Jean-Luc Moulène

Selected press
Jean-Luc Moulène: A ‘Plasticien’

— Caroline Hancock

Particularly since the 1990s, the French language has rather uniquely championed the term 'arts plastiques' ('plastic arts'), a term long-abandoned in other languages and contexts in favour of alternatives like the 'visual' or 'fine arts'. Probably because of this, some artists still define themselves as 'artiste-plasticien' ('plastician'), as opposed to 'artiste-peintre' ('painter') or 'artisan-designer'. The term suggests an emphasis on matter rather than image, and points at artistic activity as an exploration of materials and forms through a variety of modes. Jean-Luc Moulène tends to call himself a 'plasticien', even though photography is the medium for which he first gained recognition in the 1990s. But this choice is not just a matter of French habit — rather, it is a revealing move that suggests not only that image-making is just part of his practice, but that the idea of materials, their manipulation and what they might say about the form of society and the possibility of its transformation is at the core of his work.

Moulène studied **arts plastiques** (and literature) in Paris during the 1970s, after which he worked as an artistic adviser for a branch of the French electronics company Thomson, from 1981 to 1989, and, for a brief period in 1989, in commercial advertising. These early experiences with the fabrication of the imagery of products and brands familiarised him with the specific methodologies used in publicity and communication, and helped him analyse the desired effects of images on the social behaviours of consumers. As a result, his photographs, which span the genres of portraiture, still life, landscape and the street scene, critique the seductive character of conventional media representation, and the manipulations it allows. Though he prefers his titles to remain untranslated — lest they lose the wordplay and linguistic specificity that is key to his practice — he specifies that many of his photographic works from the last fifteen years are accompanied by contextual information, indicating the date and location of the picture, as a way to make explicit every factor that intervenes in the construction of the images. This information is on occasion heavily nuanced, for example with the title accompanying the series **39 Objets de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène** (1999—2000), which integrates a disclaimer, stating that they are not 'by' Moulène but simply presented or made visible by him. Likewise the names of the photographers of his sculptures or installations is often credited in his captions. (Such concern with authorship or agency reflects his consistently critical standpoint on copyright, reserved rights and originality, which often emerges in his work.) By systematically deploying that level of clarity, each caption emphasises power struggles at work during the making of works of art and post-production, and also pre-empts future confusions, erroneous interpretations or uninformed appropriations of his work. That is, Moulène’s interests lie in the full life of the artwork — in the process, on the one hand, that goes from the production to the circulation and reception of the object and its image, and, on the other, in the social conditions in which the artist and the labourer operate in the contemporary world.

Despite this apparent focus on the image as an entry into this discussion, Moulène’s artistic practice has also always included traditional, assembled or manufactured sculpture, work with found objects and the production of drawings and prints. Boundaries between disciplines often blur in his work, for example when photographs capture his found objects, combining ‘actual work’ and ‘documentation’ in an
Suddenly, everything was possible. All the materials were available for us to use. It was as if the exhibition were trying to tell us something like: 'Go ahead boys, take over the space and do whatever you want.'

Rather like Nouveau Réaliste Raymond Hains, whose phenomenal photographic output has yet to be fully acknowledged, Moulène is open to chance encounters, making art from street-level reality, and infusing it with both humour and critical rigour—photographically or otherwise.

He shares this approach with artists of his generation from other locations, such as Gabriel Orozco, who invited him to exhibit objects within 'The Everyday Altered', the show he curated at the Venice Biennale as part of Francesco Bonami's 'Dreams and Conflicts' in 2003. 'Boule fice (sphère de Lisbonne)' (Paris, 1 May 2007) looks like an oversized disco ball firmly grounded on the floor, lined with cobblestones from the Portuguese capital instead of mirrors. Recent abstract works utilising plastics like epoxy resin and polyurethane (for example, a Trous Chocmeur Rose (Paris, May 2009)) are placed on plinths or tabletops like modular or cellular sculpture or architectural models, inviting us to consider notions such as clamping, knotting, expanding, transparency and density, as well as vanishing axes, grids, intersections, edges.

3 This element of the work of both artists was highlighted by Perrine Roy, the art critic who coined the name 'Nouveaux Réalistes' in 1990, when he curated both artists in a group show, 'Cette culture qui vient de làvers' (The Culture that Comes from the Street) at the Galerie municipale de Vitry-sur-Seine in 2000.
directions and gaps. The plasticity of the materials is at the core of these exercises. Underneath the undeniable visual quality of the photographs and sculptures, Moulène’s interest lies in moulding and manipulating the things that he makes and finds, to the point that they are (or seem to be) no longer how they began.

I conceive of them all like objects after a world of photography. Therefore they are not objects in the sense of statuary or sculpture. They are objects linked to the questions of production, representation, post-photography objectivation. As such, photography continues to be the research tool for these objects, even if at the end of the day I don’t propose a print.⁵

There is something sculptural about most of Moulène’s photographs, as if the objects were about to pop out of the printed surface, igniting desire in a manner akin to advertising. Some of them could even be argued to be meditations on sculpture or puns on three-dimensionality laid flat. For example, Méduses (São Paulo, 7 April 2002) shows two jelly shoes (‘méduse’ means jellyfish), placed sole against sole in a manner that resembles the aquatic creature and simultaneously offers a volumetric study of light and shade. A sculptural conceit is at work again in his photographs of chewed gum, which also dwell on the incongruous malleability of the substance and delight in endless permutations of transparency and opacity.

In both of these works there is a play between document and reality: the ‘thing’ and its registration are distinguishable but at the same time permeable, and are given equal weight. Moulène inserts photographs in exhibitions together with sculptures or actual objects, creating disjunctions and/or associations that recall the visual games of Documents, the magazine through which Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein attempted to offer a common front against positivism, idealism and André Breton’s Surrealism, published in


Paris from 1929 to 1930. 6 The use value of documentary evidence essential to Documents has echoes in Moulène’s attention to varied modes of presentation — including spatial presentation. Indeed, the mise en espace of his photographs could be compared to the practices of Richard Wentworth or Wolfgang Tillmans, and their non-hierarchical, formal and sculptural considerations and installations.

In 1998, for the exhibition ‘Tu parles / t’écoute’ (‘You Talk / I Listen’) at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Ferne du Buisson near Paris, Moulène was invited to work with the haircare and cosmetic company Shiseido. He directed a series of photographs of two naked female models covered with Shiseido’s Perfect Refining Foundation. The function of this product — to cancel out any facial blemishes — was pushed to the extreme by Moulène, as the foundation was applied to the models’ entire bodies. The resulting images, We Were Here and There (1998), are subtly - pleasing and ironic: the women’s bodies are redolent of mediaeval statuary and - 1 cannon figures on tombstones, 7 while at the same time Moulène subverts contemporary commercial publicity tactics via their installation as traditional prints within the exhibition and on billboards outside it.

