obtain the means to confront the stark reality of matter.

The role of technical resources and materials in artistic expression is currently a topic of debate - beyond, even, their relation to the 'arts of fire' - whose relevance has become all the more acute since their legitimacy has been the subject of contestation.

The 'arts of fire' emerged from the artist's struggle against matter's natural resistance to attempts to make it yield to transformation. And the objects to emerge from this struggle bear within themselves the memory of this slow and necessary elaboration during the act of their creation.

Although this conflict requires a lifetime, it also protects the artist against the threat of being expropriated by a world that ignores the weight of matter and which, while masking the labour involved in its transformation, makes us forget that life itself could be lost within it, and be as nothing.

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By re-igniting the artistic debate which, in the 19th century, solved the problem of the representation of life in art by introducing the use of colour in sculpture and examined the question of what status to grant the

objet d'art following the discovery of primitive sculpture - a question which the 'crisis' of the surrealist object attempted to answer - I am trying to establish a position whereby labour with materials in art will evoke a 'doing' as the expression of imagination in action.

In the course of this debate, artists have sought an elective material capable of introducing and embodying life and temporality in art. Ceramics, wax, and pâte de verre have enabled them to give physical shape to this aesthetic stipulation.

These artists - who most frequently drew their inspiration from an antiquity of their dreams or a paradise lost, exotic or not - have, thanks to these materials frequently derived from the applied arts, subverted the dogmas of classical Beauty and the distinction between the major and the minor arts. By opening the field of artistic expression to duration and mental space, they laid down the foundations of modernity.

After focusing on work with wax - a material long used in anatomy to the point of conjuring up the most perfect forms of reproduction - Henri CROS sought to fix the fleeting moment in eternity through an inalterable material resistant, unlike flesh, to corruption. He devoted himself to the development of pâte de verre which he made his favoured medium. Thanks to an original technique and a symbolically charged material, he introduced in his allegorical compositions themes harking back to a vision of life rooted in the recollection of a past that, paradoxically, remains eternally present.

François Décorchemont pursued the tradition of a decorative art aimed essentially at creating precious objets d'art whose use was occulted or undefined. His work is characterized by a desire to use pâte de verre to express aesthetic concerns close to those of the impressionists - light and colour - and by the imitation of hard stones. He forms a part (consciously or not) of that glass-making tradition bound up with arcane practices and the conceits of alchemy.

In their tireless efforts to refine their material, Décorchemont and Cros saw in glass a viaticum for an intuition whose incarnation was the object of their unremitting pursuit.

Primitive objets d'art, before being confined to exhibition cases, translated into images the memory of an entire people. They took part in life whose daily rituals they shared.

Infused with a symbolic, mythic or oneiric content, they were neither handicraft nor decorative objects nor even sculpture, properly speaking. The symbolic power attributed to them placed them immediately beyond the established categories of Fine Art. Their domain was that of everyday life, and their status was defined by the imagination underlying their creation. Their destiny and their special status could be compared with those of western relics, funeral art but also, and undoubtedly, crude art or popular expression.

As it liberates this mental space ruled by the imagination, the surrealist object is confined in this same space, opening a breach through which life flooded into art.

If it is true that paradise is doomed to be lost forever, that utopias are destined always to be almost within sight, I shall nevertheless try tirelessly to reconnect - in an attempt to restore the original tension of this precarious position - the broken threads of the paradise and the utopia that have been forgotten.

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No substance can rival the power of glass to grant simultaneous access to the interior and exterior dimensions. It is by passing through this transparent obstacle that we move from the world of reality to the world of the imagination. Thanks to the image of this divide, we slip from physical space to the mental dimension.

Glass is to time what bronze and marble are to space. It lends substance to mental space, gives shape to duration.

Behind the glass, the world is given perspective, made visible like a memory, like an image at once both near and far. What we see behind the pane plunges us into dreams evoking memory or melancholy.

It is less the opera mundi witnessed by alchemists in their glass retorts that the tangible manifestation of their creative imagination.

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If, in the three - dimensional world, shadows exist in two dimensions, we can suppose that in the four - dimensional world of memory, shadows exist in three dimensions. And just as we are attached to our shadows in space, so are we attached to our memories in time.

I seek to mould in glass these images projected by our duration in memory: images of time that 'takes shape' by leaving its trace, by 'casting' - in both senses of the word - its shadow.

These shadow-memories - the shape of absence and the void, prints made visible through the transparency of the glass - are like so many relics reminding us that, here, something proximate has been lost.

Memory is like a reliquary in transparent crystal in the heart of which duration carves its images.

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«He split from indefinite time and is»

Stéphane Mallarmé

Nature offered to painters of vanitas the ideal model of the cycle of life and death. 'Vanitas' represented temporality, 'being in duration' in terms of this natural cycle. But the theme of vanity was limited by its inability to represent the instant whose haunting manifestation the artists were so vainly striving to seize. We must undoubtedly see in Dürer's *Melancholia* an expression of this furious impotence.

Glass distorted by the heat of a volcanic eruption evokes this duration, expressing through its distortion the very instant at which a dynamic process was captured. This natural still life does not represent "what is not yet broken nor about to be," as in a vanitas but rather presents vitrified duration in a shape and material that have undergone concomitant distortion.

It is through the movement from one moment to the next, by the movement from a before to an after that a shape in glass is formed... uncertainly. Modelled by the fire, it arises out of chaos, from "what is wide open or what antedated everything else." This uncertainty of shape as it submits to its own evolution lends thickness to the elusive and enigmatic moment of collapsing from the present: "nunc fluans, nunc stans."

Glass preserves the traces of its random metamorphosis from one shape into another, displaying this suspended instant of what happened "just before."

There exists in this distortion halted "just before," arising in an increase that nothing can stop, a metaphor of death and erotic desire. An anecdote can give an idea of this instant. The Greek painter Parrhasios (zoographein = writing life) who sought to capture the final moment of Prometheus' death asked for a slave to be tortured. The treatment was so brutal that the slave, about to die, cried out: "Master, I'm dying!" - "Keep that pose!" was Parrhasios' reply.

This paradox of art has travelled down to us through the centuries.

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When I create still lives in glass, I seek less to produce vanitas founded on a melancholic awareness of time's relentless march than to recall that it is the 'artistic doing' itself - contested in its critical relationship with the world and as the expression of an imagination in action - that could well present itself as a mere example of vanity.

As these vanitas, which depicted life and its pleasures while simultaneously asserting the unceasing work of time and death upon them, reveal in glass - this substance from the end of the world - the paradox of the eminently critical, and furiously obstinate position of art which continues to assert itself, in spite of all, as a promise of joy, a promise never kept but endlessly reasserted: Still life/still alive.