Forgery: The Art of Deception

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Translated by Joel Scott

For many years now, the Berlin art historian Horst Bredekamp has been interested in the relationship between art and science, and has become an advocate for the significance of a thought that thinks in images, of the hand that draws as an organ of thought. Beginning in 2005, this interest led him to his work on an edition of Galileo Galilei's *Sidereus Nuncius* that had come onto the market in New York. Bredekamp was convinced that this copy of the *Starry Messenger*, which contains ink wash illustrations of the moon in place of the etchings of the definitive edition, was Galileo's proof copy of the book, and analysed its drawings as a crowning example of the connection between scientific thinking and image production. Doubts about its authenticity had been expressed here and there in different places, but neither Bredekamp, nor the interdisciplinary research team that he put together, nor the institutions supporting him — such as the Max Planck Society, the Rathgen Research Laboratory, the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design, the Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing and the Technical University of Berlin — had been able to confirm them.

In 2007 Bredekamp published his results in the wide-ranging monograph *Galilei der Künstler. Der Mond, die Sonne, die Hand (Galileo the Artist: The Moon, the Sun, the Hand).* An extensive report on the research project appeared in 2011, published in two volumes under Bredekamp's editorship as *Galileo's O* (Bredekamp / Brückle / Hahn 2011; Bredekamp / Needham 2011). In spring 2012 it was then discovered that the New York copy of *Sidereus Nuncius* was a forgery, organised and carried out — like the forgery of other writings by Galileo — by the Italian Galileo scholar Massimo De Caro. As director of the famous Biblioteca dei Girolamini in Naples he had been responsible for the embezzlement and counterfeiting of incunabula and valuable books on a grand scale (Schmidle 2013). It is a case that can teach us a great deal about materials and technical processes, about the psychological dispositions of its participants, the self-stylisation of researchers and forgers, the success of the "cloaking strategies" of forgers, and the interaction of the humanities and science in an era when forgers and their

international networks are able to make use of laser and digital technologies and techniques. But just one point will be of special interest to us here. In the third volume of *Galileo's O*, published in 2014 under the title *Forgery: Unmasking the New York Sidereus Nuncius*, Paul Needham, the librarian for rare books and special collections at Princeton University, who was heavily involved in Bredekamp's Galileo project, writes the following remarkable sentence: "Consider: from the time that a serious problem with the authenticity of *SNML* [the New Yorker *Sidereus Nuncius*, F.T.B.] arose […] to the time absolute proof was found that SNML is forged, only three weeks passed, 10 to 31 May 2012" (Needham 2014: 95). In other words, from 2005 to 2012 an entire staff of experts pored over this book — and then, once a serious suspicion was raised, it took just three weeks to establish that it was a forgery.

How can that be? To elaborate briefly focusing on one technical detail: the paper of the New York copy being of decidedly lower quality than all other copies of this work that have hitherto come down to us, was suspect from the very beginning — too raw and in fact unsuited to illustration. But the supposition that the New York manuscript represented Galileo's proof copy, and that the watercolour illustrations were the work of his own hand, seemed to explain — indeed, to necessitate — this divergence in the quality of the paper. Moreover, the X-ray fluorescence analysis of the paper showed nothing unusual, while in the absence of any initial suspicion, an invasive examination of the material — which would mean damaging the book by removing paper fibres for examination — was out of the question. After all, in all scientific tests of authenticity, something like a principle of proportionality must be observed. Only once suspicions had been raised did an invasive analysis take place and reveal a cotton content which was much too high for the early 17th century.

Thus, what Paul Needham's remark about the "three weeks" illustrates above all else is the decisive effect of an initial suspicion — of a change of perspective that it introduces. It demonstrates the truth of the phrase from Max Friedländer's *On Art and Connoisseurship* that serves as an epigraph to the third volume of *Galileo's O*: "The eye sleeps, until the spirit awakes [sic] it with a question" (after Bredekamp 2014: 5). In their introduction to this volume the leading members of the team carrying out the research into the New York *Starry Messenger* identify the reason for their failure: "the evidence of authenticity seemed so unequivocal that none of the authors thought them questionable. All participants had used the method of negating the possibility of forgery, instead of attempting to confirm the opposite" (9). Logically speaking, these seem to be equivalent — the attempt to exclude the possibility of forgery and the attempt to demonstrate it. But in reality, and as working processes, they are fundamentally different.