If on that occasion bodies were turned into objects by means of the image, in other works the transformation is of objects into images and again into objects: at the Louvre’s invitation in 2005, Moulène selected 24 small statuettes, fragments and amulets from different departments of the museum — objects that he considered overlooked in their conventional presentation context (often a large vitrine filled with other artefacts). They were brought to a studio, where he photographed each of them against a plain background, in typical archival or museal fashion. Enlarged to approximately 50 by 40 centimetre photographs, the objects were then exhibited in the museum as flat images, but images endowed with an object status: the bare prints, mounted on aluminium, were placed directly on plinths, which were installed in a manner that overemphasised the shadows resulting from the museum’s overhead lighting.

Tracing this movement from object to photograph and back to object, Moulène also published this series as reproductions in a special Le Monde newspaper supplement distributed both in the museum and within the regular paper on the day of the opening. Exponentially broadening his audience, Moulène often distributes pamphlets, prints, leaflets and flyers through different channels, or leaves them to be picked up from piles (paper mounds that are objects/sculptures in themselves) included in his displays — the image, again, becoming object, and through it, witness to a materiality that might otherwise have been left behind.

Moulène’s systematic questioning of the function and productivity of images has also entailed the analysis, replication and transformation of the mechanisms active in different photographic genres, from advertising to pornography (as in: the series Les Filles d’Amsterdam, 2005), from investigative or crime scene photography to archiving practices. It could be said that he plays at creating documents, material proof or evidence of sociocultural facts and projections. He repeatedly refers to police vocabulary — his exhibition at ARC, Paris in 1997, for example, was titled ‘Deposition’. As suggested by Cinq concentrés concentriques, Moulène’s work denounces and points fingers. Notions of scrutiny, enigma, excavation, observation, forensic light and vigilance recur in and around his images and titles, as if they were captured events, peppered with strange clues for varied interpretations.

Moulène says he has been a handyman (bricoleur) since his youth. 8 He talks of working as an assistant carpenter as well as an artist, and maintains that both should be understood as labourers. He sometimes appropriates for himself a qualification used for Jean-Luc Godard’s ‘technicien libertaire’, or ‘libertarian technician’, 9

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Labour-intensive sculpture did not have pride of place in French post-War art and criticism—for example, Robert Filliou made fun of it with his DIY *Principe d'équivalence* bien fait, mal fait, pas fait (Equivalence Principle: Well Made, Badly Made, Not Made, 1968), an absurd collection of objects, both crafted and found.

But at a time when work is becoming increasingly dematerialised, Moulène defends making things as fundamental to human activity. His attention for some time now has focused on the preservation and valorisation of objects produced in the context of working-class cultures, in particular that of trade unions and industrial action. The photographic series *Objets de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène* constitutes an invaluable archive of French industry, manufacture and craftsmanship of the Years of Lead, from the 1960s to the 80s, that is not dissimilar in spirit to Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane’s *Folk Archive* (1999–2005), their collection of contemporary British popular traditions and culture. The objects themselves are now part of the Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail in Roncevaux, in northern France, and the ethnologist and archivist Jean-Charles Leyrie has produced a detailed account of each of the forty objects preserved as national industrial heritage. Among those objects is a ‘pipe à ois’, carved in France in the late nineteenth century, when the idea of dividing the working day between three teams working for eight hours each was a proud labour claim rather than the normal practice it is today in some countries; also in the collection is the red Gaultoise La Pantinnoise packet made from 1982 to 1983 by strikers protesting the closure of their tobacco factory in Pantin, in northeast Paris.

This interest in the representation of the working class is part of a wider engagement. Moulène has collaborated with, or made reference to in his work, the French workers’ unions Lutte ouvrière and CGT (Confédération générale du travail). In 2002, he collaborated with *Nouvelle Vie Ouvrière* to publish a special edition of the *Objets de grève* series for the CGT’s 47th congress. The arresting use of the colour yellow as a background in some of his photographs (for instance some of the *Produit du Palais royal*, 2004–05) or painted on his sculpture and objects (Marche (paille et balançoire), Paris, 1994, and Croix jaune, Paris, 2004–05) presumably refers to the historical use of the colour in syndicalist movements and its regular appearance in bold political communications.

Bridging formal and social connections, Moulène connects the ‘arrêt du travail’ (‘stoppage of work’) with the ‘arrêt sur image’ (‘stop-frame’ or ‘still’).

The notion of work stoppage is a useful metaphor to use in relation to what I do: I stop things, make the image concrete. The idea is simple: if you objectify floating mental images, they no longer float, they become legible. My work has often been about that: giving concrete existence to mental images.11

As if they were calls to action, his object/sculptures function autonomously like dissonant, ethical, potentially empowering ammunition.

The effectiveness of Moulène’s individual works lies in their capacity to occupy space and imagination. In tandem with his focus on arrest and occupation, Moulène also seeks movement, visual diapage and enquiry. The codification of movement through ritual and conventional or unconventional modes of social circulation is deeply ingrained in his practice, probably as a result from his work with French performance artist Michel Jourdain during the late 1970s. Corporeal awareness, exchange and confrontation were central

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to his collaborations with dancer and choreographer Boris Charmatz (for example, Ouvér — un lisse en utopie, 2006, and Statues. Exposition à géométrie variable, 2001–02). But variable geometry is also at work in his photographs, sculptures, objects and take-away piles of posters and printed papers. Across his whole body of work discontinuities, articulations, instabilities, tensions and release come together to produce a heightened interrogating presence, which translates into installations in which the relationship between work and space (and therefore the institution) is key. In the exhibition ‘Mental Archaeology’ at the Centre d’art contemporain d’Ivy last year, Moulène showed Riche (Le Havre, January 2010), a sculpture consisting of a plastic bottle (Moulène began collecting bottles in 2000) sporting a disproportionately large fake-diamond cap and sitting atop a precariously tall, narrow plinth. The bottle was partially filled with water, which emphasised the tilt of the floor and, through it, the original function of the space as a cinema. Material relations here suggest, like in Objet de grève, wider social relations.

