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**Can forgery be
Appropriation Art
and
vice-versa?**

Introduction

Within the field of arts, appropriation is nothing new. Copying was accepted and seen as a necessary step before achieving mastery of certain techniques. The usual motto was learning through emulation. Even Vermeer did it.¹



Saint Praxedis (1655) Johannes Vermeer
Copy after Felice Ficherelli

Making copies was also seen as a way to give tribute to particular artists the copyist feels connected with or relates to.² But copying here never was a leitmotiv or the essence of an artist's practice.

- 1 One of Vermeer's first signed painting (and disputed as well), *Saint Praxedis* (1655) is indeed a copy of Felice Ficherelli's *Saint Praxedis* (1640-1645). The difference in the painting being the cross Saint Praxedis is holding in Vermeer's version.
- 2 As an example, Vincent Van Gogh is known to have made as much as thirty copies of artworks from his favourite artists during the 1887-1890 period. In the count are copies of Eugène Delacroix, Jean-François Millet (Van Gogh felt affinities with Millet's peasant themes) and Rembrandt.

First displays of appropriation as an artistic endeavour appeared in the twenties, with Marcel Duchamp as one of its precursors. In the sixties, more radical stances of appropriation would come to the surface, with artists blatantly copying artworks previously iconized as a statement, without any desire for visual originality. They are now accepted and included as milestones of contemporary art history; their previously disruptive gestures and methods now legitimate.



Breton Women and Children (1888) Vincent van Gogh
Copy after Émile Bernard

On the other hand, forgers have been doing this way before appropriation artists. And most of them have not been recognized or legitimized like their “appropriation” counterpart. What I suggest here is to consider forgery as a practice driven by intentions and motivations. Forgery, like conceptual art, could be seen as a way of addressing questions. The validity of these statements would depend on the attitudes and intentions of the said forger.



L.H.O.O.Q. (1919) Marcel Duchamp

So, if two look-alike paintings (one by an appropriation artist and the other by a forger) have the same appearance and are painted with the same materials, then what is the difference between both?³ What is the relationship between appropriation art and forgery? Can their definitions be swapped? Can forgery be appropriation art and vice-versa?



Guy Isnard, a police official, curating an exhibition of fakes in Paris, 1955.

I have no intention of giving an explicit answer to previous statements. By formulating so, my purpose is more to suggest possibilities of interconnection between appropriation art and forgery. Therefore, I will try to

- 3 Their syntax is the same, but semantically they could be very different. *“By definition, both an original and a copy are indistinguishable on the level of syntax. Semantically, they could be very different. For example: Is a copy of an abstract painting, an abstract painting? In the copy we still see the original, thus it should be an abstract painting; on the other hand, being a faithful reproduction of another painting (object), it should be also a realistic painting.”* Benjamin, Walter. *“On Copy.”* Walter Benjamin – Recent Writings. *New Documents*. 2013. 21.

draw parallels between both practices, see what might be their common points and speculate on whether and how they could be considered as analogous activities – if there are any possibilities.

Defining

Appropriation Art

Appropriation Art defines the practice of stealing or borrowing explicitly from previous artists without trying to conceal the origin of the borrowed material. By doing so, the appropriation artist takes ownership over a previous artwork as a statement. Neither a pastiche nor a remix, it is more of a straightforward take on a previous work of art seen as canonical. By undisguised stealing, the appropriating artist positions himself in direct relation to its past heritage. Contemporary appropriation is usually freer, with stronger emphasis on individuality and opportunities to construct new narratives through manipulations and distortions of the appropriated artwork.

At first, Appropriation Art was seen as a radical stance on previously failed radical stances (as a reaction to an avant-garde that had not delivered on its promises). Its first commentary potential appeared during the rise of pop art, a movement that aimed at taking over the banality of post-war consumer popular culture and transforming it into art pieces.⁴ Elaine Sturtevant's

4 Pop art, by taking over consumer objects and transforming them into art pieces, can be seen as contradictory. The outcomes of such pieces are again lying into commodity (the trendy art piece is a commodified good). Pop art does not criticize anything, if it ever pretended to. This is a phenomenon well analysed by Baudrillard. *"A modern painting, pop, abstract, a "tachiste," contradicts nothing: it enters into the play of the syntagmatic distribution of objects in space (in the modern interior) just as – and because it issues from the inventory of a circumscribed subjectivity – one sign passes into another, from one moment to another."* Baudrillard, Jean. "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign." *University Library Nottingham*. 1981. 110.



7th Avenue Garment Rack with Warhol Flowers (1965)

Elaine Sturtevant



The Store of Claes Oldenburg (1967)
Elaine Sturtevant

7th Avenue Garment Rack with Warhol Flowers (1965), at the Bianchini Gallery in New York can be considered as one of the first manifestations of appropriation art. Using pop art's very language in order to highlight its burlesque character, and provocative by essence, the show would figure re-enactments of Arman, Frank Stella, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol.