The second case of forgery to which we shall briefly turn is the Beltracchi / Spies affair. In Autumn 2011, Wolfgang Beltracchi and three co-defendants appeared before a court and were sentenced in relation to a number of forged paintings that

they were proved to have created.[1] The case achieved particular prominence not only on account of the scope of Beltracchi's activities as a forger — according to his own avowals having forged the works of around 50 modernist artists — but also because the seven Max Ernst paintings he produced between 1994 and 2004 had been examined and authenticated by Werner Spies, Director of the Musée National in Paris 1999-2000, and one of the world's most renowned experts on the work of Ernst.

Let us compare two versions of the 1927 painting *The Horde* by Max Ernst, one of them an original, the other forged by Beltracchi (fig. 1 and 2). Naturally it is impossible to properly address the question of whether something is an original or a forgery merely by looking at reproductions, but one dimension of the question can nevertheless be adumbrated here. Would it have been possible or necessary to arrive at an initial suspicion in this case? By what criteria could one's attention have been guided in order to arrive at such a suspicion, beginning merely at the level of stylistic analysis? Above all, criteria which result from tensions between the subject of the picture and its painterly execution. The subject of *The Horde* implies a menacing ferocity — and something amorphous, a basic undefinedness.

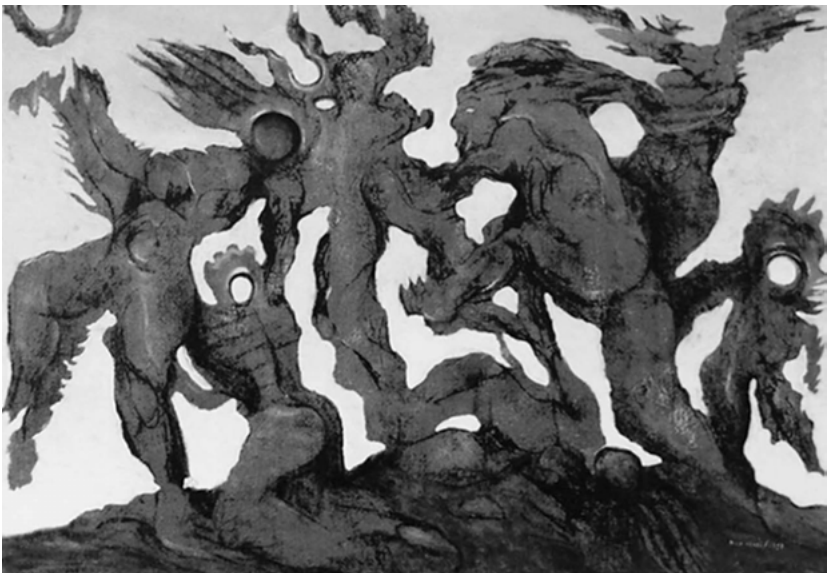
Thus, in comparing the two images, our attention would be directed above all towards the different levels of determinacy and articulation: the legibility or illegibility of the "figures", the degree to which they are articulated as human, as male or female, and the corporeality of their depiction, which is to say: towards the spatiality and plasticity of the orifices of the body, the application of colour and shadow to delineate the respective figures, and the qualities of the outlines, the shading and the internal line-work and of the ground of the painting. And of course, in encountering differences one would have to consider which aspects might be due to the difference in the format of each painting, and a potentially related difference in the status of the two works.

Studying these differences, one could notice the sexualising quality of the corporeality of the second figure from the left in figure 2. This sexualisation in the way the figure is portrayed has an explicitness, a definiteness in the form, which is not present in figure 1. Does this quality appear in comparable works painted by Max Ernst around 1927? In particular, is it to be found in paintings that bear explicit references to sexual themes in their titles? And in others, such as *The Horde*, for which this is not the case? If you pursue these questions, then you will find that this fleshly tactility does indeed stand out. This need not imply that the picture shown by figure 2 wasn't painted by Max Ernst. But the obviousness of such a detail could generate something like an initial suspicion which would have to be pursued further. A good magnifying glass would in that case identify acute problems like the 'craquelure', the quality of the small cracks on the surface of the paint. And the

1 | On Beltracchi more generally, see, for example, Koldehoff/Timm 2012; and the autobiography Beltracchi/Beltracchi 2014.