I am interested in producing work that is, in itself, the site of conflict, that presents existing conflicts in a precognitive, that therefore is sensitive for us. From these forms, a detachment and a gap are created and a critical consciousness can occur. 13

Moulène’s forms defy typology, in that they are fabricated from resemblances and alterity; preferably nonsuggestive, formless, with no clear usage. His plasticity of choice has ‘potatoïde’ (potato-shaped) qualities – that is to say, his forms are somewhat absurdly undefined and challenging. 13

He confirms his predilection for this term in interviews such as one regarding the maquette for a body (2007–2011) presented in the ‘Paris-Delhi-Bombay’ exhibition at the Centre Pompidou this year. His recent exhibitions, like the one at the Cridac, which then travelled to Nurenberg Kunstverein, and his solo show at the Carré d’Art in Nimes in 2009, incite new or different volumetric perceptions against a flattening out in capitalist production, projecting out of the box and beyond the frame. Moulène is now preparing his first US exhibition for Dia: Beacon, opening this autumn, continuing his exploration of political meanings inherent in images and objects and in the production behind them.

‘One should reward anticipation.’ — Jean-Luc Moulène 14

‘When we have decorticated, deconstructed, destroyed the real, there still remains this network of extremely solid metallic threads, a very potent human construction. This is where the work continues.

These wires, we take them and we tie them together: new figures are formed, new realities are imagined. Imagination liberates. On this horizon of being, freedom is maximal, and potence approaches possibility. New subjectiveities, new fields of action, new syntheses of cooperation can thus be glimpsed.’ Antonio Negri 15


14 Hans Ulrich Obrist and J.-L. Moulène interviewed Antonio Negri in Italy. An extract from the interview was published in the magazine accompanying the exhibition Volks: Le Monde dans la tête at the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2000 (published by Paris-Modes and Vox Tongaphiles).

Jean-Luc Moulène: Photography as Training Manual

— Sophie Berrebi

It is not unusual for one artist to display admiration towards another, but it is more so perhaps when the two are almost contemporaries (give or take a decade) and the appreciation takes the form of a dedication at the beginning of a book. In giving ‘tribute to the work of Jean-Luc Moulène’ on the credit page of Akram Zaatari: Earth of Endless Secrets (2009), Akram Zaatari acknowledges the undeniable formal proximity that exists between his photographs showing material evidence related to the stories he presents in his films and installations projects and in the form of a photograph, the folded letters become illegible and the tapes inaudible. For all their clarity of composition, these images show the limits of photographic evidence. As with the work of Jean-Luc Moulène, they underscore the muteness and codification of the image.

If Moulène’s photography seems to offer guidance for Zaatari’s practice, it could be said, in turn, that photography functions as a training manual for Moulène himself, furnishing him with a way of critically looking at and learning from the world. From Moulène’s early acquaintance with the medium in the 1980s to his most recent work, photography, most often practiced in the form of long-term and open-ended series, appears as a means of studying his surroundings, uncovering conventions of seeing as well as economic, social and political networks of production and exchange. Within this practice, the notion of the document, understood in different semantic contexts that include the legal, the scientific and the historical, plays a central part.

‘All [the artists] were using photography as evidence. That’s where I took up the work.’ Looking back at his formative years in a recent interview with Briony Fer, Moulène underlined the importance as well as the limitations of the use of photography in the context of performance art. He came to photography in the context of the Art Corpored movement, which developed in Paris in the first half of the 1970s.

For artists like Michel Journiac and Gina Pane, the key figures of this French body art scene, photography was an integral part of the work rather than simply ad hoc documentation of live performances. Journiac, for instance, differentiated ‘photographic actions’ (‘actions photographiques’), which were made

Sophie Berrebi elucidates the history of visual culture and typology of skills found in Jean-Luc Moulène’s photography and objects.

Moulène’s photographs of objects set against neutral grounds. More than that, however, and despite tackling different subject matter, Zaatari’s images consider the ambiguousness of the photograph as evidence — a reflection that can be traced back to Moulène’s own experiments. Rather than the industrially manufactured objects of daily life that commonly turn up in Moulène’s images, Zaatari’s photographs most frequently present objects that bear the marks of the conflicted history of Lebanon, from postcolonialism to intermittent war. A handbag stuffed with letters from a war prisoner, vintage audio and videocassettes, an archive of old photographs and pages from a diary are shown as material traces of the narratives that unfold in such films of Zaatari’s as Al-Sharit Bikhayr (All Is Well on the Border, 1997) and Fi Haza al-Boyet (In This House, 2003). But, once they are captured

specifically to be recorded on camera, from ‘photo-documents’, which amounted to documentation of performances. The phrase ‘constat d’action’ (or ‘certified report of an action’) was the most frequently used term to define the data collected from a performance, likening the document to a certificate or an affidavit and conjuring up legal associations. Having once participated in a collective event directed by Jouinac, Moulène was asked to record ‘photo-documents’ of several performances.2 Even in these early works, well aware of the clear categorisations of photography’s role, some of the resulting images, such as Espace du sacré (1985), implicitly acknowledge the blurriness between straightforward recording and staging for the benefit of the camera, and suggest one of the directions that Moulène would follow from the 1990s onwards.

In documents / Journal imperssonnel, the open-ended series that regroups a large number of his photographic works since 1999, Moulène uses again the term ‘document’ to define his own work. But while the term remains a trace of his involvement with body-art documentation, its meaning becomes more complex in its reuse. The series contains pictures made in different geographic locations and belonging to various genres: still life, portrait, street photography, architectural views, and so forth. They include both un-staged, snapshot-like photographs and carefully arranged still lifes. The precise date and location given for each picture offer a connection to the artist’s own life; many images appear to be made in his Paris neighbourhood or in the context of travelling, with a broad diversity of subject matter and geography, and an enigmatic touch. Yet while the series borrows qualities from the diaristic form, documents / Journal imperssonnel presents a selective choice of images. Many linger in one’s mind, conveying a feeling of intimacy and triggering a vague impression of déjà vu that operates on personal and art-historical levels.

Exemplary in this respect is Père Lachaise — Bastille (Paris, 15 September 1998).3 The picture shows a Parisian bus — easily identified by its blue destination plate — steering away from the sidewalk on a busy street in Paris. The reflection in the glass window of the bus hints at the commotion on the rue des Rosiers, which the bus’s route follows for part of its journey. Amidst this tumult, Moulène has caught a moment of respite in the form of a fleeting look addressed to him by a young woman on board. Responding to the camera pointed toward her, she turns her head slightly, letting appear a turban, widened eyes and an inscrutable expression. The image, snatched in an instant, conveys something of a flaneur’s accidental encounter, such as Charles Baudelaire evoked in his ‘Tableaux Parisiens’ poems, published in Les Fleurs du mal (1857). ‘A lightning flash... then right! is what marks, in ‘A une passante’, a sudden — almost photographic — exchange of glances between individuals that will never meet again.4 But the image that Père Lachaise — Bastille brings to mind is stronger than a literary one: the anachronism or exoticism of the headress, the three-quarter profile framed by the bus window and the modest, perhaps teasing look eerily but unmistakably recall Vermeer’s Het Meisje met de Parel (Girl with a pearl earring, c. 1665). The bus window encloses the figure like the painting in its frame — only the reference seems to set the other way round, as if the Vermeer were the imperfect mirror of Moulène’s. It is Baudelaire’s text, the momentary exchange of glances enables the narrator to be ‘suddenly reborn’, the recognition of the simultaneity between photograph and painting is what makes the photograph suddenly come to life for the viewer. This recognition, which turns the photograph from a mysterious and mute image into a familiar one, recurs elsewhere in the series. A close-up view of the Cologne cathedral (Cathédrale, Cologne, 16 March 2002) evokes in its particular framing Claude Monet’s serialised depictions of the cathedral of Rouen (Rouen Cathedral, 1892—94). A picture of the Seine, as dirty and muddy as a roadside gutter (La Seine à Paris, 10 March 2010), reverses the effect

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4 Moulène often includes identifying information alongside his titles beyond the traditional date.

achieved by André Kertész in a 1929 close-up view of a gutter that is surreptitiously transformed into a river.

