

First as farce, then as tragedy: art, vaudeville and modern painting after the French Revolution

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This chapter addresses the depiction of art and artists in popular comic theatre in post-revolutionary Paris and some of the ways in which the profession's characterization contributed to the formation of a modernist aesthetic. Such a task instantly requires qualification. The network of filiations—the breaks and discontinuities, but also continuities—that constitute the history of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century French art, stand in marked contrast with the march towards art's autonomy late-nineteenth and twentieth-century critics describe. Here, we have two parallel configurations of historical time. If the former configuration constitutes a complex genealogy in the production, circulation, and consumption of art in a period of dramatic social and political change, the latter's history might be seen as one thread among many, retrospectively spun at the end of the century and selectively worked back into an art historical fabric to find its way through to the century's beginning. We can see this second formulation of historical time at work in the conceptualization of French art's history found in the commentaries that accompanied the two Universal Exhibitions held in Paris in 1889 and 1900.

Looking back over the nineteenth century, the art critic Paul Mantz noted that while some painters devoted their work to the demands of commerce or politics, others painted from no other imperative than personal conviction.¹ Antonin Proust's official report to the Commission des beaux-arts similarly noted that French art's final triumph was in part the result of the efforts of a school of painters who set

themselves in opposition to the standards of the Académie and the tastes of the bourgeois crowd.² Here, the painters Lazare Bruandet, Simon-Mathurin Lantara, Georges Michel, Théodore Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and others were seen to have laid the foundation for subsequent generations—Courbet, Manet, Daubigny, the Impressionists and so on—to consolidate French art's triumph at the end of the nineteenth century.³ Thereafter the process of art's teleological path to autonomy is said to have continued into the twentieth century, first in France and after the Second World War in the United States.⁴ In these mythic histories, the artists' task was never easy. The painters concerned were subject to professional rejection, madness, ridicule, suicide and alcoholism. In the nineteenth century, when recognition came, it did so tragically, often at the eleventh hour or sometimes posthumously, where it provided a discourse of regret, a marker of the philistine inclinations of a world not yet ready for an art of such refinement.⁵

In this chapter, I want to invert Marx's famous contention in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* of 1856 and look at how, in this instance at least, when art history repeats itself it does so *first* as farce and *then* as tragedy. In so doing, I want to step back a few generations to explore the characterization of those largely imagined artists who took on some of what were to become modernism's defining characteristics. These artists were not early members of an avant-garde. Rather, the world in which they operated might be better understood as one shaped by the changing conception of a profession brought about by shifting hierarchies and changing circuits of cultural production that came in the wake of the French Revolution. Like the members of the profession on whom such characters were modelled, such painters were both the beneficiaries and victims of cultural deregulation. The abolition of trade guilds in 1776 and later the opening of the

Salon in 1791 to all artists irrespective of their professional affiliation had on the one hand created a growing rump of would-be artists where even the humblest artisan might dream of critical recognition, and, on the other, a corps of academicians whose professional security had been roundly undermined by a free-market. One prominent but largely unexamined vein of commentary, if not specifically “criticism,” emerged in the theatre, in one-act *vaudevilles* loosely modelled on eighteenth-century *commedia dell’arte*.⁶ During the ancien régime and throughout periods of the Consulate, Empire, Restoration and after, *vaudevilles* – short, quickly-written, one act musical plays about topical concerns, peopled with instantly recognizable social types and largely stripped of any didactic or morally elevating purpose - were written in which the vicissitudes of life as an artist in an alien and uncertain world were played out as comedy.

On first reading, such commentaries were hardly critically sophisticated. Pierre-Marie-Michel Lepeintre-Desroches’s history of Vaudeville, written during the genre’s heyday in 1823, observed how musical comedy thrived on representing the social changes brought about by the French Revolution.⁷ Despite Vaudeville’s lack of originality or literary merit (or rather precisely *because* of it), the conventions drawn upon by *vaudevillistes*, the *mises-en-scènes* in which the life and work of artists were set, and the surprising longevity of some tropes, stretching in some instances across centuries, offer an insight into the profession’s lower echelons just before art’s autonomy became an abiding concern for a protean avant-garde. Two centuries later, these tropes still had some resonance. When Tony, the hero of Robert Day’s 1962 film *The Rebel*, resigns his office job to take his place as an artist in bohemian Paris, his *rite de passage* is marked by “un vin rouge” in preference to a “cup of tea,” taken in a Parisian bar within earshot of an alcohol-

fueled debate about art.⁸ Eventually, Tony is taken to task by the art world for making works no right-thinking member of the public could possibly understand, and then exposed as a fraud. Meanwhile, his friend Paul, a self-effacing, palpably able but essentially conservative artist, finally receives the recognition he deserves. Tony's influences are easily identified: part Oscar Wilde, part Salvador Dali, part *rive-gauche* existentialist, part Action Painter, he is card-carrying modernist, albeit one in whom, like so many vaudevillian heroes of the early-nineteenth century, a whole set of art histories are conflated. His professional roots, however, are arguably part of a much older genealogy calling upon a set of anxieties about art's connection with society that were first rehearsed some two centuries earlier.⁹