Figure 1: Max Ernst, "The Horde", 1927, oil on canvas, 115 × 146 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Figure 2: Max Ernst, "La horde" (forgery by Wolfgang Beltracchi), 1927, oil on canvas, 65.4 × 81.2 cm, European Collection.



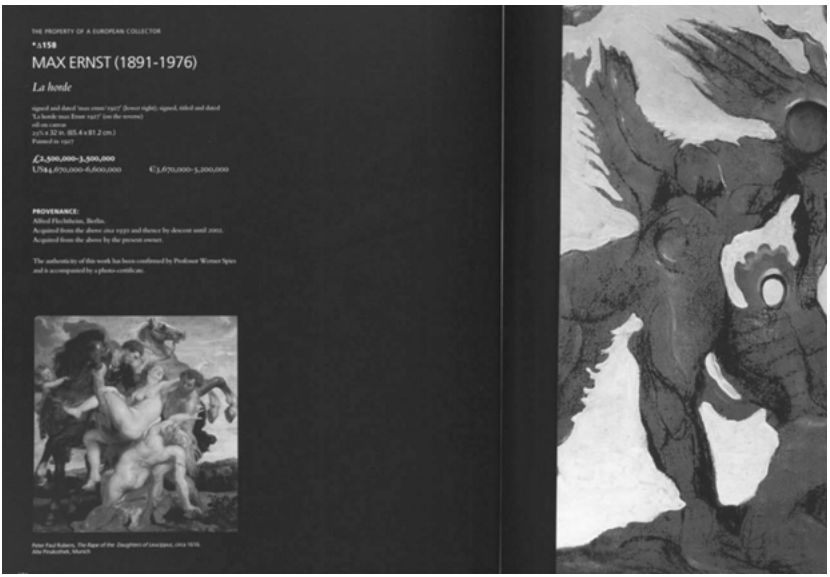


Figure 3: Page of the Auction-Catalogue "Impressionist and Modern Art" (with a detail of Peter Paul Rubens, Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus on the left side), Evening Sale, Christie's London, 20 June 2006, pp. 174/75.

Figure 4: Wolfgang Beltracchi, untitled (framing: F. T. Bach), drawing, undated.

analysis of the material to which this would have to lead would reveal pigments that were simply not available in 1927. Although one should add that there are also other reasons why, in the case of Max Ernst around the year 2000, analysis of the material would have been an urgent necessity, even in the absence of initial suspicions.

I don't wish to speculate on why these analyses weren't carried out. An equally interesting question is why the forged Max Ernsts were so readily accepted. Consider a brief addendum on this point: in the Christie's auction catalogue Beltracchi's Max Ernst was accompanied by a reproduction of Rubens' *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* on the opposite page (fig. 3). In its marketing strategy, by including a reproduction of Rubens' *Rape* as a point of reference, the auction house has completely succumbed to the detail which we examined earlier. That means that the sexualising shift that Beltracchi applied to Max Ernst's *The Horde* corresponded to one of the trends of contemporary taste, which — as one can discover from one of his early drawings (fig. 4) — was always also decidedly his own. In other words, it is not just the "historicity of the gaze" that determines the forgery, just as it does art, and, with time, reveals it, but also the psycho-physical disposition of the artist or forger, and their relation to the taste of their time.

An initial suspicion is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition if forgeries are to be rooted out. The work of expert identification is characterised by a combination of the forensic methods of the sciences of materials with the expertise of the connoisseur of style. Beyond these, competence in a specific, narrowly defined area needs to be complemented by an attention to the strategies of forgers as they come to light — because they set precedents and serve as models for successors. The New Yorker Ely Sakhai became famous by his trick of selling a work twice, while for some time now whole catalogues have been forged in order to prove that today's forgeries appeared in historical exhibitions of Russian avant-garde works that never in fact took place. Such references show that Beltracchi was not the first to work with forged museum and gallery labels. The British forgery duo John Drewe and John Myatt became famous for their sophisticated ways of forging a work's provenance. Before a work was placed on the market, John Drewe would manipulate archival materials in leading London institutions like the Tate, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art, so that the experts researching a work would actually find it in historical catalogues and documents (Salisbury / Sujo 2009). Before this method of forging provenance became known, institutions had been careful to ensure that scholars, or people claiming to be scholars, were unable to carry anything *out* of their archives — they had not paid attention to what was brought *in*.