Transposition, transformation and displacement are some of the ways in which images, and in particular artworks from the past, are summoned in Moulène’s photographs. Hence Ontoges (Paris, 5 November 1999), which depicts a row of cut fingernails (or perhaps toenails?) aligned, not in a row, but turned around and stacked vertically in a column from small to large, evokes Jacques-André Boiffard’s well-known photographs of an isolated big toe on a dark background, which were published in 1929 in issue 6 of the Surrealist journal Documents. The reference, even though it jumps out, is indirect, and partially relies on an affinity of texture and body parts, but mostly acts through a parallel process of anthropomorphism — in which Ontoges suggests a thorax and Boiffard’s Big Toe a human face.

This extensive network of visual references, which is never suggested directly nor explicitly acknowledged, sheds light on the second part of the essay’s title: ‘Impersonal Diary’. The expression recalls Claus Oldenburg’s response to a journalist who questioned him about his habit of quoting or referencing the work of other artists in his early practice: ‘It’s true that every artist has a discipline of impersonality to enable him to become an artist in the first place.’ The discipline of impersonality self-imposed by Oldenburg as a learning system appears in a slightly different form in Moulène’s work. While the latter’s working practice also suggests an idea of training through making images that bear the trace of others, the resulting images also suggest the impossibility of making an innocent, spontaneous photograph. Even though Jérôme Dreyfus — Dassault was in all likelihood the result of a split-second decision, the result of the artist acknowledging a “decisive instant”, as described by Henri Cartier-Bresson, the picture, perhaps having been selected from a series made at the time, acquires permanence and timelessness once the artistic reference appears. In Moulène’s documents/journal impersoneel every image is triggered by the memory of another image. This realisation reconfigures Cartier-Bresson’s motto of photojournalism and complicates the notion of document as straightforward evidence. It proposes that documents are not objective manifestations, but the subjective traces of culture, be it of the image’s producer, recipient or both.

The pictorial and cultural references that slip in between the decisive moment of the camera shot and the artist’s cultural baggage suggest something of a history of visual forms. In other series, however, Moulène’s interest lies in the visual conventions through which images are composed and produced in a particular area of knowledge. They follow the principle, developed by photography historian John Tagg, that “the idea of what constitutes evidence has a history [that] implies definite techniques and procedures, concrete institutions and specific social relations.” Moulène has investigated a number of these fields in different projects. Plant (rue de Bercy, Hôtel Mercure, Paris 1st, 1 September 1995 – 9 December 2002), an observational project that is supported by an academic essay by a botanist, follows the spontaneous growth, disappearance and re-emergence of a foxglove tree on the sidewalk. No Foto (1997–98) collects press photographs censored or legally contested in the press. Documento / Le Louvre (2006) explores conventions of museum archives and artwork reproduction, whereas documents / Le tunnel (boulevard de Bercy, Paris, 12th arrondissement, 1996–2001) suggests ethnographic fieldwork and the issues that arise from its documentation. Originally presented as a newspaper offprint, documents / Le tunnel is concerned both with a sampling of city signs (somewhat similar to documents resulting from the Situationists’ dérives in the city and their efforts to organize the results into psychogeographic studies). It consists

7 The tendency on the part of photojournalists and photography editors to select pictures of disaster that recall in their composition Christian religious imagery is a simplification and broadening of this phenomenon.
of a series of twenty photographs of graffiti discovered by the artist in the covered section of the boulevard de Bercy, close to the Gare de Lyon and the Palais Omnisports de Bercy in the twelfth arrondissement of Paris. Returning to the site over a period of several years, Moulène recorded in photographs the insults and notices and slogans scribbled across the walls, creating a disjointed narrative with recurring protagonistic and thematic obsessions of sex and violence: ‘Solange Cavagna la triple putain la criminelle la tueuse’ (‘Solange Cavagna the triple whore the criminal the murderer’), ‘R noir lebique non venant ecrire matraque salo’ (‘R. oldgoart shit negro come write beat me bastured’). This collection is presented in spreads in books or as diptychs juxtaposing a photograph of graffiti with a transcription of the graffiti

Moulène argues that most objects now produced can be described as ‘post photographic’ meaning that they are designed before they are manufactured, and they exist in two-dimensional computer visualisations before emerging as material things.

The anthropological characteristics of this display are enhanced by the claim of anonymity that accompanies the title of the work, ‘Le Tunnel est anonyme’ (‘The tunnel is anonymous’), and together they give a sociological and an anthropological dimension to the project. How many voices authored these graffiti? What kind of exchange is going on through these injunctions? What does it say about social relations, about hopes and fears and menaces?

The project makes visible, for instance, the tension of the formerly working class neighbourhood since its gentrification through the import of a middle class and the development of cultural centres (for example, the Frank Gehry building now hosting the French Cinémathèque, on the nearby rue de Bercy). The tunnel photographs’ ability to indirectly reflect this suggests they are less accidental encounters between graffiti and camera than the result of a deliberate investigation over a period of time, in which raw material has been systematically collected and transcribed according to particular rules – those of typography. The graffiti, in other words, has been framed and organised in order to make it legible and interpretable in scientific terms. Though presented as an art project, Moulène’s tunnel leans towards the social sciences, and the work gives credit to his statement: ‘I operate in the more or less of anthropology, of culture, of sociology, etc.’

The process of showing how documents are produced from within sites of knowledge and ideologies, which shape these images through specific conventions, continues beyond Moulène’s photographic work to inform his sculptural practice. The ‘objects’ (a term he favours over ‘sculpture’) he creates can be seen as direct extensions of his photographs in several ways.