By taking over previous art pieces, artists such as Sturtevant wanted to question the structure underneath the artwork. Taking over an artwork and showing it as his own deals as well with notions such as authenticity and authorship. One of the main differences with a copy is that the appropriation is to be seen as an original of the appropriationist, and not a copy of the referenced artist. Since it is easy to dismiss that point, Sturtevant wrote her own manifesto about how her practice should be thought of, thus defining the problems that might emerge.⁵

Mike Bidlo, another appropriation artist successful in the 1980's, would tautologically title his artwork as "NOT Pollock" for a re-enactment of a painting by Pollock. By doing so, he gives the audience the key for possible interpretations of what his work might be dealing with. For these artists, it is a matter of deliberately

5 *"The work cannot be treated in a material or non intellectual way. I am not Anti-Art. I am not saying anyone can do it. I am not "poking fun at the artist"*. I am not "reporting the current scene"**. I am not in the process of celebrating process. I am not making copies. I am not making imitations. I am not interested in painting sculptures or objects. I am not interested in being a "Great Artist". That's real medieval thinking."* Sturtevant in a letter to Onnash, March 17, 1971 * Time Feb. '69 ** Domus '70 Hainley, Bruce. "Under the sign of [sic], Sturtevant's volte-face." *Semiotext(e)*. 2013. 218-219.

framing their intentions in plain sight. This differentiates the appropriated artwork from the copy.



Not Picasso (Girl with cock, 1938) (1987)

Mike Bidlo

Recent takes on Appropriation Art reflect on the heavy burden of previous achievements within art history and try to offer out of these past achievements new narratives that could be perceived as witty or self-reflective. The reason for such attitudes could be seen in the idea that *it is not possible to be original anymore*.⁶ Against this oppressive heritage, the contemporary appropriationist uses icons from the past as working material and gives them new invocations. While previously closely related to the idea of the artwork as signifier of fetishized commodity,

6 Jonathan Monk said a statement similar in his early days of being an artist. This idea, although intemporal, was his way of advocating an uninhibited approach towards appropriation. *Jonathan Monk*. (at the Lisson Gallery.) London, United Kingdom. 20-05-2009 to 12-06-2009 <http://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/jonathan-monk> (accessed 09-02-2014)

contemporary appropriation, according to Jan Verwoert, has more to do with the idea that the ghosts of the past can be used as living material to perform new narratives or alternative histories.⁷ But yet supporting the idea of an end to originality, from an historical perspective, is problematic. Because the actual appropriationist is indeed original; he deals and reconfigures data into a way that is his own.⁸



The Deflated Sculpture (2009)
Jonathan Monk

The appropriation artist (like any artist) is the result of previous cultural amalgamations. He is knowledgeable of his heritage, and might be too self-conscious to honestly try to claim a creation within a mythological

7 See Verwoert, Jan. "Apropos Appropriation: Why stealing images today feels different." *Art&Research*. Volume 1. No. 2. Summer 2007 <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/verwoert.html> (accessed 09-02-2014)

8 Monk is nonetheless aware that this is where the originality of his work lies. "By doing this I think I also created something original and certainly something very different to what I was representing." [Ibid. 5]

*artist as a genius scheme.*⁹ His appropriations are not the result of ignorance. In fact, most of appropriation artists followed a strict art education. As an example, Elaine Sturtevant was, before making re-enactments, an art graduate trying to break through the art world as an abstract-expressionist painter.¹⁰



Ethel Red II (1961) Elaine Sturtevant

The subsequent attitude she developed is the result of precise observations she had while being in art schools or by her previous experiences in the art system. While at first she tried to fit within a movement or a style, she resorted to appropriation as a statement to demonstrate her lack of envy to follow an accepted path. But once this

9 As Sturtevant said, “*I am not interested in being a “Great Artist”.*” [Ibid. 4]

10 “*Sturtevant wasn’t eccentric to the art system or naïve to its machinations: she had participated as a young player, scrutinizing many of its sancta sanctorum, not only key galleries but also the studios of key artists of the day.*” See the *New Names* exhibition at Betty Parsons Section Eleven, New York, 1961. There, Elaine exhibited three abstract expressionist paintings. Among them is *Ethel Red II* (1961). [Ibid. 4] 244-247.

type of appropriation has been embedded as common practice, it then becomes a strategy among others that can be learned at school.¹¹ It then becomes difficult to see this approach as expressing the earlier dense radicalism with which it had been connotated.

Forgery

Forgery is defined as an attempt to deceive through a copy. If made properly, it is assumed to be original. If it is discovered, it is discarded as a fake.¹²



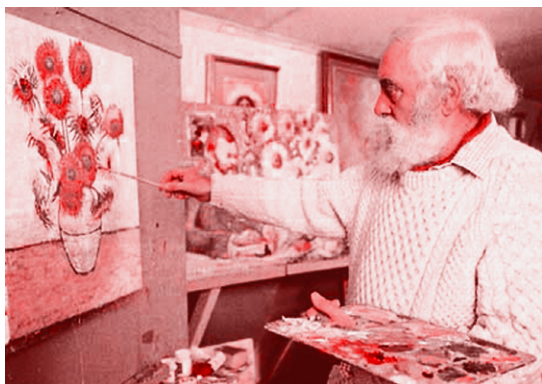
Orson Welles as appearing
in *F for Fake* (1974)

11 Jonathan Monk's liking for appropriation, for instance, was developed during his years as an art school student (1987-1991) at the Glasgow School of Art. [Ibid. 5]

12 "(...) *A fake is essentially opportunistic – it does not question the system: undetected, it is the original; uncovered, it is discarded as a forgery.*" Benjamin, Walter. "On Copy." Walter Benjamin – Recent Writings. New Documents. 2013. 23.



