On fraudulence in art

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To Mattia Burattin, artist and imposter

Abstract: Contemporary art is frequently accused to be fraudulent. Usually explained away as an epiphenomenon, the experience of fraudulence is rarely investigated *per se*. This paper closely examines Stanley Cavell's stance on the issue, comparing it with the positions implied in Arthur Danto's, Nelson Goodman's and Richard Wollheim's aesthetics. Reflections on examples of fraudulent art in the history of visual art lead to partly dismiss Cavell's position in his own terms: fraudulent art can be part of the media resources which might allow an artist to "keep faith with tradition." The impression of fraudulence is then dependent on the ontology of contemporary artworks.

Keywords: fraudulence; contemporary art; Stanley Cavell.

o con frode o con forza
Machiavelli*, Istorie fiorentine*, III, 13

More than one hundred years have passed since the appearance of Marcel Duchamp's provocative *Fountain*, and yet the experience of fraudulence seems to be still almost inescapable to the audience of contemporary art, by now used to magnified ordinary objects, taxidermied animals, and faeces displayed as art, where once one found sculptures and paintings. The discussion of fraudulence, as an experience, has been usually inserted as an argumentative step in discrediting contemporary art; alternatively, fraudulence has been explained away by aestheticians as an epiphenomenon, rather than investigated *per se*. Yet, this might appear as a surprising statement: the examination of indiscernible copies and of fakes and forgeries has been at the centre of the ontological preoccupations of the most important representatives of analytical aesthetics: Goodman makes manifest the distinction between autographic and allographic arts through the possibility itself of fraudulently reproducing the work of the given category; Danto's aesthetics starts from questioning the difference, if any, between a work of art and an everyday object perceptibly indistinguish-

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able from it. However, even if fraudulence is almost universally debated along these lines, this is not the only way to interpret it: the artist Jacqueline Crofton threw eggs at the Turner Prize-winning exhibition by Martin Creed, explaining that "at worst, 'The Lights Going On And Off' is an electrical work. At best, it is philosophy."[1] Such extreme reactions belong to the same spectrum of less aggressive statements like "but is that art?", which is the obvious starting point of any reflection on the experience of fraud in the realm of the arts, i.e., the experience of a product which pretends to the art status – which is intended and is claimed to be artistic – but that does not retain almost any of the common traits shared by the canonical members belonging to the category "art." The philosopher Stanley Cavell has emphasised more than anyone else the centrality of the experience of fraudulence in our experience of art; his considerations will be our starting point.

1. *Cavell on fraudulence*

Cavell (1969) mainly discusses fraudulence in art in *Music Discomposed* and in *A Matter of Meaning It*, but also his contemporary reading of Kierkegaard might be relevant to the discussion of fraudulence: engagement with of religious thinkers (Kierkegaard, Tolstoy) gives to his treatment of the subject a particular nuance which is not conceptually inert, as we shall see. Moreover, and most importantly for a philosopher like Cavell, fraudulence has a personal relevance and a long-standing presence in his writings, even those unrelated with art and aesthetics. Speaking of his own various activities, Cavell (2010: 211) describes fraudulence as the discrepancy between the lack of conviction in producing his (artistic and academic) results and the conviction which those results seemed to be capable of generating in others. Elsewhere (249), one can infer a definition of fraudulence as a product that promises more than what it delivers and of the impostor as someone giving the impression of a command which is well beyond her reach. In Cavell (1969), however, the tones are notoriously more dramatic and the experience of fraudulence is said to be endemic of modern art, ranging all over the arts. The exacerbation of uncontrolled feeling, the magnification of seemingly pointless realistic details, the general search for "effects" are the symptoms Cavell individuates as the typical modes of fraudulence.

But what is fraudulence? According to Cavell, to define fraudulence we must consider the genuine and the fraudulent experiences together, since both are in

[1] BBC News, 2001, *Tate Egg Protester Faces Life Ban*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/1706637.stm>.

need of critical determination: the detection of the fraudulent requires the co-optation of exactly the same capacity that is employed to acknowledge the genuine. This, in turn, means to expose oneself to the risk of being betrayed by the object, to see dispersed the energy and the time invested in the object, which are usually rewarded only in presence of the genuine article. To trust the object means to trust the artist behind it, i.e., the sincerity and seriousness of its author: that is why Cavell speaks of "knowing by feeling" (192) where the knowledge does not work as a possible foundation for further logical knowledge, and the same result could have not been acquired through other cognitive routes like inference or testimony. We treat the object of art under the same conditions reserved to the people we trust and this fact has an explanatory role to play in answering the question "What is art?" (189). Cavell's insistence on the religious-like, quasi-mystical aspect of this experience – "while not deliberate" however "welcome" – does not come as a surprise, "for religious experience is subject to distrust on the same grounds as aesthetic experience is: by those to whom it is foreign, on the ground that its claims must be false; by those to whom it is familiar, on the ground that its quality must be tested" (191). Discussing the possible exposure of false art Cavell adds other elements to his description of the experience of fraudulence and, indirectly, to its definition. In fact, "showing fraudulence is more like showing something is imitation – not: *an* imitation" (189) where the contrast is primarily with the case of forgery which admits a decisive outcome if the fraud is revealed. No such conclusive discoveries are possible for the experience Cavell is trying to delineate: the experience of fraudulence originates exactly in those objects which produce the effect of the genuine or retain some of its properties. Paradoxical as it might seem, according to Cavell, fakes and forgeries are then expunged from the domain of fraudulence, or, at least, conceptually marginal to it.