Firstly, Moulène argues that most objects now produced can be described as ‘post photographic’, meaning that they are designed before they are manufactured, and they therefore exist as two-dimensional computer visualisations before emerging as three-dimensional, material things. An object typical of this ‘post photographic’ condition is the ‘T? Nant mineral water bottle shaped to evoke flowing water as captured by a camera, which Mölène has taken as subject for a photograph (Bi-Fixe) (Paris, 7 September 2017). Images such as Bi-Fixe, along with other still lifes from the Documents series, seem to function as research for making his own objects, and indeed several of Moulène’s ‘sculptures’ also result from computerised pre-conceptions, while others are made using special industrial-production methods. The latter follow a process reminiscent of the 39 Objet de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène (1999) series that documented specially produced objects by industry workers on strike. Other works, by contrast, openly oppose industrial finish and production, and are made using manual techniques that include casting (Enfant, 2006 and Baignoire).

Jean-Luc Moulène,

**Cog Concentrés**

Concentrées,

Paris, April 2007,

black polyurethane elastomers,

18 x 18 x 18 cm.

© Jean-Luc Moulène

— ADAGP. Courtesy Chantal Crousel, Paris; Inames Lane, London and Greta Meert, Brussels
In Moulène's work, both theorisation and the means to do it are closely intertwined: just as the photographs contain a history of visual culture, the objects reflect a typology of skills. The photographs obey a similar principle as that which directs the creation of objects: both types of works are documents of the real that reflect on what this reality may be, and how it might be changed, through the artist’s practice and the very process of making.

1995), welding (Chrome, 1999), paving (Bouis fixe (sphere de Lisbonne), Paris, 1 May 2007) and carpentry (Croix jaune, 2004), amongst others. Not a specialist in any of these crafts, Moulène learns them through practice, and the degree of imperfection varies from one object to the next. In this way, when exhibited as an ensemble, the objects display a broad typology of skills and modes of production, from the shabbily executed Marche (gallière et balancée) (Paris, 1994), one of his earliest objects, to flawless industrial production in Bière totale (special production Karlsberg Brauerei GmbH, Hamburg (Saarpfalz), May 2004), produced specially by Carlsberg under Moulène's direction.

This typology of skills and techniques is suggestive of a 'training manual' that comes to existence in the very process of making, and which is perceptible in the objects' diversity of polish. At times, the act of making itself seems on show. The strange sculpture Cinq concentrés concentriques (Paris, April 2007), for example, reprises the procedure of disorientation experimented with in Ongles. Here, it is fingers rather than fingernails that have been submitted to an impossible dislocation. Cast from the artist's five fingers, in black polyester elastomer, the fingers are detached from the hand and joined at the tips. Rather than God breathing life into Adam, as in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, and the infinite reproductions of this image, it is the artist's fingers that designate the centre point of finite creation. They suggest manual activity, but their converging position, more importantly, evokes the necessary reflexive quality of an artwork. Instead of pointing outwards, they converge towards a centre. This centripetal quality is a central feature of Moulène's art, and unifies his production beyond its diversity of subject matter and mediums, and his work's sometimes opaque quality. Moulène has said: 'In my view the work is also a theoretical act. As for its conditions of existence, it must be reflexive.' 12 The statement echoes the idea of the theoretical object as defined by Hubert Damisch, for whom it is 'an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it'. 13

12 Ibid., p.142.
Jean-Luc Moulène

Having first achieved recognition for his photography in the late ‘80s, the French, Paris-based artist and his work have since and continue to radically evolve, incorporating a variety of media from drawings to objects, such that his ever-transmogrifying practice is almost impossible to characterize, and remains one of the better-kept secrets of contemporary art today.
Sharp, Chris (Essay); Cormack, Emily (Focus); Piron, François (Interview). “Jean-Luc Moulène: Mono”. Kaleidoscope issue 09, winter 2010, pp. 121-147.

MONO: JEAN-LUC MÔULÈNE

"Art is and remains for us a thing of the future."
—Jean-Pierre Cirié

The composition of a monographic text on an artist, at least for me as a critic, is almost always fraught with the fear of failure: failure to fully grasp and convey the complexity and stakes of a given artist's practice, and, in doing so, misrepresented. This work, much like the risks you take on as an artist, involves the risk of failure and must be dealt with. The artist's practice is complex and multifaceted, and the challenge is to convey this complexity in a way that is accessible to the reader. The artist's work is not simply a collection of images, but a meditation on the human condition. The artist's work is a meditation on the human condition, and the artist's practice is a meditation on the human condition. The artist's practice is a meditation on the human condition, and the artist's practice is a meditation on the human condition.
Sharp, Chris (Essay); Cormack, Emily (Focus); Piron, François (Interview). “Jean-Luc Moulène: Mono”. Kaleidoscope issue 09, winter 2010, pp. 121-147.
ing glory. Since then, the artist has continued to surprise and confound with his increasingly variegated ensembles of images and objects, as well as drawings, all of which are often less reminiscent of visual art per se than they are of unseemly artifacts, sociological data, and anthropological anomalies of a cultural and even physical order.

If any one factor could be said to unite the series of photos from the 1980s onward, it would be a preoccupation with questions of circulation. The "Disjunctions" series has often been described as an investigation of what constitutes the most banal categories of photography (still life, portraiture, street scenes, etc.) and how these categories, and what they portray, remain in circulation. Moulène approached the issue by misusing the terms and conventions of those categories to depict a given subject in such a way that was either subtly or directly unacceptable to that category. For example, Untitled (Pont d'Austerlitz, Paris) (1993) offers an ambiguously lyrical portrait of a street person, surrounded by his belongings, gazing at the Pont d'Austerlitz at sunrise. Image Blanche, Paris (1992-05-20), in turn, depicts a double portrait of a wall-eyed mother and her distracted child, finger in mouth, imperfectly framed in the image. In both cases, the discomfort produced by the photos exposes and tests the aesthetic, political, and linguistic parameters as well as the commonplace assumptions that implicitly govern the production and distribution of images.

A natural corollary of Moulène's investigation of circulation would be the idea of resistance—and this characterizes the whole of his practice, from its very constitution to its methodology to its subject matter. However, the artist is not necessarily interested in resistance as a revolutionary force, or resistance for the sake of resistance, but rather as a force of production and possibility. (Or, to put it another way, "I say No.") Moulène remarked in a recent studio visit, "so the viewer can say Yes.") Perhaps no other series more literally exemplifies this triad of interests and methods—circulation-resistance-production—than "Objets de grève" (1999–2001). This series consists of 39 photographs of objects (baby shoes, clothes, a watch, maps, etc.) fabricated by strikers while forcibly occupying their workplaces of production. Despite the essentially elegiac character of the series, Moulène shot the signs of resistance as an unassuming inventory of rare objects given a new lease on circulation (as images). "Produits de Palenstein" (2002–04), meanwhile, features contraband products from Palestine—bottles of orange water, chewing gum, cigarettes—and photographs them with a dispassionate objectivity on luminous white grounds. The series of images symbolically puts back into circulation items that are otherwise unavailable through international trade.