Mark A. Landis



Tom Keating



Eric Hebborn

It is an activity that can be related to counterfeiting, and is also a type of fraud. It can be seen as a form of hoaxing too. These definitions, most of the time, depend on the forger's intentions. One of the main reasons for resorting to forgery is financial gain, but it is not mandatory: the feeling of power that comes from knowingly fooling a said-to-be legitimate authority is another trigger. As a deluded character, the forger feels a sense of civic responsibility and must fight against a system he judges unfair. Elmyr de Hory (as portrayed in *F for Fake* by Orson Welles), Tom Keating (English art restorer turned forger) and Mark A. Landis (American forger uncovered in 2008) are three characters that would easily fit within that definition. For de Hory, it is a matter of making fools of the experts.¹³ Tom Keating qualified himself as a socialist forger; his *modus operandi* was to get rid of the forgeries in antiques shop for ridiculous amounts, expecting their discovery by the shop's clientele. As for Landis, it is all about trying to disrupt and discredit the art ecosystem by donating forgeries to museums, undermining the authenticity of their collection.¹⁴

A forger's action can highlight the cupidity of certain art experts and arbitrary monetary values assigned to artworks depending on subjective reasons (speculation within the art market might be one), and

13 Orson Welles (as a narrator) makes this quick and sharp statement while the camera shows some close-up images... "It's pretty, but is it art? Well, how is it valued? The value depends on opinion. Opinion depends on the experts. A faker like Elmyr makes fools of the experts, so who's the expert." Welles, Orson. "F for Fake." (1973) 00:27:08-00:27:25

14 For an idea of Landis's *œuvre*, see Cullman, Sam. *Grausma, Jennifer*. "Art and Craft". (2014) 89 minutes.

question the relevance of authenticity as a factor for an artwork's appreciation.

Forgers might come from different backgrounds. They might have received an art education that can be formal (an official art institution) or informal (self-education or a professional setting). Their education is usually traditional, with an emphasis on the assets of learning painting from a technical approach. De Hory had a proper art education in Paris, and was the pupil of Fernand Léger, while Tom Keating and Eric Hebborn (another British forger) were both working as art restorers before applying their skills to forgery. Forgers often identify themselves as part of the popular class, but might pretend to be from high society.¹⁵ Most of the time, they are considered to be *failed artists*. This means that, according to the standards of the legitimating authorities within the art system (art market, collectors, critics, peers), the art produced by a forger-to-be is not valuable, thus not interesting. This is the defining moment when a forger, pursuing an ideal of life through art, resort to forgery as a possibility to combine this ideal with the necessities inherent to daily life. Elmyr de Hory started to forge paintings by Picasso out of necessity; after he sold a copy that was coincidentally mistaken for a real one, he realized that he had a potential for imitation. Eric Hebborn resorted to art restoration after unsuccessfully trying to break

15 Elmyr de Hory would describe himself as coming from a fallen aristocratic family. Nonetheless, this seems more likely to be one of his inventions; the nature of the character makes him hardly trustable.

through the art world – the 50's were not the best period for academic painting. This seems like a common pattern among forgers.

Comparing

Comparing processes

To make a perfect physical impression, the appropriationist as well as the forger must use the same level of attention to detail and get to know their “victim”. It is not an easy task. As examples, Elmyr de Hory is said to have carefully practiced in order to have traits as hesitant as Matisse.¹⁶



Elmyr de Hory painting a Matisse.

David Stein (an American known for his Picasso and Chagall forgeries) argues that the forger has to merge his mind and soul with the artist, becoming his extension.¹⁷ While not as mystical as Stein’s view,

16 *“Matisse’s lines were never that sure as mine. He was hesitant when he made the drawing, you know? He added to it a little more and a little more. It wasn’t as flowing, it wasn’t as sure as mine. I had to hesitate... to make it more Matisse-like.”* [Ibid. 11] 00:25:20-00:25:51

17 *“You go into the soul and mind of the artist. It’s like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde thing. You become someone else. When I painted a Matisse, I became Matisse. When I painted*

the approach of appropriation artists acknowledges a sense of obsession for precision as well. Sturtevant would carefully study the techniques of the artists she wished to appropriate. She would then apply these techniques in a rigorous manner (by, as an example, using the same material as the originator).



Elaine Sturtevant painting a Frank Stella.