Cavell rejects the objection of confusing a question of evaluation with an issue of classification, i.e., of mistaking cases of merely unsuccessful art too straightforwardly as non-art under the rubric "fraudulence." For "that works of art are valuable is analytically true of them," and modern art makes explicit as never before that "the question of value comes first as well as last" (216), and that value is not derivative as a possible consequence of an ascription of the "honorific status" of work of art to an object. Problems of fraudulence arise when we confront a "candidate" to the art-status, which professes to be a work of art, and which, however, maybe is just pretending to be one –, a suspect somehow corroborated when we do not recognize (or we barely recognize) anything pertaining to its relative art-form in the article at issue. Cavell's example on this issue is particularly illuminating: Anthony Caro's compositions are not properly realized in the same ways as traditional sculptures are (i.e.,

carved, casted, or polished), but they are simply organized together; they are not spatially continuous but rather discontinuously coordinated; they do not stand on a base but simply develop starting from the raw ground; contrary to a long-standing tradition, they are painted, or better, coloured, in a way that enhances the impression of a de-materialization of the piece; and any preoccupation regarding their texture appears to be removed. To accept Caro's products as art – hence as sculptures – means to accept no less than the disarticulation of the grammar of sculpture, the simple fact that some material is worked with some tools. Again, Cavell emphasizes the role of experience, the role of *his* experience, the fact that it is up to him to conclude (as he does) that the result is one of conviction, that facing a Caro shows that "the art of sculpture does not (or does no longer) depend on figuration, on being worked, on spatial continuity, etc." (218). While the tradition is solid, there is no need for artists to revise their forms of expression, but when tradition seems no longer capable of sustaining their expressive urgencies, a process of "purging itself of elements which can be foregone and which therefore seem arbitrary or extraneous" (220) takes place.

Remarkably, Cavell starts elaborating his seminal definition of artistic medium in the context of fraudulence: his notion of medium is developed as a response to "the need for a grounding of our acceptance" (220) of what pretends to be art but might not be art. Recognizing that the persistence of an art is not physically assured solely on the basis of its material support, Cavell explains the constant impulse of testing and exploring the conditions of existence of art typical of modernism and avant-garde art.[2] However, in stressing that there are no a priori criteria for defining an art, realizing that such "criteria are something we must discover" (219) in the continuity of our experience of that art, Cavell manages to de-Greenbergize (Krauss 1999: 6) medium-talk. More explicitly, there are no cogent reasons to follow the prescriptions of purity of the arts defended by Clement Greenberg – i.e., the concentration on just those experiences which derive uniquely on the irreducible properties of the physical nature of the relevant medium. Yet the medium cannot be reduced to its physical material; rather, it has to be conceived as "a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications": in other words, it is the discovery that some material can be purposely governed according to some strains of convention that makes artistic expression possible – "presumably the role a medium was to serve" (221).[3] Such move restores philosophical dignity and conceptual avail-

[2] See Cavell (1979: 72): "When […] an art explores its medium, it is exploring the conditions of its existence; it is asking exactly whether, and under what conditions, it can survive."

[3] Expression and self-expression, sometimes under the rubric of "voice" and again in constant

ability to the notion of artistic medium: "integrity could be assured without purity" (220). For Cavell, when conventions are felt as devoid of expressive power, "the medium is to be discovered, or invented out of itself." (221) Coherently, Cavell characterizes elsewhere "the task of the modern artist as one of creating not a new instance of his art but a new medium in it" (1979: 104) – an enterprise he calls *automatism* not because such procedure automatically ensures success or depth, but because "in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and deploying them one's work is assured of a place in that tradition" (*ibid.*). Conceptual reference to automatism justifies the modernist tendency to reiteration, since the discovery of a new medium is generative (like traditional media) of more than one instance – meaning that its significance cannot be wholly expressed in a single work of art. Moreover, while the traditional artist knows the range of handling and results feasible in her art before any attempt, and while the master is able to explore and extend that range, the modernist artist is looking for what works without such backing: the creation of a work of art is at the same time the invention of a medium and the liberation of previous conventions which the artist can no longer acknowledge as hers. Still, one might wonder why such definition of medium can substantiate Cavell's inclusion of Pop Art, Cage's evenings, Happenings and so on in the domain of fraudulence. Both Caro and Warhol present their work as investigating the possibilities of their media, as challenging their arts, as a way to explore a new automatism: why is the latter fraudulent whereas the former is not? The answer, according to Cavell (1969), is that Pop Art simply is *not* painting, "not because paintings *couldn't* look like that, but because serious painting doesn't": what could count as a relevant change is solely "determined by the commitment to painting as an *art*, in the struggle with the history which makes it an art, continuing and countering the conventions and intentions and responses which comprise that history" (222). Hence the amusements and pleasures derived by Cage's and Warhol's products are to be taken as part of those effects that merely mimic the experience of true art. It is the seriousness of the intention, the sincerity of the expression and the devotion to her art that make an agent an artist and her product a true and trustworthy work of art. Here, the religious accents in Cavell's discussion resurface: "the practice of art – not merely the topic of art […] – becomes religious" (229); dramatic change in the arts – in the hands of truly inspired artists – is "an effort not to break, but to keep faith with tradi-