Finally, Moulène's most controversial series, "Filles d'Amsterdam" (2005), directly engages his preoccupation with the body: the body as object, as commodity, and the politics of aesthetics that govern depictions of the naked body. These decided unsettling photos, taken from above, unconventionally portray female sex workers from Amsterdam on their backs, legs akimbo, with their faces on the same plane as their sex. The blustery parity with which faces and genitals are presented prevents them from becoming pornography to be passively consumed, or pornography tout court, transforming them rather into active sites of conflict between viewer, convention, and image—and thus interrupting the flow by which such goods (images, bodies) normally circulate. In 2005, Moulène was invited to collaborate with the Louvre, the result of which was a newspaper supplement for the newspaper Le Monde. The artist selected a series of 24 ancient religious fetishes and sculptures of primarily polytheistic origin, shot them in natural light (once again, from above), organized them into a chain of association, and put them into circulation outside the museum in the supplement (Moulène had worked in the format of a newspaper supplement numerous times, notably for the São Paulo Biennial in 2002).

So far, so good. Even if, for the sake of brevity, I have had to forsake many crucial nuances of Moulène's photographic practice, it would seem as if we are dealing with a relatively coherent beast here, with nothing unmanageable or out of the ordinary. And yet were you to walk into "Ce que j'ai (What I have)," Moulène's 2009 exhibition at Chantal Crousel in Paris, or his 2009 survey at the Carzé d'Art in Nîmes, or his recent showing at the Cédric in Ivry (none of which feature examples of his well-known photographic series), you would most likely find it hard to believe that you were looking at the same artist. A good example of his radically disjunctive mode of working is his exhibition at Chantal Crousel. Featuring seven abnormal objects of a corporeal or geological nature, a constellation of plinths or tables, two photographs, one video and six drawings, as well as older works, the exhibition reads like an elegant, idiosyncratic, group show, discreetly saturated with all the perverse corporeality of the poems of E.E. Cummings and the interdisciplinarity of Bataille's journal Documents.

The effect was one of a strangely organic collection of various banal and technological phenomena organized around Bataille's notion of heterology, succinctly defined by Branden W. Joseph as "[...] what remains 'completely other,' constitutively unassimilable within general cognitive systems, whether they be advanced philosophical speculation or..."
COMMON SENSE. For instance, the sculpture Os non os (2009), displayed alone on a table and fashioned out of bones and epoxy paste, looked like a skull with no face, while nearby one encountered Head Box (2004), a small green box hung open on a wall at average head height (as if to say "insert head here"). Ostensibly an ironic reflection on authoritarian modes of seeing, the work could have also just been a comment on one-point perspective.

One particularly captivating photo, Régulier (2008), features an empty plastic bottle wedged between two rocks in what is presumably a natural outdoor setting. Perfectly centered, the uncomfortably expansive container both visually resists and seems manifestly resigned to its fate as an unassimilable object. Elsewhere, Chute d’escalier (2008, literally "stair leftovers" or, better yet, "stair ring") comprised a dark segment of wooden stairs unevenly reconfigured such that they seemed to wrinkle in the middle of the floor. An unlikely grotesque, this improbable bit of bricolage resisted classification with a tenacity that bordered on the obscene. To say it was enthralling says perhaps more about me than it does of the object. And yet I am not so sure: for to enthral is to arrest movement, to capture attention, to interrupt, and ultimately to remold the flow of circulation. To use the adjective "enthralling," however, might also be a bit misleading, as there is nothing spectacular about Moulène’s practice. If it produces fascination, it nevertheless does not disarm intellectually: the resistance at the heart of the work doesn’t brook passive consumption. Instead, it invariably produces more questions than it does answers.

Moulène often speaks about his work in relation to the body, about how his practice is an attempt "to build his own body." While such a notion is linked to the influence on Moulène of the French performance artist Michel Jourdain and his interest in the body as a site of social and political negotiation, it is also reminiscent of Antonin Artaud and his "body without organs." In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari transform the "body without Organs" into a strategy of circulation. They write, "It is not at all a notion, a concept, but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs; you can’t reach it. You are forever attaining it. It is a limit." This is what they describe as "becoming." Nevertheless, that is the Crozeel show, there was a work entitled Bœufel d’orgues (Mess of organs, 2008), which consisted of three objects, in addition to a drawing, arranged on a wooden display, one of which was a stone resembling a skull, another an amorphous kneel of clay with half a set of human teeth jutting out of it, another a piece of dark oak, which resembled a heart. The cumulative effect was as if this empty out were a mode of construction itself.

Despite the existence of such objects, it is also important to remember that Moulène issues from a tradition of straight photography: he perceives the street to be his studio, one whose center is inevitably unfixed and therefore continually shifting. Looking back at his past work from the vantage of his present production, I think it becomes clear that his practice is even less stable than it looks, that it is somehow organic and fluid. Although documentary, if anything is essentially registered in his work, it is a set of practices that seek to investigate and push against limits and resist dominant modes and myths of circulation, while nevertheless hinting at the existence of others. Exactly how this will add up or what it will engender is, as the French critic Jean Pierre Criqui trenchantly observes about Moulène’s work, a thing of the future—which is to say, it is both the source of a potential alternative future and that which can only be resolved by a time that has yet to come.
Simple portraits of products created in the spirit of protest, the photographs from Moulène's "Objets de Grève" are acute points of rupture—showing how meaning can be dismantled and realigned without necessarily dramatizing significance.

words by EMILY CORMACK
MONO: JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE

Viewed from above, human activity could be seen as a series of three-dimensional Venn diagrams with each sphere, a system. It is our onus to struggle between them, colliding and dividing as we progress through these sealed spheres within which we rotate. Whether they are biological, semantic, rhythmic, financial, visual, commercial, economic, or ontological, whether imposed or innate, systems are integral to existence. However, it is only when these systems fall, rupture, or spin from their axis that we become aware of their grip.

Within this network of spheres, there can be points of rupture so acute and potent that their effect ripples across the ecosystem, disorienting and displacing objects and processes. In his photographic series "Objets de grève" (Strike Objects), Jean-Luc Moulène articulates these breaking points through photographing objects that have breached the conditions and systems of their own production.