To this extent, she even had the opportunity to get her hand on original silk screens from Warhol and was able to use them to produce *Warhol Flowers* (1964). This method of operation through observation and precision is also applicable to Mike Bidlo, which would work for over a year trying to achieve a convincing Pollock. He learned Pollock's gesture, had to control the paint's viscosity, its

a Chagall, I was Chagall. When I painted a Picasso, I was Picasso." De Hory would oppose to that statement. "Could you write a story like Hemingway by trying to put yourself into Hemingway's mind and soul? Could you become Hemingway? No, it's a terribly vulgar and romantic explanation." Esterow, Milton. "Fakers, fakers, fakers." *Art News*. 20-11-2013 <http://www.artnews.com/2013/11/20/fakers-fakes-fake-fakers/> (accessed 09-12-2014)

layering and the way it is absorbed into the canvas. He also had to find a proper alternative to the discontinued Duco paint Pollock was known to use.¹⁸



Mike Bidlo painting a “Not Pollock”.

However, contemporary appropriation might not be as precise: now what is more important is the idea of the reference, and not the idea of the carbon-copy. Invocations involve distortions; this is why, as with Jonathan Monk’s *The Deflated Sculpture* (2009), while the materials used and the process are the same as Koons Rabbit, the output is different.

On the other hand, after the moment the artwork is done, forgery follows a different path than appropriation art. One legitimately fits within the gallery, while the other has to be tricked to take this place. This means that technicalities go further in the forger’s case. Copying a famous artist is not

18 See Rosenblum’s interview with Bidlo for some interesting anecdotes on Bidlo’s re-enactment of Pollock. Rosenblum, Robert. “Mike Bidlo talks to Robert Rosenblum.” *Artforum*. April 2003

a crime in itself; the illegal part lies in the signature process. While some do forge the signature as well, others might prefer not to do so and leave this part to a henchman, thus staying clear from the law. This is why Elmyr de Hory proudly stated that he was indeed not making anything illegal when making copies of famous artists.



Fernand Legros at his trial.

He let Fernand Legros (his associate that dealt with reselling the paintings) sign the canvas and pretended to be unaware of the selling of the fraudulent sales of his reproductions. After the artwork moves from a legal copy to an illegal forgery, it is inserted in catalogues or other printed matters, forged certificates might be produced, and it is presented to potential buyers, usually art collectors, galleries, or museums.¹⁹ This is an important point that differentiates

¹⁹ This is facilitated by the fact that there is an impossibility for a total, objective knowledge of an artist's working scope. As an example, there are as much as five catalogues raisonnés of Amedeo Modigliani's work (one of de Hory's favourite) and none has higher authority over the others; they each seem to contradict themselves. Harris, Gareth. "Modigliani Institute president arrested." *The*

a copy from a forgery. The copy can only become a forgery at the moment it is sold as something it is not (an original painting of an original artist).²⁰

Comparing attitudes and motivations

Both forgeries and appropriations are forms of copy. Previously, we said that these two approaches were roughly identical on the processes because they both aimed at visual sameness. Attitudes can be similar as well, since both are reacting on the same parameters they find relevant; contradictions within the art field, questioning the legitimizing authority and the myth of the genius artist. Nonetheless, the motivations that trigger these practices are different, thus making them different in terms of intentions. They can diverge in terms of values they deal with, targets and audiences or their relationship towards market reception.

Intent and narrative

While the appropriation artist is giving visibility into a particular artwork's contradictions, the forger, although his actions are triggered by these contradictions, does not make them visible (they are concealed). And if the appropriation artist gives new narratives to an artwork, it can be said that the forger indeed offers

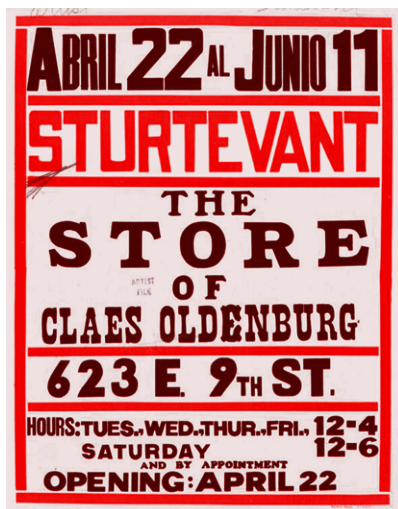
Art Newspaper. 24-01-2013 <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Modigliani-Institute-president-arrested/28490> (accessed 10-12-2014)

20 "(...) while a fake (deceptively) wants to be the original, a copy (overtly) tries only to imitate it. Thus, the purpose of a fake is to conceal, whereas a copy proposes to reveal." [Ibid. 12]



Top: Relâche (1967) Elaine Sturtevant
Bottom: Study for Yvonne Rainer's "Three Seascapes" (1967)
Elaine Sturtevant

new narratives too. On the other hand, while the new narratives resulting from appropriation are explicit (they are conceived for this purpose), the ones from forgery are lying on a meta level.