connection with fraudulence, are one of the main themes of Cavell's general philosophical enterprise, often presented as "the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible, without falsifying itself" (1990: xvii).

tion" (206). However, this still leaves us without clear criteria (beyond the personal "knowing by feeling") and *pour cause*: there are no "proofs possible for the assertion that the art accepted by a public is fraudulent; the artist himself may not know; and the critic may be shown up [...] as an imposter" (190). It is at this juncture that Cavell's moral perfectionism and his aesthetics fuse (e.g., 1990: 61-2): true art derives from the projection of the engagement of the artist to her art. We have to trust the artist to trust the object and we have to trust the object like we trust a person, at our own risk.

2. *Remapping fraudulence*

As we have seen, discussing his borderline case (Caro's pieces), Cavell focuses on the systematic dismantling of some traditional conventions of sculpture, claiming that, although Caro's art does count as genuine (at least for him), Caro's procedure is not so different from that which has fraudulent art as its outcome – the ubiquity of fraudulence is in fact the point at issue. Since Cavell's time, however, the experience of fraudulence has expanded its spectrum and now more than ever the impression of fraudulence is enhanced by the fact that it is often felt as an intentional result of a deliberate course of action chosen by the artists. The operative strategies behind the (putative) fraudulent objects seem to be a useful classificatory tool to roughly map the field: we might call i) *mis-production* the methodical dismantling of the conventions governing an art, as seen in the case of Caro, and their local substitution with others capable of producing *the impression of an artistic* effect; ii) *pre-production* the tendency – typical of a mass-society and possibly culminating in Pop Art – to vulgarize and impoverish works of art, making them second-rate and serial, in order for them to be liked by the greatest majority of the audience; iii) *post-production* the interpolation of (more or less) canonical or well-known elements within an overall rearrangement of a "new" work of art, through the possible insertion of some variation, as in many examples discussed in Bourriaud (2002); iv) *sub-production* the realization of a work according to strict and non-interpretable rules, in a way wholly analogous to the production of a serial object, as it is the case, for example, with some elementary instructions for the production of wall decorations faxed by Sol LeWitt to his assistants, who, unlike the artist, were actually present in the work's exhibition site; v) *non-production* the non-issuing of any object whatsoever and its possible substitution with an ordinary object, as in the famous (and polemical) exhibition of *Empty Shoe Box* by Gabriel Orozco at the 1993 Venice Biennale; vi) *anti-production* the entire set of actions aiming to show that the artistic experience is the result of the behaviour of the artist which in principle transcends the artistic object, as in Performance Art

and Body Art. *Contra* Cavell I take under the rubric of fraudulence what one might consider one of its main sources: vii) *re-production*, i.e., the replication of a work of art ranging over fakes and forgeries. For its presence reflects the ordinary use (supposedly very important to Cavell as well), and, in addition, the constellation of fakes and forgeries is far wider than that of referential forgeries (the only ones mentioned in Cavell's papers and the ones which might be revealed incontrovertibly as non-genuine), since it comprises also inventive forgeries (Levinson 1990: 103), where what is copied is a style rather than a singular work – which, importantly, is part of the experience Cavell intends to single out and discuss. Of course, these categories are approximate and not mutually exclusive: fraudulent works can be found at the intersection of more than one of them. In addition, the experience of fraudulence is often intensified by a set of attitudes taken by the main players of the artworld: the allusive winking to artists/works/theories belonging to certain art-world circles and capable of reassuring the members of those same circles; the ostentation of cynicism towards the laymen who persist in not appreciating the artworks at issue; self-mockery and joke as defence mechanisms to defer dissent.

Cavell's (1969) central thesis is that "the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art" and that "modernism makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art" (188-9). The central thesis of this paper is that the fraudulent strategies perfunctorily enumerated above (including the examples given by Cavell himself) found their origin in the history of art (we focus uniquely on the visual arts here); hence they are not imputable solely to modernism's self-criticizing discipline – even though, as Cavell rightly sees, modern art has largely displayed them. Moreover, these strategies have been often adopted (sometimes retaining a fraudulent intention) by the light of the commitment to the art, as a way of "continuing and countering the conventions and intentions and responses" proper to art; in other words, as an oblique means to "keep faith with tradition" (206). Fraud, and its experience, can be seen as part of the media resources available to the artists. However, nothing in this paper is intended as a straightforward apology of fraud; our goal, rather, is to show that Cavell's spirit goes well beyond his letter.

