

EEVA MAIJA VILJO

## THE WORK OF PICTORIAL ART AS AN UNRESOLVED MESSAGE

Imagine that somebody who hides his identity behind a false signature, sends you the Fountain by Marcel Duchamp (signed "R. Mutt" in 1917), or an object similar to it, by post. Unless you had a sophisticated awareness of ready-mades, you would not, I think, add it to your art collection. You might feel bewildered about the purpose of the unknown sender. You might feel offended, even insulted by the explicit rudeness of the message, once it had become clear that it was indeed a message, not a functional object, that you had received. Taken out of context, Fountain cannot be recognized as an art object, but if it is read as a sign - with or without artistic value - its intentionally offensive nature at least becomes quite clear.

Does this mean that a work of art cannot be recognized as such without knowledge of the context in which it was produced? Obviously not. Fountain just happens to be a special case - or then it is not a work of art. There has grown around this work a tradition of interpretation that assigns to it a pivotal role as an art object rather like the famous, now lost panel painting with which Brunelleschi demonstrated the power of central perspective in representation. According to this tradition the Fountain of Marcel Duchamp is one of the pioneering statements about the changed nature of art in this century.<sup>1</sup>

However, the discussion on the significance of Fountain to the theory of modern art is based largely on verbal statements made by the artist himself and also on a replica of the work produced almost fifty years after the "original" Fountain was offered as an exhibit to the Society of Independent Artists in New York. By this time Fountain number 2 had become regarded as a doctrinal work. Materially Fountain 2 is a different object from Fountain 1.

<sup>1</sup>See for instance Albrecht, Juerg, "Fountain" by R. Mutt. Marcel Duchamp zum 100. Geburtstag, *Pantheon*, 45, 1987, 160-171.

Visually it is perhaps close enough to the first specimen to merit the status of a replica, as such works generally go. As a work of art it is nothing like the same product, however.

We must consider Fountain 1 as it arrived to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 before any statements about it had been issued by the artist, by the friends of the artist, or by various people on the receiving end of the message. At this stage Fountain was in a sense mute. Its impact could be created only by its object characteristics, by "object language." This is, in fact, a prime feature of a work of pictorial art, and as far as I have been able to make out, it seems to be widely accepted by art historians, aestheticians, and philosophers of art as the starting point for the interpretation of meaning.

In spite of the fact that I do not think a detailed knowledge of the context of a work of art is a necessary condition for appreciation or "understanding," I still want to consider context as a field of social interaction that the artist has to be aware of, take into account, or somehow surmise as a vital part of the formation of an artwork. Baxandall and Bryson, among others, have stressed the importance of context, and Baxandall especially has scrutinized the social production of an artwork closely.<sup>2</sup> He refers to a certain kind of social field where the artist meets the patron and the prospective public with the French word "troc" signifying exchange of a material kind, buying and selling, for instance, barter. He points out that within this "troc" there exist no facilities whereby it is possible to designate in advance the precise art object that will be made. The artist is, thus, free to take initiative and to formulate the process in relative independence.<sup>3</sup>

Duchamp's mute insult had to have a receiver in order to be an insult, and it was, in fact, directed to a coterie of artists and affluent intellectuals who had espoused the cause of modernism in the US art world. I do not think that Fountain can be regarded as the profound and generalizing statement on the nature of art that it is often given out to be. Any intentional meaning it could have had must be looked for in the artist's immediate social field and as arising out of his interaction with very definite individuals on concrete issues. It was to these persons that Duchamp addressed himself with the parodic Fountain.

The Fountain as such, as an object, is not an argument for or against anything. The burden of investing it with a final meaning lay with the organizers of the exhibition to which it was offered. Whatever they would

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<sup>2</sup>Bryson, Norman, *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze*, Gt Britain: Macmillan, 1983; Baxandall, Michael, *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Baxandall 1985, 47-50.

decide to do with it would become part of its meaning. In other words, they would complete the process of intending something which was begun by the artist.