Poster for Sturtevant's *The Store of Claes Oldenburg*, April 1967

It is the narrative of their personal stories, their attitude and what one might imagine after the forgery is uncovered. While Sturtevant offers Claes Oldenburg's *Store* as a self-contradictory art-market-store attacked by popular class neighbour kids, Picabia's *Relâche* as a physical cancellation, Heizer's *Double Negative* as a mythological Howard Hughes's desert quest or Yvonne Rainer's

Three Seascapes as expiated from any feministic after-thought dance, a forger like de Hory only offer himself as his own character in F for Fake and the possibility to correlate his story while appreciating a known-to-be-fake Modigliani painting. In other words, a de Hory painting can only become related to the de Hory narrative when it is explicit that it is a de Hory. A counter-example that could place the forger as having the same intent of designed/visible new narrative within his work would be Han van Meeregen's *Supper at Emmaus*, which, while painted in the style of Vermeer, deals with themes unknown to the latter but largely pronounced by experts and critics.²¹ Here, the intent to unleash a designed fictional narrative is the purpose and not a residual consequence of one's practice.

Target and audience

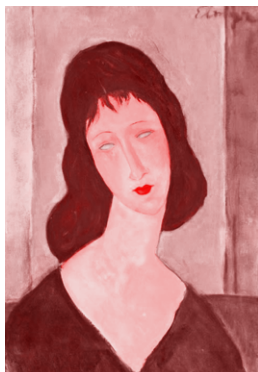
While the appropriation artist's target is another artist or an artwork, the forger's target is the art collector. For the forger, the copy is a medium to reach a target (the art expert) while for the appropriation artist the target is the very artwork copied. While Sturtevant highlights Oldenburg's contradictions by re-enacting his *Store*,

21 "His first target was the renowned Vermeer scholar Abraham Bredius. To fool Bredius, he created a large *Supper at Emmaus*, which was to be acclaimed not only as a great lost Vermeer but one which shed new light on the master's career – showing that he had painted religious pictures as well as the genre scenes for which he was known. (...) Bredius managed to see in the picture 'a depth of feeling... such as is found in no other work of his' (...) But Bredius was held in such high renown that his view prevailed." Graham-Dixon, Andrew. "ITP 50: Woman Reading Music, by Han van Meegeren." The Sunday Telegraph. 01-04-2001 <http://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/archive/readArticle/80> (accessed 10-12-2014)



Supper at Emmaus (1936-1937) Han van Meegeren

de Hory is not addressing any critiques to Modigliani when forging his paintings. He is rather addressing his critique to the collectors that might find a good deal in the forged artworks. In a way, while the appropriationist is commenting on the artwork he copies, the forger does not express criticism on it. In fact, he would often reproduce artworks he highly regards. The choice of an artwork to copy for the forger is a matter of taste while for the appropriation artist it is a matter of what the artwork represents in terms of value and how this can be played with.



A painting *in the style of Modigliani*
by Elmyr de Hory.

While a spectator can appreciate Appropriation Art within a museum, it seems difficult to imagine oneself enjoying a forgery within a museum. The viewer, by looking at an appropriated artwork, might think of what the artist wants to point out by copying or think

about the appropriation's relation to its original (since the artwork is an icon, it will always strongly refer visually to its reference). However, the spectator contemplating the forgery can't be aware of its fake status until it is discovered as a fake. The forger's questioning is related to a broader societal phenomenon that is not to be experienced on a personal level. What could be said, too, is that the audience able to appreciate appropriation art is often highly educated and has a specific idea of what art is (in its contemporary form). To the common public, it is too intellectual and specific. Since it does not relate to beauty or other traditional values, it is difficult to appreciate. On the other hand, possible repulsion might make it truly effective in relation to the questions addressed, thus proving its pertinence.²²

Market reception

If the forger's actions are motivated by money, the artist's actions are not. But the artist, like the forger, can become rich. Or at least, be the matter of speculation. And the forger might be poor as well. Certain forgers only made little gains out their activities because most of the profits went to their accomplices and their network. Other forgers would deliberately sell their copies for almost nothing. They pursued the nobler goal of strict art market pertur-

22 To this extent, it seem that Mike Bidlo had few problems with its public or relative artists that would react aggressively to his work. *"MB: When the de Chiricos were shown at Daniel Templon in Paris, a strangely dressed French street artist came into the gallery while I was there, and started screaming at the top of his lungs, 'This is shit, you are shit, this is awful!'"* [Ibid. 17]

bation. Tom Keating and Mark A. Landis never made any money out of their forgeries as it would contradict their beliefs, and neither of them would have let accomplices make money on their behalf. As said, an appropriation artist, once recognized within the art field, can trigger a general hype around his work.



Frightened Girl (1966) Elaine Sturtevant

In this situation, he can become what he was initially in opposition with. The appropriation artist becomes an icon, and his work can be seen as signs of artwork-as-consumer-products, or symbols of taste or high-culture.²³ *Frightened Girl* (1966), a Lichtenstein re-enactment

23 "In this sense, modern works have indeed become everyday object: although laden with cultural connotations, they pose no problems to the environment. (...) Two chains cross: the necessary dimension of signification is also the "fatal" dimension of integration and consumption." [Ibid. 3]

by Sturtevant sold for 3,413,000.00\$ at a Christie's auction in November 2014.²⁴ A sum of this range competes well with original Lichtenstein's, or forgeries like van Meegeren's *Supper at Emmaus* (sold for €4.640.000 in 2014 eq.). Here, the artwork becoming an object of speculation is not to be seen as a goal (it is not desired), but more as an inherent consequence of unleashing artworks in the wild. Sustainability of an art practice rhymes with personal financial sustainability (as capitalism regulates society; it is a by-product). The appropriation artist wishes to pursue his practice and consequently takes part into the economic system. Becoming the object of speculation or a sign-symbol-icon of commodified value is not intentional but a fatality.²⁵