Consider i) mis-production: the experimentation of new techniques in art implies the disarticulation of the media in search of some artistic effect, or the conservation of an artistic effect in changing conditions, like in the (technically) disastrous enterprise of the *Last Supper*, which Leonardo wanted to be detailed and suffused with *sfumato* – features proper of his paintings, but difficult to export to mural painting, as the conservation history of the work has shown. More successfully, Luca della Robbia, by developing the enamelled terra-cotta technique, managed to vividly paint sculpted reliefs, whose

lucid colours solved the acute urgency of appropriate and weatherproof architectural decoration. To see that (ii) the development of an art-industry is not obviously detrimental to the quality of the products, consider the case of the industry of souvenirs in XVIII century Rome which, under the pressure of contemporary *Grand Tourists*, changed over a whole production system, that of mosaic art, initially addressed solely to the decoration of the Saint Peter Basilica. The technique of glazed micro-mosaic (*mosaico minuto*) rose in that context with highly original results and its products rapidly spread all over Europe, mainly as objects of use; quality increased when it was clear that ancient ruins and landscape subjects should have been conjoined with the circular shape of *guéridons*, which were in great demand at that time (one of the finest examples is displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Loan: Gilbert.896:1). Seriality and audience's requests enabled Piranesi to explore his talent by working on his favourite subject, ancient architecture: his engravings and etchings range from the archaeological reconstruction of parts of ancient and modern Rome to the most fervid and atmospheric *capricci*.

In the late XVII century, idiosyncratic manipulation of antiquities was at the origin of the practices of conservation and restoration as we know them now: however, even Bartolomeo Cavaceppi (one of the most celebrated sculptor-restorers at that time and a close friend of Winckelmann's), who argued for the absolute value of the untouched fragments, still believed that integration was necessary when possible. This kind of antiquarianism, which allowed the sober reassembling of ancient statues, however archaeologically respectful, was momentous in the formation of the leading values of the rising Neoclassic art (iii). Cartoons were largely widespread in the Renaissance and allowed reuse, in particular in the cases of the stained glasses of churches and of the frescoes where the same subjects might reappear with small or no variations at all (iv). In traditional art, pupils or the *bottega* were often the only hands touching the object then signed only by the master – an operation conceptually not so dissimilar from that of the presentation of readymades (v); moreover, the increasing presence of raw materials in the works of art, even though with an entirely different significance as in *non finito*, was a practice well established in the High Renaissance. Luca Giordano painted a perfectly "false" picture *a la maniére de* Jacopo Bassano in order to impress king Charles II of Spain, who was disappointed of owning only one of a supposed couple of paintings by Bassano. Giordano did not properly forge an existing Bassano nor his motives had anything to do with selling: his aim was to show his virtuoso skills (*far presto*) in order to show the superiority and the inexhaustible creativity of the true artist (vi). In fact, perfect imitation of antiquity was taken as a mark of talent for artists in the past: when an artist felt not recognized by his contemporaries,

he could still gain credit reproducing an ancient model – or, at least, this seems to be one of the morals one can draw from the complicated vicissitudes of Michelangelo's *Cupid*. Vasari writes that the young Michelangelo sculpted a sleeping cupid which was carried to Rome and there fictitiously "discovered" and taken as authentically ancient; when its true origin was revealed, Michelangelo became a celebrity in the contemporary art scene and his career took off. Michelangelo's *Cupid* (now lost) later became a property of famous art patron Isabella d'Este, who was used to display it significantly close to another *Cupid*, then attributed to Praxiteles: rivalry with ancient models became an assertive way for talented artists to define themselves as legitimate heirs to the classical tradition, hence to be true artists (vii). In these last cases, emulation (of models, of effects, and so on) ends up in fraud *tout court*, a fraud, however, which has the liberating power of shaking the audience's and the critics' convictions concerning the art of their time.

This cursory list of supposed counterexamples to Cavell's thesis (cases where, from a fraudulent start, we end up with a trustworthy object), however, can be read as corroborating his main point (maybe with the only amendment regarding *re-production*), i.e., that it is up to you, that you have to decide to trust *this* work of art. Of course, you can partly decide that on the basis of the artist's engagement with her medium, and the result, when rewarded, of such "knowing in feeling" is "one of knowledge, or [with] the form of knowledge – it is directed to an object, the object has been tested, the result is one of conviction" (Cavell 1969: 192). Nevertheless, even this, in the end, is a function of the artist's sincerity and devotion to her art: in absence of shared criteria and of supporting conventions, conviction rests on an artist's sincere effort in producing an object we manage to acknowledge as, and with the respect we feel due to, art.