What were the tropes on which *vaudevillistes* drew, how did they resonate with changes in the structure of the profession, and what do they tell us about the contextual, as well as subjective or even psychological, aspects of early intimations of autonomous art? Typically, authors had a jaundiced view of the work of art, the act of making art and art itself. Painters of vaunting ambition but dubious talent were shown in the pay of *parvenus* dealers, frequently depicted as Jewish—a common trope in parts of modernism's history—selling pictures to a community of newly-rich but ignorant bourgeois collectors while artists of integrity, modest artisans with little ambition but plenty of talent, passed unnoticed. The fractious relationship between art's higher ideals and the overweening power of commerce were common themes. So too, the sorry tale of those crushed by the profession and who turn to drink, typically in the ubiquitous *cabaret*, a humble bar somewhere on the city's margins. In some cases, *vaudevilles* were quite topical. Pierre-Yves Radet's *Le peintre français à Londres* of 1816 touches on the fate of the arts after Waterloo, telling the story of how a feckless painter's patriotic refusal to

commemorate a French defeat commissioned by “Milord Nelson” finally earns him the admiral’s admiration and saves him from the clutches of an avaricious dealer.¹⁰ By contrast, other plots contain curious anachronisms conflating histories in which cultural conventions from one period are added cheerfully to others. Louis de Laboullaye’s *Artiste et artisan ou les deux expositions* of 1834, for example, contrasts art’s noble aspirations with the ignobility of the applied arts or *métiers*, a topic last seriously aired in the dispute between the Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture and the trade guild, the Académie de Saint-Luc, back in the mid-seventeenth century.¹¹ Here, the aspiring Salon painter Durbin fails to receive the critical recognition he expects, and the talented but modest artisan Adrien unexpectedly receives lucrative patronage from another English *milord*. The *milord* tries to lure Adrien to England but, again, as a good patriot he resists.¹²

An early and startlingly prescient comic example of art’s characterization as a form of deregulated production is found in Denis Carolet’s *Le retour de l’Opéra-Comique au Foire de Saint-Germain*.¹³ The play explores the respective merits of high-brow and popular theatre as a troupe come together to rebuild the venue where the play was first performed in February 1734. In one of a series of comic exchanges about the respective merits of the arts—dance, acting, music—the character “Le Peintre” appears and offers his services as a scene painter to the allegorical figure of “L’Opéra-Comique.” Le Peintre declares a himself a “man of honour” whose paintbrush is his “path to glory;” after a drink, the whole world is at his feet and he soon offers his portfolio for inspection. He is a master of perspective and portrait painting. As for his designs for the theater, “they are in here” (a stage direction indicates a tap to the head). Ideas come thick and fast, especially after a drink, and it is for this reason that his wine-merchant’s shop is his *atelier* and his

home the *cabaret*; in fact, he owes everything to alcohol, he explains.¹⁴ His services are rejected, where after he asserts his genius as a compensation for professional failure and exits shortly before the play ends. That the part forms not much more than a brief vignette suggests all the more the character's instant legibility to Parisian audiences. "Le Peintre," it seems, needed no introduction.

Certainly, painters had long been integral to the life of the capital's trade fairs. A wide range of artists, artisans, tradesmen, picture-sellers and *brocanteurs*, or traders in bric-a-brac, came together alongside the court, nobility, bourgeoisie, and the working class to watch impromptu performances and other spectacles, to sell and buy pictures at the Foire Saint-Germain (as in Carolet's play), the Foire Saint-Laurent, and at the open-air *Exposition de la jeunesse* on the intersection of the Pont Neuf and the Place Dauphine.¹⁵ In some cases, there were close family ties between painters and *vaudevillistes*. The father of Jean-Baptiste Raguenet, the Parisian topographical painter and member of the Académie de Saint-Luc, performed at the Foire Saint-Germain and Raguenet *fils* composed his pictures with stock types set within meticulously identified Parisian *loci*, well known as performative settings for social display.¹⁶ Raguenet's work arguably owes much to *vaudevilles*. Like the characters found in the work of Carolet and others, the figures in Raguenet's *View of Paris from the Pont-Neuf*, are stock characters, cut out from the world around them, instantly recognizable clichés shown in settings that were immediately recognizable to Parisian audiences (Fig. 1). There were also accounts of painters—especially Flemish painters—performing the dissolute behavior commonly depicted both in painted tavern scenes and in their comic representation on stage, and, not least, as part of fairground culture.¹⁷ According to the historian Jean-Baptiste Descamps, the life of the Flemish painter Franz Floris, for instance, ended

prematurely as a result of a dissolute life divided between sleep, painting, and drinking at his local *cabaret*. Meanwhile, Gerard de Lairesse pedantically illustrated a point about perspective with a diagram sketched out on a table-top with his finger to which Emanuel de Witte responded with a pornographic drawing of the painter.¹⁸ We should not, however, overplay our hand. This is hardly an example of modernist alienation *avant la lettre*. But it is an early instance of artists' troubled relationship with the world around them that also makes a connection between unwarranted professional self-confidence and the production of unwanted art all right-thinking people thought preposterous; conditions later closely associated with modernism. Not least, the *cabaret*—or, more accurately, theatrical representations of it—consistently emerge as the only environment in which these pretensions have much credibility. Le Peintre's "vin de Bourgogne," Lantara's "vin-bleu" and Tony's "vin rouge" all perform the same function, soothing the abrasions between cultural production and reception to make the *cabaret* one of the few places fit for the articulation of self-generated cultural capital the rest of the world finds risible. Louis-Léopold Boilly's *Scène de Cabaret* of 1815 captures something of the social diversity of citizens drawn to working class drinking establishments in the early-nineteenth century. (Fig. 3)

Perhaps one of the most vivid indications of the profession's structuration and the comic potential that went with it can be found several years before the Revolution, in the Abbé Lebrun's *Almanach historique et raisonné des architectes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs et ciseleurs*, a national trade directory for the arts published in 1776.¹⁹ The Abbé begins with a pep-talk about art's longstanding social and intellectual dignity, based on his reading of Johann Joachim

Winckelmann's *Histoire de l'art chez les Anciens*, which had been first translated into French twelve years earlier. Great art, he explains, is sustained by a process of intellectual reflection from which an ideal image of the human form is extracted.²⁰ Digests of Winckelmann's work were common in dictionaries and encyclopedias of the period. But the Abbé then goes on to list artists and institutions of demonstrable standing cheek by jowl with artisans and tradesmen, miniature painters, ornamental sculptors, costume designers, and jewel and wood engravers for whom any claim to professional *noblesse* would have been palpably funny.²¹