We shall not pursue these more narrowly technical problems here, but turn instead to consider whether and to what degree forgeries can lead to fundamental questions and insights concerning art. In discussing the significance of an 'initial suspicion' we have already alluded to such an insight: namely into our perception and how it is formed. It is an everyday experience that something that was able to fascinate

us just last year now leaves us peculiarly cold, while something else to which we have hitherto been indifferent is suddenly of the greatest interest. Through this experience of the changes of our perception, we can gain a sense of the forces that form them.

But in cases where we vacillate in our judgment between recognising something as an original and deeming it a forgery, this shift in perception acquires a particular intensity and *Evidenz*.[2] Reflecting on these changes, we can look on, as it were, while our gaze shifts, we can see how an emotional investment in it that would otherwise remain unconscious reveals itself in an abrupt alteration. In such cases, we catch a glimpse of something which is in fact continually taking place but usually goes unnoticed, namely the formation of what we see by the horizon of our expectations. The experience of a relatively sudden replacement of one horizon of expectation by another allows us to catch a glimpse of a quality of our seeing that is of decisive importance for the work of the art historian more generally: the power of the quality of projection that has always already determined our seeing.

There is hardly anything of more significance for the understanding of our power of sight and the insight into the necessity of its being double-checked than the experience of such a relatively sudden switch between the expectational horizons that ground vision — the experience of the achieved closure of a new horizon of expectation, which through a rapid switch establishes itself as just as 'evident' as the one preceding it. We need to remember, however, that in dealing with a questionable work, the task we are faced with is a double one. It is fundamentally necessary to work in two directions simultaneously. In the words of Max Friedländer: "It is indeed an error to collect a forgery, but it is a sin to stamp a genuine piece with the seal of falsehood" (after Hoving 1996: 209).

A second fundamental question has already been alluded to through our discussion of 'initial suspicion': the relationship between the whole and its details. In the case of Beltracchi's *Horde*, it was a detail that ought to have aroused an initial suspicion. This ought to have been pursued until it either showed itself to be unfounded or was confirmed. The sexualising, almost voluptuous and tactile articulation of the figure's buttocks ought to have drawn attention to itself given the thematic context, essentially defined, as it is, by formal indeterminacy. But is it not also the case that details that disturb the unity of the structure of a whole and thus draw attention to themselves, that indicate a contradiction or at the least a

2 | *Evidenz* has no simple translation in English. It is a common topic of enquiry in German-language art theory and visual cultures, and refers to the ways in which images take on an evidentiary character, in part through material and visual qualities of the images themselves, but also through their embedding in cultural discourses and practices which imbue them with specific meaning and function, and which are in turn shaped by the function of these images. [Trans.]

tension between the thematic conception and the execution — that such details also appear in authentic works of art, in 'strong' works? We can recall, for example, the peculiarities of 15th-century Italian annunciation scenes to which Daniel Arasse has drawn attention, such as in Franceso del Cossa's *The Annunciation* in the Gemäldegalerie Dresden (fig. 5; Arasse 2003). In the imposing construction of this painting, the two main figures of which are placed on either side of a monumental central pillar, arranged diagonally and drawing the eye into the depth of the perspectival field, there is one detail that is altogether out of place: the snail in the foreground. Its presence can, at a pinch, be justified iconographically as a symbol of the Virgin Mary, however its position and exaggerated size "remain disconcerting, indeed, almost shocking" (87).[3] Positioned on the bottom edge of the picture, the snail is not painted *into* the fictional space, but rather *onto* the image, or its frame, "onto the borderline between our space and the space erected by the perspective of the painting" (88). It is a detail — though I will skip the particulars of Arasse's argument — that by means of its "divergence" indicates "the disproportion of the divine", that shows that "the perspectival structure, as 'symbolic form', is a symbol, not for the infinity of the world, but rather for its *commensurability* — and that the infinity of God is incommensurable with the world" (89).