This line of reasoning, however, has been contested, as Michael Fried, who notoriously supports most of Cavell's theorizing, notes in a retrospective essay on his career (1998). Maybe signalling a more general cultural change (or a change of critical hegemony) from Modernism to Postmodernism, Hal Foster notices that "a primary motive of the innovative art of my generation is precisely that it *not* compel conviction – that it trouble conviction, that it demystify belief: that it not be what it seems to" (quoted in Fried 1998: 43). Though not persuaded, Fried concedes that Foster, not unreasonably, describes the contemporary artistic scene (including Cavell's threat of fraudulence) "as the replacement of one set of concerns by another, altogether different set." The idea of a paradigm shift in modern art, involving the foundational myth of the artistic conquest of appearances and, implicitly, the (debatable) Platonic conception of art as copy of a copy of a Form (again, an ontological fraud), has

been attractive for many, but probably found its philosophical champion in Arthur Danto.

For Danto (1997a), Andy Warhol was the first artist who realized that the time-honoured age of imitation of reality had come to an end and, very consciously, acted accordingly, isolating and celebrating as art an article of wide consumption. In this way, Warhol "revealed as merely accidental most of the things his predecessors supposed essential to art, and who carried the discussion as far as it could go without passing over into pure philosophy. […] Demonstrating that no visual criterion could serve the purpose of defining art, and hence that Art, confined to visual criteria, could not solve his personal problem through art making alone", Warhol brought the history of art to an end (287). The main consequence of the post-historical age inaugurated by Warhol is, according to Danto (1997b: 34), that "there really is no art more true than any other, and that there is no one way art has to be: all art is equally and indifferently art." If the use of an artistic form is no longer available to artists in the post-historical condition, its re-use counts as mention and has nevertheless currency. This is why "artists today treat museums as filled not with dead art, but with living artistic options. The museum is a field available for constant rearrangement, and indeed there is an art form emerging which uses the museum as a repository of materials for a collage of objects arranged to suggest or support a thesis" (5-6). The whole category of fraudulence (in Cavell's sense) is supressed and its experience might be conceived of as a difficulty in the epistemology of art, not in its ontology, which is completely resolved in Danto's theory.[4] Of course, the possibility of criticizing a work is obviously open, "but one is already treating it as art when one does so" (Danto 1998: 137). Danto's position is not too dissimilar to Nelson Goodman's stance on this subject: there is no room for insincerity or Cavellian fraudulence. Since the aesthetic experience derives from the proliferation of meaning whose source is the work of art itself, excellence and mediocrity depend on its cognitive efficacy (and, after all, "most works of art are bad" (Goodman 1984: 199)). Similar considerations are valid for what is sometimes considered as another form of falsification, *kitsch* – kitsch being a sort of impoverished and spurious beauty, basically relying on trite and predictable subject matter and stock and cheap emotional responses (accordingly, "kitsch" oscillates between aspects ii) and iii) of the taxonomy offered above). Kitsch imaginary can be co-opted in the art domain as in Jeff

[4] See Danto (2013:5): "When they see work that puzzles them, people ask, "But is it art?" At this point I have to say that there is a difference between *being* art and knowing whether something *is* art. Ontology is the study of what it means to be something. But knowing whether something is art belongs to epistemology – the theory of knowledge – though in the study of art it is called connoisseurship."

Koons' works, which Danto (1997a) does find "terrifying" and populating an "aesthetic hell" (280-281) but, in the end, capable only to transgress another boundary between art and non-art, remaining nevertheless art. Goodman simply seems not theoretically well-equipped to treat this ambiguity: Disneyland or Las Vegas are full of buildings wholly and highly symbolic in Goodman's terms but whose artistic value can be denied precisely on the basis of being kitsch, since they cannot count as true architecture, and remain (bad) architecture nonetheless (Lagueux 1998). Remarkably, Cavell never mentions "kitsch," preferring the term "fraudulence" instead, which seems wider in spectrum and retains the more pronounced moral component present in Tolstoy's use of "*poddelka*" (counterfeit), one of Cavell's main sources. However, even if the more (morally) neutral "kitsch" (used pretty much in Greenberg's sense, namely as academism, formulaic repetition, effortless enjoyment) has been widely accepted as a key term in the reconstruction of modernist art, the tendency to conceive of it as morally damaging is still frequent. Roger Scruton (2009), for example, convincingly presents the development of contemporary art in the terms of a paradox, whose articulation is (again) pervaded with a religious language: "the relentless pursuit of artistic innovation leads to a cult of nihilism. The attempt to defend beauty from pre-modernist kitsch has exposed it to postmodernist desecration. We seem to be caught between two forms of sacrilege, the one dealing in sugary dreams, the other in savage fantasies. Both are forms of falsehood, ways of reducing and demeaning our humanity." (192)

Is it possible to drop the somewhat confusing moral/religious element generally prevailing in such theses (in terms of the artist's devotion to her art and the audience's faith in it), while *conserving* the idea of fraudulence?