Dutch painters figure prominently. In *Le tableau de Téniers ou l'Artiste et l'Ouvrier*, Ferdinand pits an artist at the top of his profession who is contracted to restore a Dutch genre scene by the painter David Teniers against an artisan-decorator. In a case of mistaken identity, it is the decorator not the artist who restores the masterpiece, thereby reducing it to a daub.²² Rembrandt and Gerrit Dou feature as characters in Charles-Guillaume Etienne and Etienne Morel's *Rembrandt ou la vente après décès* of 1801, where the painter's feigned death leads to a rise in the value of his work.²³ The landscape painter Simon-Mathurin Lantara, who had died in 1778, emerges as a seminal figure in the early history of art's autonomy. He appears as a scheming drunk working with a Jewish art dealer in Pierre-Yves Barré, Louis-Benoit Picard, and Jean-Baptiste Desfontaine's *Lantara ou le peintre au Cabaret* of 1809, a role he plays again in *Dorvigny et Lantara, ou les artistes au cabaret, vaudeville anecdotique* of 1831 by Nicolas Brazier, Frédéric de Courcy, and Jean Toussaint Merle, and in *Lantara, comédie en deux actes mêlée de chants* by Xavier de Montépin and Jules Dormoy of 1865.²⁴ The plots vary, but sooner or later, as Robert Day's screenplay and Villeneuve and Laboullaye's *vaudevilles* show, the tables are turned, charlatans and fools are exposed, virtue and patriotism

triumph, the paint is easily removed from a defaced masterpiece, and talent and artistic value are recognized, often as a result of the redemptive power of love.

In many cases, the intercession of sensible women as custodians of the home contrasts conspicuously with the pretensions of foolish men. Here, women are key to the restoration of a social and domestic stability that the unregulated production of art potentially disrupts. During this period, the binary opposite of an unregulated art was not, it seems, the time-honored regulations of the Academy—nineteenth-century modernism's mortal enemy—but bourgeois domestic stability. Many years later, at the end of the Second Empire, it was precisely this regime that Pierre-Auguste Renoir set out in his painting *The Auberge of mère Anthony* of 1867, where the presence of the eponymous *patronne* regulates a domestic interior and with it the production of unregulated art in the form of daubs on the *cabaret's* walls. Such marks were made, in many instances, as I have shown elsewhere, by celibate young men.²⁵ Despite its origins in the street fairs and public festivals of Paris, at heart the *vaudeville* was an essentially conservative form, quick to poke fun at a volatile and changing profession but keen to assure its audience that the bedrock of French cultural, social and family life remained intact.

If, as Simon Critchley has argued, one function of comedy is to reinforce a consensus—Critchley cites the example of the work of P. G. Wodehouse as a gentle form of comedy that ultimately affirms rather than challenges a cultural and political order—then the artistic profession offered a rich source of comic material.²⁶ In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, to work as an artist was to be part of a highly stratified profession in a period of increasing professional deregulation. The strata within the Académie Royale—its rectors, councilors, officers, members, and associates—were replicated in the one-time trade guild, the

Académie de Saint-Luc, and in provincial academies in major cities throughout France. There were also the long-established hierarchical distinctions between different types of art. History painting's connection to the liberal arts secured it pole position. Beneath it came portrait, landscape, and still-life painting, genres thought to depend more on mechanical *mimesis* than the operation of an informed *idea*.²⁷ It was in this context that Dutch art's preoccupation with the painting of everyday life placed it at the lowest end of this hierarchy.²⁸ Such works remained expensive. Nonetheless, they were perennially popular across a broad social spectrum, were much-imitated and easily copied, and, as early-nineteenth century guides to collecting warn, they were often forged.²⁹ Seen in this context, the dignities of history painting and the institutions that promoted it counted for little. Often, the widespread popularity of Dutch art and its French imitators contrasted comically with history painting's loftier mission.

When the Paris Salon was opened to all after 1791, structural distinctions were reduced still further. All artists, whatever their professional station, now had access to a democratized Salon, as the three-fold increase in the number of pictures on show 1791 attests.³⁰ A petition to the National Assembly submitted by the radical Commune des arts in 1791 had insisted that the Salon be open to all submissions, that its catalog contain no reference to a painter's professional standing, and that no picture should be subject to censure other than on the grounds of public morals.³¹ In the words of painter Jean-Bernard Restout, the Commune's president, artists should be reduced to one "common mass."³² Others took a different view. In a now largely forgotten vein of less respectable criticism where commentaries on the pictures are set beside footnoted *chants*, the anonymous author of *La vérité au Museum, critiques en vaudeville* also listed a whole series of

complaints. The minor genres dominated the exhibition, upstaging the now unfashionable history painting; the best artists had left the country since the Académie's abolition of 1793 and by 1800 only "barbarism" was on show. But on a brighter note the Salon was redeemed by some "magnificent frames."³³ Education and expertise still counted for something. The erosion of professional boundaries hardly qualified newly enfranchised artisans to master *grande peinture*, although some certainly tried. History paintings on a conveniently small scale usually reserved for portable genre painting made by painters from a humble background were common and, in theatrical circles at least, intrinsically comic. It is no accident that when in Jacques-André Jacquelin and Auguste Lafortelle's *vaudeville Le Peintre dans son Ménage* one "Blaisot" is sent to Rome to bring home a painting by Raphael in return for the hand of the daughter of the artist Aufinello, he confesses that he only made it as far as Le Mans, and he returns instead with a miniature history painting on the basis that the bigger version wouldn't fit into the coach.³⁴