Created by disenfranchised factory workers embroiled in a range of industrial disputes throughout France since the late 19th century, the objects that Moulène photographs in this series were created in the spirit of protest and revolt. To create these objects, the workers commandeered the means of production, diverting the machinery ordinarily used to create commercial products, and reprogramming it as a stage of the worker's rebellion. A Manufrance frying pan, for example, was gilded with the words "Employment - Solidarity - Freedom - Justice" to commemorate attempts to preserve jobs at the Manufrance factory in 1984. A packet of Gauloises cigarettes was colored red and printed with the details of the workers' occupation of the Pantin cigarette factory in defiance of its closure in 1982. In all of the objects that Moulène documents, what was once domestic or utilitarian is transformed into a symbol of industrial agitation and unrest. Through the subtle modification of a pipe, a packet of cigarettes, or a newspaper, these objects shift from belonging within a commercial system of production to operating outside of any sanctioned economic system.

The front page of the International Herald Tribune, Friday 5 June 1987, which comprises one photograph in the series, was printed and distributed with large vacant spaces where photographs should be. These voids give the viewer, the reader, or the casual consumer space to think through the rupture in their daily read. The retoucher, whose hours had been cut, was on strike, and in this work, his revolt becomes emblematic of an increasingly rationalized work place, where hours and benefits are cut, as financial profit is valued over the worker's well-being. It is through these blocks of silence on the page that consumers are made aware of the mechanics of the systems of production and distribution and their role within them. The subtext of the newspaper's production and the vast human narratives within it is revealed through erasure. This judder in the usual flow of news and views destabilizes the newspaper's function, transforming it from a vehicle for daily news into a symbol of protest. Like a vocal inflection, this pause in the layout of the paper brings new significance to the meaning of this otherwise everyday object, shifting it from one sphere of meaning to another.

More generally, the objects that Moulène photographs in this series are representative of hot spots within the history of revolution. The objects cluster chronologically around 1948 and 1973–78, corresponding with the close of the Trente glorieuses in France—when France's economy grew steadily for thirty years—and the global oil crisis, followed by another spike in the late 1980s when the global financial markets crashed (Black Monday, 19 October 1987), and again in the early 1990s, coinciding with the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. They testify to the rebellion and defiance that percolated throughout Europe over the past 150 years, and can be seen to plot a subjective and intimate course through various upheavals and crises in recent history.

Lit by a dead grey light and placed uncompromisingly in the center of the frame, the objects are photographed like evidence. They are presented simply, economically, placed on backgrounds that seem unrelated, without any illusion of pictorial depth. The objects appear to have been found and placed before the camera, recorded for an as-yet-unknown significance. The objects are elevated through documentation, loaded with poignancy, and yet they are completely removed from the energy of their narrative.

Since the industrial revolution, the factory worker has become one of the most well-theorized professions of the 20th century. The treatment, status, and level of agitation experienced by factory workers both subjectively and collectively have come to be seen as indicative of much broader financial and political contexts. Factory workers' capacity as an active lobbying force has also been recognized and harnessed by numerous artists and theorists. Significant among the more recent commentators on this force is Antonio Negri, whose own activism led to his incarceration for ten years. Negri speaks explicitly of the power of the workers to generate social change in a contemporary setting, "What liberates history, what frees us from slavery, is living work, the capacity of work to oppose capital. And only
when this occurs is capital forced to assume democracy. The time has come to put an end to it, once and for all." In "Objets de grève", Moulène focuses precisely on this moment, when the workers have made a break to oppose the forces of capital and to use their work to revolt from it. These points of resistance sound out the depth of wider dissent, and represent the first wave to break on the shore.

While there is little doubt that these objects played an important role within various industrial disputes over the past 150 years, they also reflect the changing status of the object in contemporary society. As the forces of neo-liberalism diminish the potency of revolution by co-opting the language of revolutionary activity, we are also faced with the dramatic global rise in consumerism. "Objets de grève" reveals how the forces of neo-liberalism, coupled with the resultant rise in rampant consumerism, have depreciated the status of the object as a potential tool during revolution. As Moulène himself has stated, "We're producing fewer strike objects these days. In the 1980s, the product was the dominant mode of communication when a strike needed to be made known, we manufactured objects. Today, spectacle has become the primary mode of communication..." This community of codes has now been replaced by campaigns that are more media-aware, such as culture jamming and web- and social networking. Particular objects that signify revolution and protest in themselves are now comparatively scarce, indicating an increased dematerialization of rebellion, and enshrining Moulène's objects as momento mori for an age of protest that has passed.

A small ceramic pipe, for example, from the late 19th century, features three number 8's in relief on its bulb. The three eights refer to the late 19th- and early 20th-century trade unionists' mantra calling for an eight-hour work day, eight hours of leisure, and eight hours of rest. Although Australia and New Zealand passed a law assuring the satisfaction of these demands in the 1850s, France did not legislate this guideline until the Popular Front was elected to government in 1936. This utilitarian pipe therefore bears the stamp of a distant aspiration epitomizing a working class struggle that was not to be resolved for another four decades.

The valorization of an object such as a pipe—from utilitarian object to political symbol and call to arms—transforms its status as a commercial product and embeds in it a new load-bearing rhetoric. In the hands of the factory worker, the objects are shifted between spheres of meaning and their potential is freed for further signification. However, what does it mean for Moulène then to take these objects decades later and momentarily tug them from their resting places (in archives and pockets, and on mantelpieces) and reframe them? Collated as a series and presented independent of didactic captions, these photographs take on the formal qualities of documents within an archive. Positioned as such, the archival connotations of "Objets de grève" serve both to revive the object's revolutionary status and simultaneously to dull it, for as with any kind of archive, the energy of the original object is displaced. What was once so fierce, so full of fire is collated and itemized, sunk into the archive, which is, after all, another system, another sphere designed to corral human behavior. While Moulène resuscitates the factory workers' utopian voices for a moment, baring their narratives, opening them for discovery, their stories will fade as the viewer moves past the photograph hung on the gallery wall, just as the archivist's box is slotted back in the vault. And perhaps just as photography captures and freezes the everyday, empowering the photograph only to depict the appearance of things, these objects are only able to reveal a small portion of the actual events that they signify. Like fragments flaking from time, these formerly revolutionary objects, once they are archived within Moulène's "Objets de grève", become mere outlines of their fierce origins, revealing as little of their story as sediment in the rubbish heap of revolution.
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As described in his own words, Moulène’s practice stems from the 1970s notion of art as an enigma—hence the programmatic discontinuity and the constant evasion of realism, leading a descent back toward a sympathetic space.

material collected by FRANÇOIS PIRON
Jean-Luc Moulène continues to be recognized more for his photographic work than for his objects and drawings, which he only began exhibiting a dozen years ago. Some of his pictures are better known than their author, such as his Objets de grève, a photographic inventory of objects manufactured on the assembly line by workers on strike and sold on the black market to help finance their cause, the workers thus re-appropriating their skills and inventing a parallel circulation and economy. Both the economy and the circulation of objects are themes that arise frequently in Moulène’s work. His thinking on the subject of the circulation of images has led him on multiple occasions to occupy the pages of wide-circulation newspapers, such as the Brazilian daily on the economy, Valor, or Le Monde in France, and also to produce numerous publications in collaboration with writers in whom one discerns a kinship with his own practice, which is anchored in the literary legacy of Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Alfred Jarry, and René Daumal—writers who have produced a body of work both irreducible and accessible to many fields of knowledge, texts that are at once open to their immediate surroundings and founded on the radical negation of the world as it appears to us. A discussion with Jean-Luc Moulène involves a game of paradoxes, watchwords, and improvisations. Moulène’s rhetorical choreography fashions thought on the tongue and constantly redefines a line of conduct that seeks, above all, to avoid being tied down.