3. *Recalcitrance*

A good starting point might be found in the writings of someone who thinks that "art is more deeply rooted in human nature than morality", namely Richard Wollheim.[5] Wollheim (1993), too, compares the performance of a religious ritual with the creative process from which a work of art emerges, confirming that the way in which both the ritual and the creative process are performed are crucial for the intended result. However, even though he thinks that "inner veracity [...] is an aim of all ritual" (the creation of art included), Wollheim insists on the variability of the performance with an illuminating comparison with the

[5] Wollheim (1993: x) continues expressing surprise "that philosophers make little of the fact that, though good art is more likeable than bad art, virtuous people do not enjoy this same advantage over those to whom we are drawn primarily for their charm, or their gaiety, or their sweetness of nature, or their outrageousness."

code of behaviour: "our inner feelings might fluctuate, but good manners could be relied upon to give an even, inexpressive surface to life" (14). This idea fits with Cavell's intuition that fraudulence is a permanent risk: even if Cavell's line of reasoning tends to obscure it, traditional artists can be fraudulent (imitative, insincere) too, despite the automatic acceptance of their works; actually, they have to be, at least during the apprenticeship with the medium of their art. It is remarkable that Wollheim explicitly approves the Cavellian idea of the artistic medium as a material worked in a characteristic way, a way which has to be understood in the context of the art within which the medium arises. Wollheim (1980: 42), though, emphasizes that the election of certain seemingly arbitrary materials and processes as vehicles of art might be due to their "inherent unpredictability: it is just because these materials present difficulties that can be dealt with only in the actual working of them that they are so suitable as expressive processes." This feature of unpredictability seems to be dependent on the resistance of the medium to the artist's pure intentionality, demanding the subsequent "actual working" (*ibid.*). Wollheim attributes this point to an argument, given in a different context, that he firstly found in the writings of his colleague, Stuart Hampshire. After underlying the importance of imitation as a means of learning routines, customs and even language, Hampshire (1972) imagines to be asked what a particular person is like. Not finding the exactly fitting words to answer the question, he observes, one might turn to parody, reproducing some of the facial expressions, the idioms, the turns of phrase, the tones of voice typical of that person. If the result is successful in isolating the person's peculiarity, one might say that in a sense the task is accomplished and the answer given – given, of course, not in conceptual or discursive form. Hampshire comes to individuate what he dubs "a rough general law of revealing imitation" which is clearly exemplified in the arts of mimicry and parody: the parodist expresses more effectively the individuality of the victim "in so far as the likeness in speech and expression shows through an unlikeness, with the imitation superimposed on an alien and contrasting personality" (150). The essential nature of what is imitated – Hampshire continues – is then "filtered through the resisting medium": the perfect artificial reproduction would not serve the same cognitive goal as a revealing imitation. Hampshire himself concludes that in the representative arts "the medium, and the conventions governing the use of the medium, produce this tension between likeness and unlikeness in the imitation, which makes the imitation revealing" (*ibidem*). Parody, then, might be considered not just as a detrimental case of fraudulent imitation (more or less in the terms of (vii) above) but also as preliminary to the discovery of an artist's own personality, as Hampshire himself admits. Speaking of Proust, Hampshire (1964) claims that he "was always a brilliant mimic and parodist", that he became a writer just

"in virtue of his irrepressible gifts as a parodist", and that "he only slowly succeeded in escaping through parody into a style of his own" (15). In this sense, parody and imitation have a liberating and expressive power – a power whose effect Cavell himself experienced. In his dialogue with Danto, Cavell (2007) remembers when he attended the Charles Norton Lectures delivered by John Cage, a composer surely positioned in the pantheon of contemporary art (and in Danto's pantheon as well), and suspected of fraudulence in Cavell (1969). Cage rearranged passages extracted from a set of source-texts, recombining them according to chance procedures for the length of a standard lecture; the result was a sort of composition of sometimes meaningless, sometimes almost meaningful English sentences which Cage read in a theatrical setting. Cavell (2007: 34) found himself "charmed […] freed from the demands either of sense or of silence, punctuated from time to time by the wonder whether something intelligible had found its way to speech" and touched by "the force of revelation" when "a completely pure, unmistakable sentence" made its appearance as an "incredible gift." He became "almost joyful" not just because of the sensuous pleasure of the mise-en-scène but in virtue of its mimetic character (a "simulacrum") "of an ordinary lecture, of one of those uncountable hours in which audiences have sat without effective complaint through an hour-long talk, so much of so many of which are recyclings of personal or cultural source texts, parts of which are unintelligible and other parts almost intelligible, with here and there perhaps memorable leaps or slips of clarity" (*ibid.*). Even if Cage's lectures were not intended as art, this is, in a sense, a different answer to Cavell's own question back in *Music Discomposed*, "How can fraudulent art be exposed?": fraud itself can be used to expose fraud, in a way similar to the case, mentioned above, of Luca Giordano showing his virtuoso painting abilities to the king, who continues to admire and attribute aesthetic value to Giordano's work even after he has discovered that it is a forgery, or the wonder of Cavell when he found a meaningful sentence in Cage's lecture. I suggest to subsume frauds thus intended to that process of *dismantling* individuated by Wollheim (1974) in his *Minimal Art*: the artist is the first who perceives artistic conventions and means of expressions as eroded and hence operates a partial or total "obliteration or simplifying of a more complex image that enjoyed some kind of shadowy pre-existence […] according to his inner needs" (110). This destructive work might be so radical that even the survival of the medium itself can be put in question, in some cases enhancing the experience of fraudulence in the audience, in some other opening a different and refreshing field of experience. Of course, in Wollheim's article a pejorative evaluation is implicit, signalled by the term *minimal* and confirmed by the fact that some thirty years after the essay Wollheim (2012: 39) still found "the scene […] too overcrowded with figures who tried to get into the history