There are periods in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the number of *vaudevilles* written and performed in Paris diminish in number, or where *vaudevilles* take on a politically tendentious tone. There were also cases after Thermidor, for example, when *vaudevilles* were thought inimical to Republican ideals.³⁵ During this period, the possibility of genuine social or institutional change through collective political action seems to have absorbed the implicit sense of contained unrest found in comic theatre. James Johnson makes exactly this point in his analysis of revolutionary responses to Carnival in the early years of the French Revolution where unbridled license was seen to be inimical to the spirit of Liberty. For Jean-Paul Marat, Carnival helped citizens forget their suffering, functioning as an expression of their incapacity to bring about sustained political change.³⁶ At their

best, it seems, *vaudevilles* make fun of individuals or institutions in periods of social and political tension. Typically, the spirit of unrest such tensions unleash is never sufficient to inhibit the publication of comic drama, but it is enough to lend it content, or more specifically, a content that can be contained in humorous form. In this context, to laugh at an artist's pretensions is hardly an insurrectional act. As Sigmund Freud noted, "humor"—one of three classifications of the comic identified in a short essay of 1927—relies on the discharge of contained psychic energy and the comfort that follows from a parental superego offering reassurance that disorder will ultimately be resolved.³⁷ For Freud, humor evidences an imperviousness to the wounds dealt to the victim by the outside world. Such assertions map instructively onto the structure of the *vaudeville*. If the parental superego takes a collective form in the image of the home or its some-time surrogate, the *cabaret* or the *auberge*, we might understand the "wounds" in terms of the damage done to people and things through the production of art. Here, artists invariably drew on the forms of cultural capital accorded to them since antiquity, and it is in this context that references to the classical tradition set out in trade directories and *vaudevilles* are so important (and so funny). However, these same artists now found themselves socially and professionally uprooted and correspondingly made ridiculous by deregulation. With the Revolution, artists lost credibility because of the levelling abyss into which so many of their profession fell. Yet the wound to this symbolic order is rarely that deep and sometimes it is not so symbolic. Aufinello's family risk eviction in Jacquelin and Lafortelle's play, and it is worth recalling that Tony's monumental sculpture *Aphrodite by the waterhole*, made in his first-floor London apartment, falls through the floor of Mrs. Cravat's "respectable" establishment, inflicting a material wound on the home but narrowly missing its redoubtable *patronne*. Shortly

after, Tony heads for Bohemian Paris and the *auberge*, a heterotopic realm where antics such as these are permissible, even encouraged; indeed, with a glass of wine to obfuscate the distinctions between production and consumption, they form the very conditions of modernity. It is here perhaps that we can identify some of the distinctions between the characterization of art and artists in vaudeville and in Ray's later film. The play ends on a conciliatory note; the family are finally safe from eviction and the two lovers united. But art – or rather an art driven by inflated ambition, one that fails to observe the normative prescriptions of production and consumption, fares rather badly and is ultimately seen as absurd. Aside from a cabaret, there is nowhere for Aufinello to find refuge. Tony, by contrast, is similarly marked as a buffoon but has a refuge in bohemian Paris, among black-besweatered existentialists where what Mrs. Cravat termed 'miscellaneous rubbish' might (for a time) be taken perfectly seriously.

Let's return from the London of the sixties to Paris just before brumaire, Year IX. Written "in three days by three authors" and "turned down by three theatres," *Le Café des Artistes* of 1800 unfolds in a Parisian cabaret close to a theatre.³⁸ The *vaudeville* opens with a dispute about professional dignity Tony would have found familiar. As Florville notes, too often "one confuses under the same category the man who only owes his living to servile, manual work with he who owes his genius to those sublime conceptions that await immortality"³⁹ Newly acquired by one Duthé, the eponymous café gives its proprietor the chance to indulge his love of the arts, to create a "new Parnassus" and find a husband for his daughter, the eminently sensible Lucille. Bought from the sale of the lucrative "Café de Gros Cailloux"—named after a well-known 'house of ill-repute' near the Champ de Mars—the *Café des Artistes* is patronized by a range of "types," hacks palpably

bound to the world of trade but in pursuit of both potential renown in a climate of professional deregulation, and Lucille's hand.⁴⁰ Only one contender, the young writer Florville (who, with Lucille, is the voice of common sense throughout the play) has a genuine talent. As the play unfolds, each declares the dignity of his profession and with it his claim for Lucille. One character, Belphegor, insists that without actors drama would cease to exist, where upon the tailor Celestin argues that dramatic success is impossible without the art of the costumier and points to his capacity to transform a poltroon into a hero. The silver-tongued Pygmée, an author of clever quips, or *cotteries*—a diversion once practiced by aristocratic women at court—is expected that evening in six literary salons and declares that all Paris waits on his word. The “*artiste-glacier*” Gelloni (loosely translated as “Frosty”) “burns” with love for Lucille and makes his pitch.⁴¹ Like other trades, *artistes-glaciers* also claimed their *métier* was in fact an art with a long and venerable history dating back to antiquity. The frontispiece to Monsieur Emy's *L'Art de bien faire les glaces d'office, ou les vrais principes pour congeler tous les rafraîchissemens* of 1768 contains an illustrated frontispiece showing ice-cream's apotheosis as it ascends skyward in the hands of an infant Mercury (Fig. 2).⁴² Finally, Croutignac, his name taken from the slang for a rough or poorly-made sketch or *croute*, promises to resolve the matter but must first turn his hand to making a tavern sign for Duthé's café.⁴³