- 24 The high value might have been caused by Sturtevant's death in October 2014. Christie's estimation range was between 600,000.00 and 800,000.00\$. Previous auctions price were significantly lower, although it is clear that the amount is still substantial. <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/paintings/sturtevant-lichtenstein-frighten-girl-5846086-details.aspx> (accessed 11-02-2015)
- 25 Barbara Kruger (another artist known for her appropriations), conscious of possible contradictions of an artist's relationship to the art market, once said to Hal Foster: "*there is nothing, not even the lint on your sweater, that's not touched by the market. Get over it*" Bollen, Christopher. "Hal Foster, The Insiders." *Interview Magazine*. October 2014. <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/hal-foster-the-insiders/> (accessed 11-02-2015)

Correlating

Speculating on forgery as artistic practice

Forgery and appropriation art might have related and diverging points. Now, it could be interesting to see in which frameworks forgery could be considered as a legitimate artistic practice, or if it even could be thought of so. The first and most effective scenario would be to qualify forgery as an act of art in relation to craftsmanship according to the principle of the *techne*; art as amassed knowledge and mastered skills and its applications.²⁶ It is obvious that forgery involves lot of skills. The perfect forger has a true mastery of form-making technique but he must also understand how the targeted structures function. Hence, enacting a confidence trick involves practice and ability for self-reflection.

Another interesting approach is to consider the forger as an artist from a conceptual, dematerialized definition of art. In this scenario, the work of art is not to be seen in the singularities of the forms made by the forger but more in the singularity of his attitude or his approach. It could be thought that the forger's dissent is more

26 *Techne* as coined by Aristotle or Plato, is often translated to craftsmanship or art, but is in fact fairly more difficult to define (a bit of both, or neither of both). It could be more described as a pragmatic, context-dependent and production oriented skill driven by a conscious goal. "The set of principles, or rational method, involved in the production of an object or the accomplishment of an end; the knowledge of such principles or method; art. *Techne* resembles *episteme* in implying knowledge of principles, but differs in that its aim is making or doing, not disinterested understanding" D. Runes, Dagobert. "Dictionary of Philosophy." 1942. <http://www.ditext.com/runes/t.html> (accessed 05-03-2015)



Woman in Blue Reading a Letter (c. 1663) Johannes Vermeer



Woman Reading Music (1935-40) Han van Meegeren

honest than the appropriation artist's commenting.²⁷ If acknowledged, then this desire for opposition and the developed attitude to manufacture this opposition is what could be seen as the forger's art. This could relate as well to forgery as a performative act. If he could be self-aware of all the consequences of his actions, and if they are all desired, it could be said that he does indeed take responsibility for his work. To the argument that invisibility might prevent the forger to be considered as an artist, an answer could be whether Duchamp's chess games are to be considered as art (his ultimate masterpiece according to him) even though knowledge or documentation of these happenings are extremely loose or non-existent. Invisibility might not undermine one's work as an artist.²⁸

As well, it could be said that the forger becomes an artist when he exceeds expectations by painting radically new pieces. It is said that most of the good forgers do not copy but rather paint in the style of the artist they want to impersonate. The best example of this would be the previously cited *Supper at Emmaus* by Han van Meegeren.

27 As he does not aspire for success, fame, or recognition, his actions could be described as more ethically driven than the now-commodified artist. As well, the dissent expressed by a forger could be more disrupting than its embedded-artist counterpart. I think of forgery in relation to other artistic practices driven by activism that end up with concrete results within the realm of the political; beyond critiques embedded within the museum as soon as addressed. To this extent, Chantale Mouffe would point art practices of artists / activists / hoaxers such as *The Yes Man*, which could potentially be related to forgery (which is just another type of hoax). See Mouffe, Chantale. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." *Art&Research*. Volume 1. No. 2. Summer 2007

28 But Duchamp's previous achievements act as a credibility endorser for his subsequent act of silence, as well as this silence confirms the seriousness of his anterior achievements within the art field. Renunciation suggests past enunciation; it is not the same as "never-enunciation". See Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence." in *Styles of Radical Will*. 1969.

If a forger gets recognition, he can become an artist by making copies bearing his own name. This is interesting as here the border between appropriation art and forgery becomes extremely thin. In fact, it could be said that in this case the forger becomes an appropriation artist. He is legitimized (people are interested in buying a de Hory and not a copy of a Modigliani) but does express himself only through the spectre of the reference artist he is taking on.²⁹



A painting *in the style of* Modigliani: detail of Elmyr de Hory's signature.