without contributing to the art." However, this assessment does not depend on the supposedly fraudulent inclusion of non-art in the domain of art, or on the lack of originality (i.e., on the fraudulent imitative nature) of contemporary products, but on the absence of actual work on the material within (or challenging) the possibilities of the relative medium, or on the attempt of establishing a new medium (which seems not really possible in Cavell's perspective). Even if actual work on the medium and the artist's challenge to its recalcitrance appear less impalpable of Cavell's sincerity – since they are somehow verifiable through the inspection of the object itself rather than through the examination of the artist's conscience –, they are not intended to distinguish fraudulence from authenticity, or art from non-art. However minimal, minimal art is still art.

4. *A new kind of fraudulence?*

So far, I tried to obscure the line between fraudulent and true art traced by Cavell: not all frauds are true frauds (purely imitative, in search of effects, and so forth), but some of them (equally theatrical) are intended to have a revitalizing influence on the relative art. Still, I did not account for the frequent impression of fraudulence in our experience of contemporary art. Preliminarily, it is important to stress that originality and its increasing value in the history of art is, in turn, an historical product: beyond the aforementioned relation with the ancient tradition (see (vii) above) and the idea that every epoch ideologically reinvents what is "classical" according to its current needs (Settis 2006), one must keep in mind, for example, that early collectors used to keep memory copies of most of the pieces they sold, and that artists used to make study copies of works of art for a variety of reasons which never included forgery. Although today we tend to project immediately the question of falsification on every new entry in the art-market, at that time the status of these sorts of copies was firmly auratic and no contrast with the original was admitted in the terms we use today. That contemporary theorizing on the arts takes this aspect as central shows how crucial is the issue of originality for our experience of art – an issue which, nonetheless, absorbs and confuses the other issues examined here and that we feel are bounded with it, such as authenticity, sincerity, and integrity. In fact, it is originality that artists claim to cling to in subverting traditional artistic practices, at the cost of raising doubts of fraudulence. In this light, our tendency to attribute fraudulence to contemporary art might be the result of our own projection, as in the case of memory and study copies, and maybe a sign that we have misunderstood the aesthetic subtleties of the present-day artworld. Roman statuary, for example, has long been interpreted in the frame of mind of *Kopienkritik*, in which Roman statues were considered just as copies

of Greek originals with no intrinsic aesthetic merit; only recently, scholars have proposed alternative ways of explaining the appropriation of Greek models according to Roman (ethical and aesthetical) values, reconsidering the practice of free and exact copies in a complex thread of allusion, parody and emulation – the successful rivalry with a designed model (Perry 2005). However attractive, this comparison seems unconvincing: as said, originality (and recognisability) are at the centre of artists' preoccupations and motivate their intentions in producing art so innovative that it is (sometimes) barely comparable with traditional art, hence raising questions of fraudulence.

Let's go back to forgeries, which, as shown, are central to fraudulence. Goodman's solution to the problem of two hypothetical indiscernibles, that we know to differ in terms of authenticity (which is crucial into Goodman's discrimination between autographic and allographic arts) is to underline the role that our perception can play in learning to see the difference between the two, preparing the present contemplation to eventually develop such perceptual ability, and giving rise to further doubts and questions that inform our current perceptual experience of the possible original work. Danto's rebuttal of this proposal reaffirms the idea that in the case of forgery as well as in the case of authentic art the relevant property is not perceptual, but historical, semantic, and intentional. Cavell's reflections on forgery just focus on the twofold need for sincerity and originality. But, what is wrong with forgery?

In answering this question, philosophers recurrently refer, rather surprisingly, to love (Soucek 2008). According to Francis Sparshott (1983) a similar question would be "What is wrong with free sex?" – "for, after all, one cannot say how there could be anything wrong with pure pleasure, provided that no personal bond is implied or violated" (253-54). Even Danto, who would have no problem in taking as art an ordinary object insufflated of artistic intentions but otherwise identical in all respects with other ordinary objects of its same class, speaks of appreciation of forgeries as "making love to a ghost who happens precisely to resemble the one we believe we are making love to" (1993: 290). Mark Sagoff (1978), implicitly, raises the problem of non-fungibility: "Love attaches to individuals and not simply to their qualities or to the pleasures they give" (453).