It is precisely because a work of pictorial art is a material object that it is a suitable focus for a long-term process of formulating meaning. The characteristics of "object language" are in a sense indefinite, i.e., an object has to be continually interpreted and reinterpreted even though material, composition, colour, etc. stay the same, or almost the same, over time. As an object the artwork can be the instrument for the probing behaviour of the artist with regard to difficult or perplexing issues, and it is, at the same time, the means of enlisting the public for the same task.

A possible explanation of Duchamp's Fountain, for instance, could be that the artist had no definite stand on whether the urinal was a work of art or not. His intention could have been to expose the well-meaning proponents of novel art trends by giving them only two wretched choices: suppress the Fountain - which is what actually happened - and show yourself the conventionalist that you are, or accept it and show that you have no clear understanding of art since you will accept any object as an artwork. The meanings would only have been implied by the artist, and the controversy brought to a head within the context. The context would have to be defined as the field of interaction around the work. Admittedly, those who in this case were directly addressed, i.e. the jury, had little choice in the matter. There was, thus, an element of prediction in Duchamp's action.

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Another interesting characteristic of pictorial works is that processing does not narrow the range of meaning; it seems to do exactly the opposite. It might be worthwhile to compare this artistic processing with the defining of a concept. In the latter case the intention is to arrive at a precise meaning, and this is accomplished by eliminating ambiguity. In art the opposite seems to happen as far as the meaning of the work is concerned. The composition can become more unified, pictorially more precise, reduced even, as the artist works on it, but at the same time it starts to grow rich in allusions, and these allusions do not necessarily lead to an unambiguous view as to what the work signifies.

It is, of course, possible that defining a concept and creating a work of pictorial art are not, as processes, so far removed from each other as the end results would lead one to suppose. Uncertainty about the meaning of a concept can, for instance, be eliminated by saying the same thing in different ways or by scrutinizing a whole range of possible meanings in order to find the limits



Akseli Gallen-Kallela: Sketch for *Démasqué* 188. Oil on wood panel. The Gösta Serlachius Museum of Fine Art, Mänttä.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela: *Démasqué* 1888. Oil. The Art Museum of the Ateneum, Helsinki.

of the concept. It could be said, then, that the task of defining a concept requires elaboration in much the same sense as does artistic work. Nor, can it be assumed that my discussion of some unresolved aspects in the meaning of art objects can be extended to all pictorial artworks without some very rigorous qualifications. I have, in fact deliberately chosen examples that can be designated as special cases in order to point out how "intention" is tied to social interaction in the Baxandallian sense.

My next example, however, does not so much focus on social interaction as on the significance of concrete visual material for the development of the artist's intention. I refer to *Démasquée* (1888)<sup>4</sup> by the Finnish artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela. The work depicts a female nude in the artist's studio. She is leaning back to one side, in a taunting position, while removing a mask in order to reveal a full, luminous gaze in a pallid, faintly smiling face. The painting seems rich in symbolic content, but it has not been researched in a conclusive way. Its ambiguous character has recently been pointed out in a feminist study of depictions of women.<sup>5</sup> It seems to be difficult to decide whether the woman is attractive or repelling, or possibly a bit frightening, and what her posture and facial expression are meant to convey.

A preliminary sketch for *Démasquée*<sup>6</sup>, which was a commissioned work, shows that the initial intent of patron/artist was pornographic. That at least, is what the black-stockinged, but otherwise nude model of the sketch would indicate. The surroundings are the same as those of the final work, Gallen-Kallela's studio, and the collection of objects shown in both versions is more or less what the artist is known to have had on display there. These objects had been chosen for their special significance - for example a human skull on the table obliquely behind the model - but in the sketch they simply happen to be there; there is no connection to the woman. The removal of the mask, too, is here only a coy gesture.

In the final work the woman and her studio backdrop form a meaningful unity, and although it is not clear quite what the unity signifies, it is obvious that the enigmatic nude has taken off her stockings and assumed her seat with some deep design in mind. It seems safe to suppose that in *Démasquée* the objects in the visual field of the painter making realistic sketches of his model have served to steer away the intention of the artist from that of the original commission. That the objects were his own choice is another interesting matter, but it need not here occupy us further.

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<sup>4</sup> The Art Museum of the *Ateneum*, Helsinki.