Again, the making of a shop sign pitches the painter headlong into a world of trade once clearly separated from the world of art but now, after 1791, potentially on the same cultural register as the fine arts. Inevitably, this is no shop sign but really “a masterpiece,” thereby comically shifting Croutignac's place on this expanded cultural register where the highest possible professional aspirations—he

speaks of his work in the same breath as the work of Michelangelo and Raphael on show at the Muséum—meet the base exigencies of trade.⁴⁴ In a swipe at humanist art theory, Croutignac also claims to be an adept in the world of arts and letters having added beautifully painted *majusticules* to the well-known sign at *Le barbe d'or* on the rue Vivienne and *Le Petit poucet* hanging in a café on the rue du Coq-Honoré.⁴⁵ Like so many details in contemporary *vaudevilles*, the joke would have been instantly recognizable at a number of levels. As Richard Wrigley has noted, and as Kathryn Desplanque explores in this volume, parallel careers in the fine arts and sign painting were for some years options open to the profession's lower echelons, particularly younger artists at the start of their careers.⁴⁶ Watteau, Chardin, Boucher, and Carle Vernet made shop signs at the start of their careers and some painters were reputed to have turned to sign painting as traditional sources of patronage declined with the Revolution. Not least, the *Barbe d'or* was a well-known Parisian landmark recorded in the *Almanach des Gourmands* of 1810, giving comic theatre an additional topical point of reference.⁴⁷ Croutignac presses on. He has agreed to show his “priceless” sign—*Pegasus expiring on Mount Parnassus*—not as a result of a commercial transaction but only as an act of friendship, and he has the ingenious idea of painting a representation of a curtain over the whole picture in order that “those looking at it may imagine the picture of their choice.” The demand for pictures is uncertain, he claims, and comes from so many quarters that “one must act politically” to keep all options open. The drama is finally resolved through the device of a play within a play. Pygmée recounts the plot of his latest production—the story of five *originaux* in search of the hand of a café-owner's daughter—and in so doing disparages the professional pretensions of all concerned including the “*barbouillier*” Croutignac. In steps Florville to point out that the poet

has omitted himself from the plot of his own play and redresses the omission in a couplet that lampoons them all. Finally, Florville has his own part to play within the charade as a contender for Croutignac's daughter, at which point he breaks character to declare his love for Lucille. Order is restored: Gelloni prepares the feast for Florville and Lucille's wedding and Croutignac promises to celebrate the event in the form of allegorical painting of love. Croutignac ends the piece with a ribald song at which point there is a call for "the curtain"—the curtain over the painting and the curtain on the stage—to fall.⁴⁸

We have seen several instances of the production of art without a consumer in mind and the corresponding drink-fueled claim for art's autonomy. But how might such claims affect the appearance of a work of art, the visual representation of such autonomy? Croutignac is quite clear on the matter. Of economic necessity, he must turn his hand to sign painting, but he loses no opportunity to inflate its status by making a history painting and comparing it to the finest pictures on show at the Louvre, over which he paints a curtain. The contention is palpably ridiculous and is taken from the well-known story from Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis*, in which Zeuxis famously paints grapes so realistic that even the birds are fooled but who is himself in turn duped into attempting to draw the curtain Parhassius painted over his picture. But there is perhaps more to Croutignac's painting. To what extent might we see his curtain, if not as the eighteenth century's first abstract painting, then certainly as a work shaped by art's comically inflated cultural capital in the hands of an economically and professionally deracinated producer making works no one wants or understands? Here, the implication is clear. A painting of nothing is the proper condition for a transcendent art of uselessness.

Indeed, a blank space of contested cultural and financial worth on which others might project their hopes certainly came to feature in culturally conservative art criticism in post-war France, a period in which the nation was wrestling with American modernism and the fate of its own cultural heritage. Writing in his pocket-sized polemic *Contre l'Art Abstrait* of 1957, the French art critic and curator Robert Rey summed up art's condition in post-war France. The French Revolution "dried the seed" of French painting, he contended, and while the thought of a politically tendentious "Jacobin" art was abhorrent, abstract painters, were effectively saying "...In my pictures you can see what you wish, all or nothing as you choose; I open to your thoughts a field of which I myself know or wish to know anything, where you can wander without direction, without a point of beginning, without an end and without limit."⁴⁹ Rey was not alone. Other left-leaning conservatives had similar fears about the value of abstract art—expressed in this instance as the "purely subjective" grey on grey of montage found in the films of Sergei Eisenstein. Like Croutignac and his peers, the Hungarian Marxist literary critic György Lukács concluded that modernism was devoid of skill or content and that those who thought otherwise were being duped.⁵⁰

In Jacquelin and Lafortelle's *Le Peintre dans son Ménage* of 1799, performed on the night of Bonaparte's *coup* of 18 Brumaire, an early iteration of this idea of abstraction is prefigured but, in this case, takes shape within a domestic setting.⁵¹ The plot is worth summarizing in detail. The rent on Aufinello's (an Italianized contraction of "au fin," or "at the end") home and studio is a month overdue. Madame Voisinet (someone from whom Mrs. Cravat might learn a thing or two) calls for the payment of 600 francs and bailiffs are due any moment. Madame Voisinet is particularly taken with the frescoes Aufinello has painted on

the wooden panels of what at present is his *atelier* but on Agathe's marriage will become her bed-chamber, her "*temple d'amour*." Agathe, promised to Blaisot (the history painter *manqué* from Le Mans) has no interest in art and is secretly devoted to a young musician, Florval. Marie, Aufinello's wife, and again the voice of common sense and domestic order, learns that her husband has recently turned down 100 Louis d'Or (about 2500 francs or the average cost of a small cabinet picture by a well-known Dutch master) by the rich collector Dorbin, Florval's uncle. Offended by the offer, Aufinello wipes part of the canvas clean declaring that he would not compromise his talent for ten times the sum.⁵² And here we might speculate about how the defaced picture—the third we have seen so far—constitutes yet another image of abstraction. It is certainly an expression of an art beyond price that is free from the vulgar demands of commerce and by extension symbolically free from any subject.