Exhibitions about famous forgers were organized as well.³⁰ But in this case, it could also be argued that the

29 "People ask, 'Is that a real de Hory?' says Pyle, an English antiques dealer with a roguish laugh, standing in front of a fine Modigliani fake. 'It's not a Modigliani, but is it a real de Hory? Yeah. Look at the quality. Have you seen anything of that quality that wasn't a Modigliani?'" Hamlin, Jesse. "Master (Con) Artist / Painting forger Elmyr de Hory's copies are like the real thing." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 29-07-1999 <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Master-Con-Artist-Painting-forgers-Elmyr-de-2917456.php> (accessed 09-12-2014)

30 See *Intent to Deceive*. (An exhibition at the Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts.) Springfield, Massachusetts. 01-21-2014 to 27-04-2014



Top: Forger David Stein interviewed during first solo show in New York City.

Bottom: John Pyle, proud owner of an “authentic” de Hory.



Han van Meegeren's forgery of *The Procuress* (by Dirck van Baburen, c. 1622) is considered more valuable by market standards than the "original".

forgers are not forgers anymore (as the best ones intend to remain invisible).³¹



Forgeries of forgeries, “Inferior quality” forgeries of van Meegeren. (probably made by his son)

Forgery as artistic practice: limitations

However, while it is possible to consider forgery as an artistic practice, there are obvious problems that might limit ourselves to consider it so. A common argument is that the forger might not truly take responsibility for his whole actions. If a forger would be offered to become a successful artist, might he have been one? If de Hory would have been successful as an artist in

31 “(...) as *Théodore Rousseau* pointed out, ‘We should all realise that we can only talk about the bad forgeries, the ones that have been detected; the good ones are still hanging on the walls.’” *Wynne, Frank*. “I Was Vermeer: The Rise and Fall of the Twentieth Century’s Greatest Forger.” *Bloomsbury USA*. 2003. 11.

Paris, he might never have resorted to forgery. As a reverse statement, the appropriation artist might not trade his status for the one of the forger if offered so. Art forging as an activity may be the result of the impossibility to live as an artist making his own work. Doubt can also arise when one looks at an exposed forger's arguments for justifying his practice. Is it sincere or is it just a mere formulation for hiding remorseful greediness?



Han van Meegeren at his trial, proving to the jury that he was the author of the *Supper at Emmaus*.

When van Meegeren was caught, he was first seen as a pro-Nazi collaborator that sacked a Vermeer and sold it to the enemy. He then confessed to the forgery and was elevated as a hero. However, there is no doubt that it was not his intention to dupe the enemy; what happened has more to do with a combination of circum-

tances.³² In order to be considered as an artist, the forger must at least be consistent, and, though not impossible, it is not always the case.

Relating Appropriation art to forgery

Certain appropriation artists might have the same attitude and enthusiasm as forgers when it comes to making copies and selling them. Mike Bidlo's enthusiastic, *getting into the soul of the artist* attitude is, as an example, totally related to David Stein's view on forgery.



Inside Mike Bidlo's studio

32 Denis Dutton, like a lot of others, expressed doubt regarding van Meegeren's claims. Opportunistic in nature, the last was known to be quite inconsistent and harsh on art critics that made him fail as an artist. The positive image given by the public has more to do with popular mythology than actual events; his vendetta had nothing to do with war resistance. Dutton, Denis. "Forgery and Plagiarism." From *the Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*. 1998. http://www.denisdutton.com/forgery_and_plagiarism.htm (accessed 11-02-2015)

If they are not sincere in their comment as they just found a way to achieve recognition within the art field by copying without bothering much, then they could be considered as legitimated scammers (where the forger is the illegitimate counterpart). If one has to steal, one must know why he is doing so.³³



After Piet Mondrian (1984) Sherrie Levine

Although not a value judgement, one can question Sherrie Levine's practice in relation to Sturtevant, as it seems that after Sturtevant, this way of commenting

33 To blatantly copy could be described as a theft. But, according to Barthes, theft is absolutely legitimate. *"The only possible rejoinder is neither confrontation nor destruction, but only theft: fragment the old text of culture, science, literature, and change its features according to the formulae of disguise, as one disguises stolen goods. (...) The social intervention of a text (not necessarily achieved at the time the text appears) is measured not by the popularity of its audience (...) but rather by the violence that enables it to exceed the laws that a society, an ideology, a philosophy establish for themselves in order to agree among themselves in a fine surge of historical intelligibility."* Nonetheless, its "revolutionary" power has to be testified in order to be function as such. Barthes, Roland. "Sade, Fourier, Loyola." *University of California Press*. 1989. 10.

may no longer be relevant.³⁴ One can question as well the practice of appropriation in relation to an artist's intentions.³⁵ A more classical argument would be to consider that appropriation artists are not expressing themselves. On the other hand, such an argument needs to be defined according to our beliefs of what is self-expression. As said earlier, an artist is original by the links or configuration he provides (as Monk paradoxically defined his art as being original even though it is not possible to be original). Here, it is not by the "invention" of the content but by the creative uses of it triggering singularity within the relationships that is seen as self-expression.

34 This relates to the idea that innovation is what an artist seeks through his practice. One can argue that Levine did exactly as Sturtevant did before. Would that make it irrelevant? Maybe yes... maybe not. Nonetheless, by picking up on specific works to appropriate, she positions herself differently than Sturtevant.