<sup>5</sup> Stewen, Riikka, 'Luopuminen/lempeä kapina: naisenkuva 1800-luvun suomalaisessa taitteessa,' *Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia/ Konsthistoriska studier*, 10, Helsinki, 1987, 117-131.

<sup>6</sup> The Serlachius Collection, Mänttä, Finland.

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Ronald Paulson has criticized art historians, notably those who have been influenced by Ernst Gombrich, for believing that a work of art has only one true interpretation and that it is possible to unravel this meaning as obviously intended by the artist (in collaboration with his patron).<sup>7</sup> I can go along with Paulson's viewpoint in so far as I too think that more than one meaning can be found in a work of pictorial art. Paulson, however, looks to the pictorial material for signs of unresolved conflicts of the artist's subconscious, and these he wants to interpret in terms of Freudian symbolism. This approach, if taken to an extreme position, regards the artist's work as a document of her/his subconscious conflicts, and she/he can then no longer be regarded as mistress or master of her/his intentions.

Art historians have generally preferred to think of the artist's intentions with regard to her/his work as more or less conscious designs based on rational choice, and that is also the stand that Baxandall takes. For him intention is manifested in relations that can, in principle, be established on a factual basis.<sup>8</sup> Taking the view that subconscious influence is predominant in artistic work shifts questions on material and technique into a secondary position. "Explanations" of works of art are expressions of methodology and as such they approach the works from some selected standpoint. My stand here is that the pictorial artwork is more explicable if treated as a material object than if it is looked on as a manifestation of subconscious or preconscious aspects in art. I am merely trying to show that the problem of intention can fruitfully be approached from the material object side of the artwork.

Baxandall has suggested that producing a work of art is something similar to or analogous to problem-solving<sup>9</sup>. The problems are presented - or present themselves - as a "charge" or a "brief," as Baxandall calls them. In the final work they are resolved, as far as the artist is concerned. The work is then ready to be apprehended as a problem by whoever responds to it. Baxandall thinks that intention in artistic production manifests itself as a devious process of spontaneous acts. (Here he talks about causation: a brush-stroke inspires the next brush-stroke in a causal way.) This is, in effect, approximately the way that I think the evolution of *Démasquée* from sketch to final work took place.

Artistic work may be problem-solving, but I do not think that that covers all of its aspects. Reducing the meaning of a work to an initial problem

<sup>7</sup> Paulson, Ronald, *Literary Landscape. Turner and Constable*, New Haven & London, 1982, 16-18.

<sup>8</sup> Baxandall 1985, 41-42.

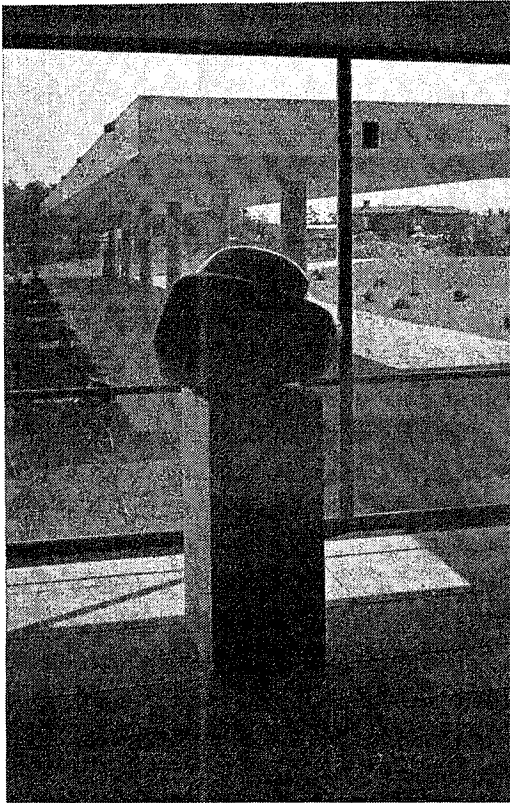
<sup>9</sup> Baxandall 1985, 42-47.



and its solution brings us back to the art historic position that Paulson objects to. There is, in fact, enough material in Baxandall's discussion of art works to allow for alternative interpretations of the artistic process, but he seems to be influenced by Gombrich's view that art is mainly cognition, and comparing the artist's activity to problem-solving may seem convenient from that position. Bryson has given Gombrich's standpoint a critical examination and shown how the equation drawn between visual perception and visual art with its concomitant stress on representation as the "explanation" for all pictorial works, has led to this mistake.<sup>10</sup> It is true that Baxandall focuses on the technical problems that the artist has to contend with, and there problem-solving could be an apt comparison, but unless we are to reduce meaning to technique, another way to characterize the artistic process must be worked out.