What distinguishes the way a detail in a painting that turns out to be a forgery becomes suspicious from the 'conspicuousness' of a detail in an authentic work? Certainly *not* the degree to which it lends itself to interpretation. The two examples which we began with make clear how sophisticated forgeries often offer 'interpretability' as a bait, so to speak, with which to tempt the expert. But if interpretability is not the distinguishing mark, then what is? We cannot define a universal criterion; criteria of authenticity can only be made precise in each particular case. Which does not mean that attention to forgeries will not allow us to open up important insights into the relationship between the whole and the detail — for as long, that is, as this relationship remains foundational for thinking about art.

In different ways, forgeries raise the problem of boundaries. It is not just that the concept of a forgery already implies the distinction between original and forgery. Work in the field of the question of original and forgery always ultimately presupposes a judgment about the scope of the quality of an artist's work in a given period — and a given medium. Because it is much more probable that a hastily scribbled drawing, in spite of its questionable quality, would be the product of a quality draughtsperson's "weak moment" than that a sculpture requiring six months work would diverge markedly from the standards of the work created by a sculptor around the same time, and yet nonetheless belong to his œuvre. But forgeries also raise the question of the boundary in a yet more fundamental sense.

3 | With regard to the reading flow all German quotations have been translated.

Figure 5: Francesco del Cossa, "The Annunciation", 1470/72, tempera on poplar, 139 × 113.5 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.

Art, especially in its modern and contemporary forms, increasingly understands itself as the attempt to push beyond boundaries. These are simultaneously the locus and the object of experimental artistic practices which investigate the minimal conditions of art, which ask which of its traditional characteristics are questionable or dispensable. In the context of neo-structuralism and postmodernism, a broad discursive field has formed in which the relationship between original and forgery appears in a new light. This field encompasses the interrogation of the qualities of authenticity and repetition, of artistic piracy, and of allegorical procedures and procedures of appropriation and the critical revision of the concept of originality. Beyond that, it encompasses questions around and approaches to the affirmation of the phenomena of forgery, the questioning of the dichotomy of the original and the fake, which in the course of this volume will be discussed extensively by others.

Understood as a radical form of art's own self-reflection, a forgery certainly stands in a certain proximity to avant-garde forms of art that throw basic assumptions of our traditional understanding of art into question. Indeed, in some strands of contemporary discourse, the phenomenon of forgery seems to have filled the space vacated through the obsolescence of avant-garde art and the ebb of the neo-avant-gardes. Let me illustrate this by the example of one of Jean Dubuffet's *Cows* from the mid-1950s (fig. 6). Hubert Damisch reflected on works of this kind in an

Figure 6: Jean Dubuffet, "Vache la belle queutée (ou Vache au pré rose)", Nov. 1954, oil on canvas, 97 × 130 cm, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

early text from 1967 (Damisch 1998: 28-40). What if — this, according to Damisch, is the line of questioning intended by Dubuffet — what if our culture is constituted in such a way as to hinder our perception of art? How could art possibly remain fixed in the place to which culture, with all its signs and pointers, assigns it, reducing it to a museum object? Art is a cognitive process, an undertaking of the mind; it no longer recognises itself in the mirror that culture holds up to it, in the degenerate and caricatured form of the knowledge of the cognoscenti, the connoisseur. Culture itself must rather be interrogated, its personnel and its institutions challenged in the name of art. According to Damisch, Dubuffet's art seeks to break out of the circle of culture by activating the order of the bestial.

But if the aim is to throw culture itself into question, to break out of its circle, then why should this breakout accept the framing of the traditional category of the original? Wouldn't the escape be more radical if it liberated itself from this cultural prison too? There are about half a dozen Dubuffets forged by Drew and Myatt (Salisbury / Sujo 2009: 106, 205). Are these not much more radical artistic statements than Dubuffet's own painting? There are a number of variants of contemporary discourse which suggest this. Forgery is claimed as a sort of replacement for the avant-garde, even if this claim is not explicitly made the object of reflection.