But, as with so many *vaudevilles* of the period, if deregulated transgressive art is the cause of domestic disorder, the production and distribution of more conventional art is also often the source of domestic resolution. Florval, whose love for Agathe is unknown to Aufinello, wins his favor by consulting "the renowned" painter on the authenticity of a picture attributed to "Carofalo" (a distortion of Garofalo, a sixteenth-century Italian painter well-known in Paris since 1796 when several examples of his work had been brought to the Musée Central). Aufinello declares the picture an original but the subject is familiar: "a father and mother looking at a note passed between their daughter and her secret lover hidden behind a bush."⁵³ In fact, Aufinello is so taken with the picture he positions Florval and Agathe in precisely the same pose found in the picture's composition, thereby realizing in art that what he had failed to recognize in his own domestic setting, his

daughter's true affection for Florval. Aufinello is delighted with the "Carofalo" and swaps it for one of his own works, a *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, Venus's home and a locus of conjugal bliss. Continually exasperated by her husband's mindless devotion to his work—the bailiffs are now at the door—Marie seeks help from Dolbin.

Dolbin eventually returns to buy Aufinello's frescoes to find not the scene of pastoral delight Marie described in the *temple d'amour* but what looks more like a tragedy: Florval and Blaisot are posed by Aufinello with daggers drawn in a *tableau vivant* of Siphax and Roland from Ariosto's *Rolando Furioso*. Dolbin instantly recasts the composition: Florval plays the part of Médor and Agathe his Angélique, two lovers from Ariosto's poem, and the union between the two is settled.

The plot is hardly a model of structural elegance, but it says much about how the production of a deregulated quasi-autonomous art in a changing cultural economy were framed in terms of emotional and material trauma and their impact on the home, and how under the circumstances art became a conduit of thwarted desire. Agathe's *temple d'amour* stands out as a troubled space apart, set offstage on the boundaries of art and love, penury and status; it is the place of misplaced passions and misplaced ambitions, a locus of art that we never get to see and one that—as a fresco—cannot be readily sold. In some ways the pictures in the *temple* have much in common with Aufinello's other picture, the work of such transcendent value that it too was beyond price and beyond sight. Writing on the commodification of art just a few years after Jacquelin and Lafortelle's play, the historian and critic Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy made a similar distinction between two categories, *valoir*, art's cultural value and *prix*, its cost, insisting that it was in large part the scale of art that contributed to its commodification. In the hands of the collector, Quatremère argued, even the smaller

paintings of Raphael were subject to the dead hand of commerce.⁵⁴ But the love of art also came at a terrible emotional and material cost. Pressed by Marie to turn his hand to the applied arts, Aufinello considers divorce, reduces his wife to tears, and sees before him only a weeping Roman *patronne* and another subject for a picture. In the same spirit, Aufinello literally bends the figures of his daughter and her lover to the shape of art in a *tableau vivant*.⁵⁵ At this stage in our reverse engineering of modernism, we might want to think of abstraction not in terms of Clement Greenberg's teleological march towards a formal abstraction but in terms of Jacques Lacan's description of desire.

Writing on Lacan's "modernism"—his concern with the transcendental constitution of the world of experience and the desiring subject's place within it—Louis A. Sass has rehearsed some of the ways in which desire is configured not simply as a desire for someone or something, but rather as a "desire for desiring" where "one desires to be desired as a desirer."⁵⁶ Here the concept of desire is tangible but eternally beyond reach, or rather, when there is the prospect that the object of desire might be attained, it is sullied by the very conditions of its attainment and must be sought for again. In this sense, desire is best described as the "frustration of desire" rather than its fulfilment and it is this frustration, Sass argues, that leads to the search for substantive meaning in some form of transcendent subjectivity, in art. Sass provides only a few illustrations about how this process applies to art, notably Lacan's description of the appearance of the "blot"-like skull form in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* and the moment of James Stewart's recognition as an observed observer in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*.⁵⁷ In Holbein's picture, the anamorphic skull is legible only when looked at obliquely, rendering the rest of the picture illegible. The viewer is thereby inserted

into a less structured and ultimately unknowable space that is impossible to reconcile to the normative frame occupied by the two main figures. Here, Sass argues, we have the creation of a “quasi-object” that generates another world while also threatening to compromise or obliterate the first.⁵⁸ It is precisely this emptiness seeking fulfilment along with its impossibility that constitutes the imagined object of desire. Here we might take stock and see abstraction—or certainly abstraction in its late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century form—as an example of Lacan’s *objet petit a*. Clearly, it is not difficult to find a place for Aufinello and some of his contemporaries within this scheme. For Aufinello, art, or art in its highest untainted form, clearly constitutes an unattainable desire and it is certainly hard to name. If art takes the form of Agathe’s *temple d’amour*, for instance, then we certainly never get to see it. And at the very moment when Aufinello’s desires are about to be fulfilled (when Dolban tries to buy his picture) is the point at which his work is necessarily defaced, reduced to a Lacanian “blot,” something that has transcendental significance in Aufinello’s universe, but not in ours. Clearly the blot has a troubled relation with the rest of Aufinello’s world. Like Tony’s *Aphrodite by the waterhole* it is the source of the painters’ near destruction. Ultimately, however, the world is saved because the blot, the tavern sign and others like them are rendered comic. But it so easily might have turned out otherwise. We hardly need to remind ourselves that alcoholism, depression, suicide, and madness were integral to the life and work of so many modern artists. Indeed, we might see such conditions as the other side of *vaudeville*, the fate of deregulated production of a transcendent art without its comic reduction, without a doughty *patronne* to step in and make sense of the world.