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I have already shown with Duchamp's Fountain how a view alternative to the



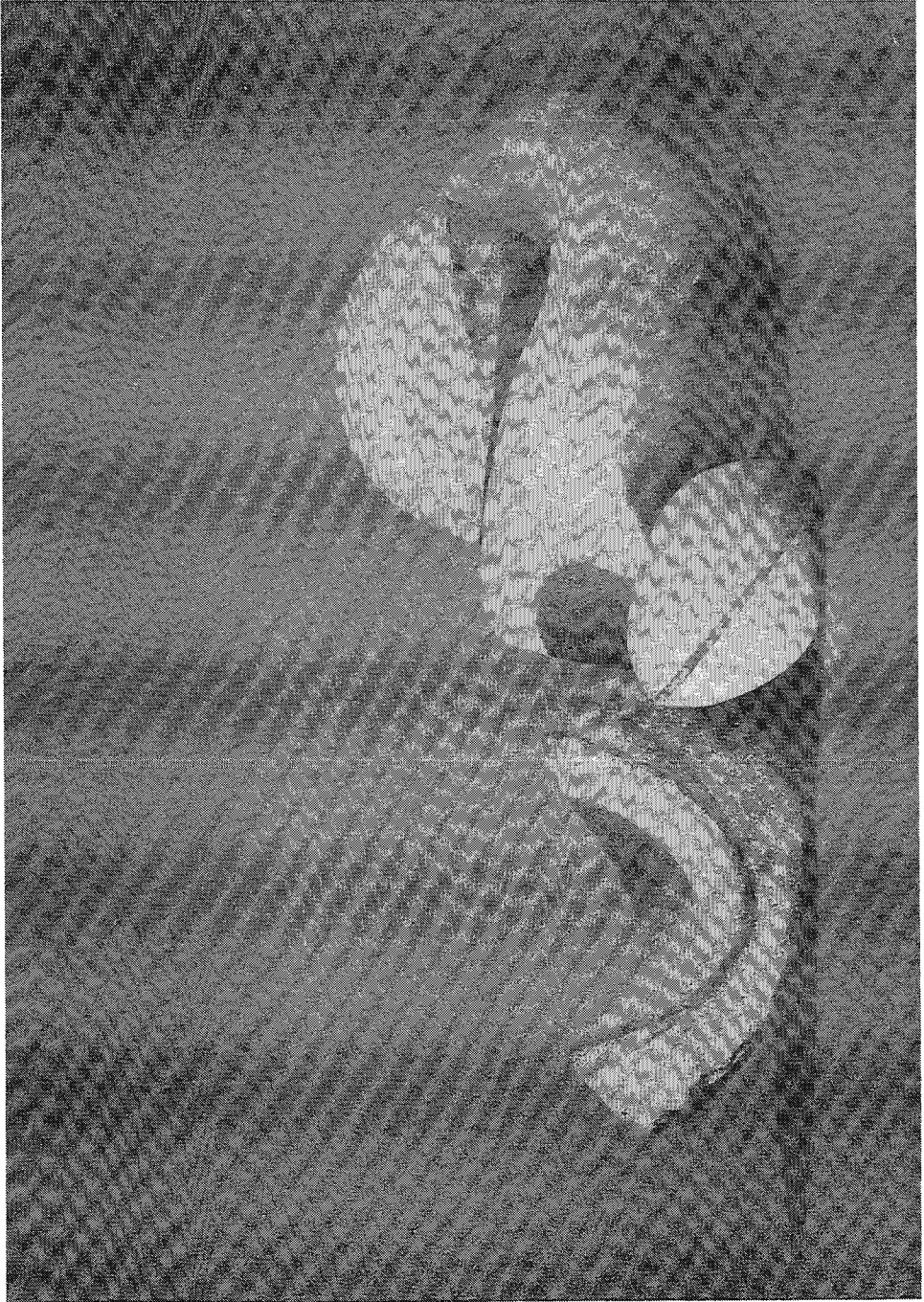
artist as problem-solver can be found with the aid of Baxandall's "troc," which could also be thought of as context of a certain (historical) kind. Since Fountain can hardly be regarded as representative of all artworks - or even of a sizeable number of them - I shall demonstrate my case with a bronze sculpture (see illustrations), *De Profundis* (1968) by the Finnish sculptress Essi Renvall. It was commissioned after the artist had won a competition for a sculpture intended for the entrance hall of a funerary chapel in Turku. The work is seemingly in a nonfigurative mode, which is a fitting kind of "decoration" for the modern building in which it is housed.