As can be seen from the collages of Karl Waldmann, such thinking can provide a basis for acts of curatorial self-aggrandisement that play into the hands of the forgery industry (Steinfeld 2015: 9). In the summer of 2015 eleven collages by Waldmann were shown as part of the exhibition *Künstliche Tatsachen/Boundary Objects* at the Galerie Kunsthaus in Dresden. The collages reveal interesting combinations of Dadaist techniques with those of the Soviet avant-garde (fig. 7). They are works by an artist who was discovered in 1990 and has since been in demand on the international art market, with 149 works sold since 2001. His virtual museum is represented, among others, by the well-known New York art dealer Walter Maibaum. If you're not acquainted with this artist, you're in good company. Nobody knows him. As it turns out, the existence of Karl Waldmann is no less uncertain than the provenance of his collages. As the chorus of doubt concerning the authenticity of both artist and work swelled in volume, the head of the Dresden Kunsthaus tried to deftly get out from under her predicament. She transformed the life and work of Karl Waldmann into conceptual art, and stated that it was also possible "that we are dealing with a contemporary artistic project that works with fictional strategies" (after id.: 9). At the same time, the curator responsible for the exhibition described her own activity as "working curatorially at the boundaries of (hegemonic) canonisations — and, contrary to the scholarly paradigm, continually expanding those boundaries" (after id.: 9).

It is possible to speak here — along with Thomas Steinfeld from whose article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* I have drawn these references — of "a determined rejection of the museum as institution". Steinfeld continues:

Figure 7: Karl Waldmann, "20 Mark", undated, collage on cardboard, 32 × 24.5 cm, Galerie Pascal Polar, Belgium.

> [Until now] one of the most important functions of this institution has consisted in checking, evaluating and declaring the provenance of what it exhibits. Those who refuse to do this […] transform every possible object into a potential work of art and elevate […] even economically motivated kitsch to the status of an object belonging in a gallery for 'contemporary art'. Their methodical doubt asserts itself in the form of a moral *ressentiment* that is effectively more hegemonic than any assurance of authenticity. It stands as the basis of a curatorial practice that by doing nothing and knowing nothing assures itself of always being in the right. (9)

A few decades ago, the invention of a "Karl Waldmann" might actually have been an artistic project that worked with "fictional strategies". Today, this dissimulation has become a sales strategy. That which once served the avant-garde critique of the fetishisation of the original work and the artistic ideologies of the cultural sector has long since become an element of this sector. The line along which exhibitions like that of the Dresden Kunsthaus are curated is one of the market.

Where, then, do we stand in our reflections on forgery, what is their real context? In his 1996 book *False Impressions* Thomas Hoving estimates that in the decade during which he was director of the New York Metropolitan Museum, 1967-1977, questionable works and fakes made up a good 40% of the works that he investigated. He also assumes that at the time of the publication of his book, this portion had risen to 50% (Hoving 1996: 17). This estimate was, as I have said, formulated in relation to high-level museums and does not address the even more acute form of the problem in the "emerging markets" of Russia, China and eBay. In a single raid in 2009, the State Office of Criminal Investigations in Stuttgart seized around 1000 forgeries of works by Alberto Giacometti, an artist who only produced some 500 sculptural works (Rost 2015: R3). The picture we get of the art of the Russian Revolution is also horrific (Lorch 2013: 13; 2015: 17). The market for this art has largely collapsed since the beginning of the 1990s on account of a flood of fakes, the production of which has for some years now taken on an industrial character, with its own galleries, experts, marketing systems and research institutes. The most recent high-point in this development was a case brought before a court in Wiesbaden in February 2017, after investigators of the Federal Office of Criminal Investigations seized more than 1500 dubious works in the style of the Russian avant-garde. In situations like these, Steinfeld's analysis rings especially true, that "at some point, art history and the study of art just stop working" (2015: 9).

It is by no means the case that these sorts of practices only end up harming the art market and speculators, for whom our sympathy may, with some justification, be limited. Art history and the study of art, not to mention the general public, are affected too, and seriously. Exhibitions are prevented from taking place, certain books are unable to be published, others, including catalogues, are only financed,

written and published in order that two or three doubtful works can be included and in this way "authenticated". Thus there exists no catalogue of the drawings of Constantin Brâncuși, one of the 'founding fathers' of modern sculpture. Nor will there be one in the foreseeable future, despite the fact that such a catalogue would be indispensable for the investigation of this side of his creative activity. This lack amounts to a long-term impairment of study and curatorial work in the area, and obstructs our understanding of it. However the large number of forgeries in this area, which makes the prospect of producing a catalogue a long and difficult business, is not the only hindrance. It is even more the conjunction of the difficulty of the work with the juridical context in which it would have to take place that is decisive. Particularly in the USA, a stage has been reached where in the case of several leading modern artists, nobody can any longer be found who would be willing to provide an expert opinion concerning the authenticity of a newly discovered work, for fear less of the juridical ramifications of an error than of being sued for compensation for decreases in value resulting from a negative evaluation of a work. The interaction between the scale of forging practices and the legal context in which this practice takes place is something that requires attention — much more than is possible here.