Concluding ... Post-Script

The respective configurations of artistic ambition as farce and tragedy have long co-existed in two separate spheres. At work in each instance are two different communities, a community of bourgeois cultural consumers primed with clear expectations of what good art ought to look like and how it should function, and a cadre of artists who have got a bit above their station, take themselves too seriously and see themselves as having a heightened degree of professional autonomy that leaves the rest of the world behind. Here, the example of the nineteenth-century existentialist philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard is helpful. The concept of comic farce – seen by Kierkegaard as an existential category rather than a genre – involves a “contradiction”, one that subverts a norm, he contends, but leads to no lasting harm.⁵⁹ Thus, vaudeville makes upstart artists look foolish but, as we have so often seen, no lasting damage is done, the norms of bourgeois life carry on, and the play ends happily. For Kierkegaard, comedy and tragedy have much in common and both depend on a contradiction. Indeed, the one condition might even be seen as both comic and tragic. With the existential condition of tragedy, however, the contradiction remains unresolved; it involves suffering and pain and there is no possibility of resolution. The individual, Kierkegaard explains is “tragic because of his passions”.⁶⁰ In many respects, these passions mark out the existential condition for modern artists, or, for our specific purposes, the condition of those early-nineteenth century painters cast aside as the tragic rejects of history who fail to reconcile themselves with bourgeois norms. For Jules Janin, writing in the journal *L'Artiste* in 1830, the plight of the artist in bourgeois culture was indeed tragic, one that constituted a “living death” and required a struggle on the painter’s part to free

a world enslaved by philistinism.⁶¹ I want to leave the final word to an art dealer and amateur who had to negotiate a transition between Kierkegaard's two worlds of comedy and tragedy, Pierre Roux de Cantal. In his catalogue of the collection of the late Robert de Saint-Victor sold in Paris in 1822, Roux posthumously rescued the reputation of the painter Simon-Mathurin Lantara from the calumnies heaped upon him in Barré, Picard, Desfontaine's vaudeville of 1809.⁶² Could so sensitive a soul really be the drunken habitué of the cabaret described in Picard's libretto, asks Roux? No. The insights shown in Lantara's pictures were wholly out of step with the tastes of the eighteenth century and resulted in the painter's underserved infamy. Indeed, it is the art dealer's task to set the record straight, to insist on the integrity of the man and his work, to change the existential condition in which the arts find form and to offer him again to the nineteenth century.

¹ Paul Mantz, "La peinture française," in *L'Exposition Universelle de 1899 : les Beaux-Arts et les arts décoratifs*, eds. Louis Gonse and Alfred de Lostalot (Paris: Le Temps, 1889), 49.

² Paul Mantz, "Introduction", Antonin Proust, *L'Art Français: Publication Officielle de la Commission des Beaux-Arts* (Paris, Bachelot, 1890), 12-14. See also André Michel, "Paysage", *L'Art Français*, 85 ff.

³ Paul Marmottan, *L'École française de la peinture; notice historique et critique*, (Paris: Laurens, 1886).

⁴ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85.

⁵ Alfred Sensier, *Souvenirs sur Th. Rousseau* (Paris: Léon Techener, 1872), 370.

⁶ Claire Trévien, *Satire, Prints and Theatricality in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016), 77-87.

⁷ Pierre-Marie-Michel Lepeintre-Desroches, *Suite du Répertoire du Théâtre Français: avec un choix des pièces de plusieurs autres théâtres*, (Paris: Vve. Dabo, 1822).

⁸ *The Rebel*, dir. Robert Day (London: Associated British Pictures Corporation, 1961).

⁹ For an account of the history of representation of vanguard art in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries see Diana Knight, *Balzac and the Model of Painting: Artist Stories in "La Comédie Humaine"* (London: Legenda/Modern Humanities Research Association, 2007), and Serge Guilbaut, *Comment New York vola l'Idée d'Art Moderne* (Paris: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 1989), 10 ff and 212 ff.

¹⁰ Pierre-Yves Radet, *Un peintre français à Londres* (Paris: Vaudeville, 1816), 29.

¹¹ Louis de Laboullaye, *Artiste et artisan ou les deux expositions* (Paris: Marchant, 1834).

¹² Laboullaye, *Artiste et artisan*, 12.

¹³ Denis Carolet, "Le retour de l'Opéra-Comique au Foire de Saint-Germain," *Le théâtre de la foire, ou L'opéra-comique. Contenant les meilleures pièces qui ont été représentées aux foires de S. Germain & de S. Laurent* (Paris: Prault, 1734).

¹⁴ Denis Carolet, "Le retour de l'Opéra-Comique," 316-317.

¹⁵ Patrick Michel, *Le Commerce du tableau à Paris: dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2007), 122-125.

¹⁶ Émile Campardon, *Les spectacles de la foire* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1877), 293-295.

¹⁷ Christoph Gottlieb von Murr, *Bibliothèque de peinture, de sculpture et de gravure*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt and Leipzig: Jean Paul Kraus, 1770), 131.

¹⁸ Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, Jean-Bapstise Descamps, *Vie des peintres flamands et hollandaise* (Paris: Bure l'ainé, 1745), 313.

¹⁹ Lebrun, *Almanach historique et raisonné des architectes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs et ciseleurs* (Paris: Delalain 1776).

²⁰ Lebrun, *Almanach historique et raisonné*, 11.

²¹ Lebrun, *Almanach historique et raisonné*, 136 ff.

²² F. de Villeneuve *Le tableau de Téniers ou l'Artiste et l'Ouvrier* (Paris: Choy, 1824), 26.

²³ Etienne Morel, *Rembrandt ou la vente après décès, vaudeville anecdotique en un acte* (Paris: Au magazine des pièces des théâtres, 1799).