I became interested in art during the 1970s with the practices of bodycal art, or what was called “non-art” or “anti-art.” Photography was important as a record of a performance. I also became aware at that time that I had no to myself on show, or for occupying even a trace of the symbolic position of an myself that I would be a long-term performer, in the sense that presence is my concern is to authorize rather than to be an author.

Culture consists in the coexistence of the singular and the commonplace to singularize the artist-individual, certainly necessary in the 1970s at a society undergoing a process of normalization, has nevertheless today become capital, and consequently must be reconsidered.

My notion of art comes from this period of the 1970s, when it was thought that work was an enigma to everyone, and not just a secret reserved for a few, and that to be open to the whole of human knowledge—be aesthetics, to history, to psychotherapy, to society. The work of art is a focal point of all disciplines; it is shot through...
I am above all discontinuous rather than heterogeneous, and in this discontinuity I find a critical convergence with present-day modes of knowledge, which favor availability to the detriment of experience. I have never thought of my work from the perspective of a coherent whole. I think of my shows or group shows. As Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes said, "Me and me, that is millions!" I am interested in the work without art, rather than the artist without the work. I work on this hypothesis. I make works, but I am "on strike from art," and by the same reasoning, obligated to it.

A good proportion of contemporary art consists in introducing popular practices into a separate world. Art ennobles and celebrates these popular practices. Historically speaking, it was photography that forced art to take up a position: whether to regain the work by introducing the vernacular, or to withdraw from it into the self-sufficiency of radical abstraction. Photography forced the world into art, and the history of its practices is more interesting than the history of its authors, since most of its practices are anonymous. It might even have been considered a form of Outsider Art that had not been identified as such.

For my part, Outsider Art interests me because its productions, its works—if they have an aesthetic and an intentionality—exist prior to being regarded as art. This has to do with my own practice, in the sense that I consider my images and objects as tools, articles of use: practical above all else.

The point of departure of my work consists in images that have found a support in photography. I am not saying that I do photography, but that I make images, in the same way as I make objects, not sculptures, because sculptures are only a typology of objects.

What are the conditions of the work? My criteria are that it should be complete in itself, separate, and that it should bring with it, in such a way as to be plainly visible, all the conditions under which it was produced. But also that it should have a direct link with...
what it has been separated from, which is to say, the world. This separation I speak of is not pathological, but liberating. It is in being as impersonal as possible that I try to keep looking at the world. To separate oneself is first and foremost to elude the temptation of realism of moralizing. My wall images play on representation, while my objects play on presence. To go into the sense of impression or expression doesn’t interest me; rather, it is the tension between the two that matters to me. A work is an affirmation and, at the same time, a negation. It is a battlefield.

Duchamp said that he didn’t choose his ready-mades, but that his ready-mades chose him. Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment” posed the question directly: who decides? In this decision, there is a suggestion of faith; there is even something weirdly divine about it. As far as me, I avoid believing. In the same way, there is a double manner of thinking in Duchamp if the ready-made is an additional object in art, it is also an object subtracted from industry. The decision Duchamp took may possibly involve both aspects: to show, in art, that an object has been taken away from the world. But he was very careful to not make this explicit, and this enabled him to avoid making works that bore an ideological stamp.

I do not attempt to control the discourse and analysis of my work; on the contrary, I try to surrender all control. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I do this work before having the work invaded by different disciplines. No one discipline can entirely encompass a notion of the world, not even history, law, or economics. In my work, I attempt to cut diagonally through different regimes or separate spheres that divide the world into the areas of economics, politics, and culture. And these diagonal cuts enable me to obtain another figure. This kind of diagram helps me a lot. In tracing this figure, I try to strike hard enough for it to produce a swelling on the world. There resides my ideal for a work, as well as this idea of separation: a swelling, bearing witness to a blow, situated on the outside of the world, like an excrescence. One only has to hit hard and up it comes.

I never use the word “project” concerning my work; it is always simply a matter of practice. Becoming aware of your own practice is retrospective. There is no art, and no theory, that comes before practice. It is only when you become aware of your practice that you can begin putting something into form. When the first phase of the practice is of the order of feeling, allowing a return into the area of perception, it is then that a conceptual space
arises through the act of forming. The act of forming is of the order of technique. Academism in painting consisted in finding a proper equivalence between a technique and its subject, and this problem is still present in my own work. Technique does not come first, and yet technique is necessary, closely linked to the problem of the subject that it put in place. To tackle a technique does not imply mastering that technique. Such knowledge does not concern me, except when it becomes a matter of construction, not of discipline.

The difference between art and other fields that require technique resides in its methods: whereas the scientist or the mathematician publishes the results of his experiment, an artist has to produce something that is not merely the result of an experiment, but must also render the experiment available to others. This means that to create a work, having done the experiment, he has to go back to his sources, and the form created must make it possible to perceive and re-open a sympathetic space. The work consists in a descent back toward sympathetic space, toward the observer.

The form of a work has no stake in the game other than to make experience possible; it is a kind of rhetoric that helps to communicate thought. That’s why what is common interests me far more than what is singular. I share something with the other, and that shared something is my playing field.

Thought, to my mind, is an act that forces one out of oneself, not an imposition of personal singularity. This means that I must take into account even what I reject. It is by starting from the center, not the periphery, that one can gain an overall view of what goes on in the world. Photography is an instrument of frontality.

I am often reproached for my seriousness. Whereas I work very seriously to manufacture artefacts (which is, after all, a scam), to savor a dirty trick that hits the right spot. A dirty trick is this admirable, surprising, unexpected, and successful space in which one encounters truths like a set-up, in fact. I would say that my works lie on the side of serious force rather than grim ardor. My works examine the evidence, which is something really close to imbecility. Robert Filliou and George Brecht are members of my family, and with them I share the aspiration to create works that make me ashamed. The ones that make me most ashamed are, in the long run, the truest.