35 As an example, ready-made as other ideas can be misused and turned to derision as the artist using the terms tries to hype his work. *"I had one artist approach me and say she did ready-made art. (...) I then wondered what that meant and how it worked. She said, "Oh, I don't know, my dealer told me to say that" [laughs]."* Ulrich Obrist, Hans. "Elaine Sturtevant." 032c #16 (Post-America). Winter 2008/2009 <http://032c.com/2008/elaine-sturtevant/> (accessed 11-02-2015)



Infe©ted Mondrian (1994) General Idea

Closure

I have previously stretched the definitions of forgery and appropriation art in order to see if two different yet similar practices have points of interconnection. Obviously, Appropriation Art is not forgery and vice-versa. But it is enjoyable and productive to think of these two as related activities. Indeed, forgery offers an interesting counterpoint, raising questions of perception and relevance in other fields as well. Nonetheless, one should be cautious. The forger has become, in the same fashion that the artist could have been seen earlier, a romanticized and mythological figure. In addition, one has to be careful of the destructive impact forgery can have as it distorts our real historical narrative (for example, the fictional narratives of Verwoert's fantasized invocations becoming the very real).³⁶ On the other hand, the way history is built can be questioned as well, as it is not as objective as one might like to believe. So, who's to believe?

Thinking about forgery in relation to appropriation art raises related questions. As examples... what would happen if pieces from an appropriation artist were forged? Or if an appropriation artist would appropriate a piece of another appropriation artist? Where is the

36 Dutton, again, is clear on that. Forgery, according to him, is highly damageable as it distorts our vision of artists and impacts our relationship with their artwork. *"Since forgery is usually attributed to a historically important figure, forgery distorts and falsifies our understanding of art history. (...) The successful forger, in contrast, affects our view of historically important artists and creators."* To show the potent distrust forgery can cause, Dutton uses the example of two lovers making out the dark, as it turns out they are strangers. Passionate but highly deceptive. [Ibid. 34]

point of reference in these circumstances? What is the border between art restoration and forgery?³⁷



An Artful History: A Restoration Comedy (1989)

Mark Dion

Can an artist forge his own work, and what happens then?³⁸ Contemporary art practices have seen a tremendous use of studio assistants. In that case, who is the author? But maybe this has always been the case?³⁹

- 37 Mark Dion already addressed that question in *An Artful History: A restoration Comedy* (1989). In this video piece, he takes on the role of an art restorer, stretching the limits of art restoration to the point it might be considered forgery, showing to the audience how both practices might merge.
- 38 Giorgio de Chirico is known to have forged his own work as a frustration against lack of recognition of his latter works and a success of his early paintings that he considered unjustified.
- 39 Rubens did the same hundred of years ago. In his workshops, assistant might paint according to sketches and ideas the painter would give. While Rubens might paint parts of an image, assistants would do other parts before the artist would inscribe his signature. "Formerly, painters regularly used collaborators or "negros": one specialized in trees, another in animals. The act of painting, and so the signature as well, did not bear the same mythological insistence upon authenticity – that moral imperative to which modern art is dedicated and by which it becomes modern (...)." Warhol,



Self-forgery dated from the 1960s of
Le Muse inquietanti (1916, 1917 or 1918)
by Giorgio De Chirico



Left: Relâche (1967) Elaine Sturtevant

*Right: Study for Yvonne Rainer's "Three Seascapes" (1967)
Elaine Sturtevant*

Dealing with an idealized notion of authorship is complicated... We can ask why do we indeed need an author. As one said, *the birth of the viewer comes at the death of the author*.⁴⁰

It is clear that the examples of radical appropriation described in that essay might not be rigorously sustainable as an artistic practice today. Engaging contemporary attempts can deal with one's relation to an original (appropriation as highlighting hidden relationships) without necessary copying. As well, since previous appropriations were questioning authorship while still being authors in the making, one might think about possibilities of using appropriation in an author-less manner.⁴¹ On the other hand, the idea that there is no possibility for newness, the realization that the idea of absolute newness is a fallacy, and that what makes one's practice original is actually more situated in the originality of the new links being made developed through reconfiguration of existing materials or data is a powerful open window to contemporary doubt.

Gilbert & George or Jeff Koons are not new to this. [Ibid. 3] 103.

- 40 As said by Barthes in *The Death of the Author* (1968). Barthes and Foucault both happened to question the pertinence of the author's authority over his work, and suggest that the text (but this can be applied to an artwork as well) has a life on its own. The reader is the only one that has legitimate authority when it comes to reading. The author has to be seen as an endorsing function of a work, nothing more. He only exists because we ask so; we wouldn't consider authorless works, it is a gesture of endorsement that gives value to a work.
- 41 The Museum of American Art Berlin (MoAA) is an interesting initiative that tries to deal with this, by re-enacting famous exhibitions of modernist heritage in an ambiguous form of copies mediated as originals but with confusion-inducing anachronisms. See *Les Fleurs Américaines – Museum of American Art in Berlin*. Le Plateau / Frac Île-de-France. 2014

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