The reason for emphasising the scale at which forgery is now carried out is that only in this way is it possible to appreciate the real damage done by this form of "mimesis". In the catalogue to the legendary exhibition *Fake? The Art of Deception*, held at the British Museum in 1990, editor Mark Jones summarised this damage as follows:

> When a group of fakes is accepted into the canon of genuine work all subsequent judgements about the artist or period in question are based on perceptions built in part upon the fakes themselves. […] This, finally, is our complaint against fakes. It is not that they cheat their purchasers of money, reprehensible though that is, but that they loosen our hold on reality, deform and falsify our understanding of the past. (1990: 16)

In this respect I retain a measure of scepticism vis-à-vis the title of this conference collection *Faking, Forging, Counterfeiting. Discredited Practices at the Margins of Mimesis*, which suggests, at the very least, that forgeries are ultimately unjustly discredited. Accordingly, the title I have chosen for my own essay, *Forgery: The Art of Deception*, is also meant ironically. Of the hundreds of forgeries with which I have had to do in the last 25 years, or more precisely, of the hundreds of works with which I have had to do in the last 25 years of which one was required to ask whether or not they were authentic works by Brâncuși or perhaps merely falsely attributed to him, or indeed forged, perhaps only 1 in 100 was even in the slightest 'artistically productive'.

A recent article on contemporary art claims that the replicative practices of contemporary art go to show that the basic assumptions of the concept of forgery are problematic. When, in summary, the author claims that "in light of the adaptations carried out by conceptual artists, the authenticity of the original itself — and with it also of its counterfeit — are revealed as 'deceptive phantasms'" (Frohne 2006: 368), then that is accurate — for the works of contemporary art being described. What is problematic about this stance is the way the author's ultimate formulation implicitly extends the idea of the deceptive character of the conceptual dyad of original and forgery, making it into a *universal* determination. It is necessary to make distinctions here. Not because these things bear no relationship. Of course, the way we think about past practices of forgery is affected by what forgery has become today, in an era of the global counterfeiting both of commodities and of reality itself. But if it is true that in modern and contemporary art — since Duchamp, roughly speaking — the basic meaning of the idea of originality and thus also the categorical difference between original and forgery has sometimes been subverted in artistically and theoretically interesting ways, that does not mean that this is similarly true for a painting by, say, Monet, or for the relationship between a drawing by Monet and a Monet drawing as forged by Eric Hebborn. The conceptual dyad of original and forgery is an historical one and must be grasped in its specific quality in every particular case.

As you will have presumably noticed I decided to write this essay in a narrative mode. I would like this mode to be understood as a reminder that the world of forgeries is itself powerfully determined by stories, by narrative framings. Notwithstanding the predictable topoi and framing clichés that accompany any new work that turns up, such narrative fabrics usually have a particular weave that can give us important insights into a forger's strategy and the quality of the work presented. In the case of doubtful sculptures from Romania attributed to Brâncuși, for example, such stories usually say that the piece was buried in order to keep it out of reach of the state apparatus and was therefore — unfortunately — recently cleaned. This "explains" why in recent decades the piece in question has never appeared in official contexts and why its surface now looks like it does. In short, it is a story that uses an apparently unquestionable historical context to deprive experts of the opportunity to base their judgments on questions of provenance and on the quality of the surface and patina. The way these basic elements are presented and connected with others can be extraordinarily informative.

Experience shows that it is better to take a serious interest in this narrative fabric, in its stories, legends and thematic stylisations, in order to be able to tear it open from inside, as it were, rather than attempting to avoid it altogether. Because the danger is that in trying to sidestep this fabric, one will become all the more hopelessly entangled in one of its threads. It is here, in the invention of contextualising stories and placement strategies, and not in the theoretical provocation and material

execution of the forgeries themselves, that the often truly productive aspect of the forgery industry ultimately lies; or, to return once more to the ironic formulation of the title of this text, its 'art'.

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