Essi Renvall: *De Profundis*, 1968. The funerary chapel of the Holy Cross, Turku, Finland. Photo Simo Rista

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<sup>10</sup> Bryson 1983, 18 ff.





Preliminary stages of Essi Renvall's *De Profundis*. The source, the natural stones, separated, to the left. To the right a modified and enlarged plaster cast of the stones. Simo Rista, Helsinki. Photo Simo Rista, 1989.

There is a source for *De Profundis*, two natural stones that fit into each other found by Essi Renvall's son on the shore of the Mediterranean in Lebanon and brought back to Finland by him (see illustrations). The mention of the artist's son is not meant to carry any overtones of sentiment; it merely shows the significance of reciprocal personal relations for context, or "troc" if you like. One of my students has done some research on *De Profundis* and its source, and she came to some interesting conclusions.<sup>11</sup>

It can be discussed in what sense *De Profundis* can be called nonfigurative or abstract. All of Essi Renvall's other work is representational; she is particularly known for her portraits. The finished work is definitely not a copy of the stones in larger size; many details have been changed and modified. One way to characterize the work is to call it a "portrait" of the natural configuration of two stones that through the action of the waves during a long period of time have acquired their curious shape. However, in the 1960's when *De Profundis* was made, there existed no such alternative in people's mind - the stones were, of course, not widely known. The sculpture was received as a nonfigurative work by the critics and the public.

The important point here is not so much what the sculpture looks like, but what the sculptress intended. She was obviously aware of the current trend for abstract art, and, in fact, I do not think it would have been possible to win the competition with any other kind of work. If an artist who is used to doing representations of models wants to do an "abstract" work, a natural way to proceed would be the method adopted by Renvall and then leave it to the jury to decide whether it was acceptable as nonfigurative art or not.

It seems quite certain that the reaction of the jury and the public were "intended" by the artist, and as such it can be judged to have been a valid reaction to the work. I have wanted to show that here again as in *Fountain* the reception is a necessary factor in the creation of meaning. The public, you might say, intended *De Profundis* to be a nonfigurative work, and so its final significance was created within the area of "troc" rather than being determined solely by the artist. Part of the meaning of *De Profundis* is the hidden irony, and we can be sure that there exist in the world any number of artworks that carry similar undercurrents of private or limited significance. It is of course of small consequence to the sphere of reception whether they are ever exposed, and in the case of historic art we have lost a great many clues to interpretation anyway.

I have tried to show how the artist can leave the solution of the problem of meaning to be completed in the context of the work rather than

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<sup>11</sup>Malmio, Kristina, 'De profundis av Essi Renvall. Hur stenarna från Sayda blev sakral skulptur', *Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia/ Konsthistoriska studier*, 12, Helsinki, 1991, 211-217.

bring it to a conclusive finish in the art object. If I have interpreted my examples correctly, they point to art as an exploratory activity where the actual problem is not resolved within the art object, but where it is through the art object that the problem is posed by the artist for the public to solve. The artist's function is to solve problems only in a limited sense. Her/his more important task could be to set problems for others (and herself/himself). For that purpose pictorial art utilizes the material, object qualities of artworks.