²⁴ Pierre-Yves Barré, Louis-Benoit Picard and Jean-Baptiste Desfontaines, *Lantara ou le peintre au Cabaret* (Paris: Fages, 1809). See also Xavier de Montépin and Jules Dornay, *Lantara, comédie en deux actes mêlés de chants* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1865).

²⁵ Steven Adams, "Signs of Recovery: Landscape Painting and Masculinity in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Gendering Landscape Art*, eds. Steven Adams and Anna Greutzner Robins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 17-18.

²⁶ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 14.

²⁷ Rensselaer W. Lee, "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 22, no. 4 (1940): 207-210.

²⁸ Darius A. Speith, *Revolutionary Paris and the Market for Netherlandish Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 4-6. See also Carol S. Eliel, "Genre Painting during the Revolution and the *Goût Hollandais*," in *1789: French Art during the Revolution*, ed. Alan Wintermute (New York: Colnaghi, 1989), 47-61, and Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations sur l'art de dessin en France* (Paris: Desennes, 1791), 86 and René Schneider, *L'Esthétique classique chez Quatremère de Quincy* (Paris: Hachette, 1910), 99.

²⁹ Speith, *Revolutionary Paris*, 27-29.

³⁰ *Explication des peintures, sculptures et autres ouvrages de Messieurs de l'Académie royale* (Paris: Impr. des bâtimens du roi, 1791), 2-3.

³¹ Philippe Bordes, Régis Michel, *Aux armes & aux arts!: les arts de la Révolution, 1789-1799* (Paris: A. Biro, 1988), 138.

³² Nicolas Mirzoeff, "Revolution, Representation, Equality: Gender, Genre, and Emulation in the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture, 1785-93," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31, no 2 (1997): 159.

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- ³³ *La vérité au Muséum, ou l'Oeil trompé, critique en vaudeville sur les tableaux exposés au Salon* (Paris: Marechal, 1800), 2-3.
- ³⁴ J.-A. Jacquelin & A. Lafortelle, *Le Peintre dans son Ménage* (Paris: Fages, Year VIII), 26-27.
- ³⁵ Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787–1799* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 84.
- ³⁶ James H. Johnson, “Versailles, Meet Les Halles: Masks, Carnival, and the French Revolution”, *Representations*, vol. 73, 1, (2001): 90.
- ³⁷ Sigmund Freud, “Humour”, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964) vol. XXI, 166.
- ³⁸ Charles-Georges Étienne, Charles Gaugiron-Nanteuil and E. Morel, *Le Café des artistes, vaudeville en un acte* (Paris: Huet, 1799).
- ³⁹ Étienne, *Le Café des artistes*, 14.
- ⁴⁰ Jean de la Tynna, *Dictionnaire des rues de Paris* (Paris: Imp. De Brassuer aîné, 1812), 75.
- ⁴¹ Étienne, *Le Café des artistes*, 21.
- ⁴² Emy, *L'Art de bien faire les glaces d'office, ou les Vrais principes pour congeler tous les rafraîchissemens*, (Paris: Le Clerc, 1768).
- ⁴³ Étienne, *Le Café des artistes*, 21.
- ⁴⁴ Étienne, *Le Café des artistes*, 24.
- ⁴⁵ Étienne, *Le Café des artistes*, 26.
- ⁴⁶ Richard Wrigley, “Between the Street and the Salon: Parisian Shop Signs and the Spaces of Professionalism in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth centuries,” *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 1 (1998): 65.
- ⁴⁷ Alexandre Grimod de la Reynière, *Almanach des gourmands : servant de guide dans les moyens de faire excellente chère par un vieil amateur*, vol. 4 (Paris: Maradan, 1810), 281.

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- ⁴⁸ Étienne, *Le Café des artistes*, 36.
- ⁴⁹ R. Rey, *Contre l'Art Abstrait* (Paris: Plon, 1957), 18.
- ⁵⁰ Catherine Gunther Kodat, *Don't Act, Just Dance: The Metapolitics of Cold War Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 43.
- ⁵¹ Jacques-André Jacquelin and Auguste Lafortelle, *Le Peintre dans son Ménage* (Paris: Fages, 1799).
- ⁵² Jacquelin and Lafortelle, *Le Peintre dans son Ménage*, 9.
- ⁵³ Jacquelin and Lafortelle, *Le Peintre dans son Ménage*, 9.
- ⁵⁴ Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, "Sixième Lettre," in *Lettres à Miranda sur le déplacement des monuments d'art de l'Italie* (Paris : 1796), 124. See also Daniel. S. Sherman, "Quatremere/Benjamin/Marx: Art, Museum, Aura and Commodity," in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, eds. Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff (London: Routledge, 1994), 123 ff.
- ⁵⁵ Jacquelin and Lafortelle, *Le Peintre dans son Ménage*, 12.
- ⁵⁶ Louis. A. Sass, "Lacan: the mind of the modernist," *Continental Philosophy Review* 48, no. 4 (2015): 17.
- ⁵⁷ Sass, "Lacan: The mind of the modernist," 36-37.
- ⁵⁸ Sass, "Lacan: The mind of the modernist," 16.
- ⁵⁹ Will Williams, *Kierkegaard and the Legitimacy of the Comic: Understanding the Relevance of Irony, Humor, and the Comic for Ethics and Religion* (London: Lexington, 2018), see also Søren Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 434-434.
- ⁶⁰ Williams, *Kierkegaard and the Legitimacy of the Comic*, 12-13.
- ⁶¹ Jules Janin, "Être artiste", *L'Artiste*, vol. 1. (1830): 9-10.

⁶²Pierre Roux de Cantal, *Catalogue d'une riche collection de tableaux, des trois écoles, et par les plus grands maîtres . . . qui composaient le cabinet de feu M. Robert de Saint-Victor* (Paris: Roux de Cantal, 1822), 136.