Here, I think, one might find the main source of the experience of fraudulence in contemporary art. Seemingly, there is a wide consensus among theorists in conceiving of the ontology of most of contemporary art as close to that of performance art and frequently characterized by audience participation – incidentally, the early Fried's critical pronouncements were animated by the same spirit. Peter Osborne (2018: 145), for example, uses the umbrella-term "postconceptual work" to label that kind of work which is "best identified with the *distributive*

unity of the totality of its materializations at any one time, rather than with the *element of identity* that links the distributed series of [its] visualizations," viz. its displays. According to Sherri Irvin (2013), installation art calls the traditional particularist ontology of visual arts into question, since it is better interpreted in terms of performances, which are sometimes works of art in themselves as in "jazz compositions that allow for improvisation" or as in "Glenn Gould's interpretations of the *Goldberg Variations*" (246). According to Julie Reiss (1999: xiii), in installation art "the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work" and Claire Bishop (2005: 8) thoroughly investigates the "modalities of experience that installation art structures for the viewer – each of which implies a different model of the *subject,* and each of which results in a distinctive type of work." Site-specific art can be seen as parasitic on the implied or contextual meaning of the location it is anchored to, when it is, namely when we exclude that "site" can sometimes be – as Miwon Kwon (2002: 29-30) claims – a "discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid, virtual," thus making the physical site wholly interchangeable. Readymades and Conceptual Art tend to erode the differentiation between artworks and ordinary objects and to present as artworks "dematerialized" objects, challenging the traditional emphasis on sensory presence, hence on beauty and pleasure. It is reasonable to think, with Bishop (2005: 17-20), that installations' scale and site-specificity "circumvent the market, while its immersiveness resists reproduction as a twodimensional image, thereby placing new emphasis on the viewer's presence within the space;" similar considerations hold for Conceptual Art, whose engagement of the intellectual faculty of spectators seeks "to revise the role of art and its critics […] at times also promoting anti-consumerist and anti-establishment views" (Goldie, Schellekens 2007: xii) in the domain of the art and beyond.

All these strategies aim evidently to obstruct the possibility of commodification of art, yet making the ontology of contemporary art more instable and precarious: instead of a particular, one might find an undifferentiated serial object or no material counterpart at all or multiply instantiable works (Caldarola 2020: 341), whose identity might change at any display or might be in need of completion by an audience. Such move, probably animated by the best intentions (at least, originally), while avoiding commodification, still prevents the audience from appreciating their products as objects of love, denying, in Richard Wollheim's words "a sense of what is special about art:" precisely the fact that "art is, strangely enough, something that we humans can love" (1990: 553). It is love denied, then, that accounts for the experience of fraudulence, which – *pace* Danto – is a question of ontology, not of epistemology. Love is a long-standing preoccupation of Wollheim's aesthetics – *Minimal Art* ends on a revealing reference on it – because it constitutes the link with his philosophy

of mind and moral psychology, since a person's sense of value is grounded in the power of love to generate certain favourable perceptions of an object. This is why Wollheim tries to safeguard it, warranting the presence of an actually worked (artistic) object according to a particularist ontology.[6] The evanescent, incomplete or merely substitutive ontological status of contemporary works, while remaining fully artistic, hampers this primordial drive, hence raising the impression of fraudulence.

If recalcitrance imposes renunciation of the artist's immediate gratification and pure intentionality, it also amplifies the artist's expressivity in the constant challenge to overcome the difficulties imposed by her medium. It is this inextricable bond of the laborious work on the medium and the urgency of human expression that makes art deeply rooted in human nature, in ways that go even beyond language and conceptualisation and that, in the end, "accounts in some measure for the pathos of art, certainly of all great art, for the sense of loss so precariously balanced against the riches and grandeur of achievement" (Wollheim 1980: 117). There are no reasons to think that this feature would not be open to contemporary art as well, in its direct engagement with the audience's experiences (and perhaps not necessarily in connection with a particularist ontology), once a stable medium were robustly established in art practice and, consequently, a deep human bond reaffirmed beyond any fraudulent impression of blandly vicarious simulacra or ironically imitative artistry. However, frauds and parodies can also play a role in facilitating this process well beyond the mere immersive entertainment contemporary art is frequently accused to be, working as a liberating power that opens up a new field of (sensuous or intellectual) experiences: starting by pretending to believe, according to another religious thinker – Blaise Pascal –, "will naturally make you believe" (*Pensées*, §233).[7]

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[6] It is remarkable that Wollheim (1980: 76), who obviously admits multiply instantiatable arts (like literature) in his ontology, tends to treat them, – through the type/token disjunction, as producing a sort of abstract object, insisting that the relation between a type and its tokens is "more intimate" than, say, that between a property and its instances (see Maistrello 2020). Interestingly enough, even Cavell (1979), who claims that the creation of a new work is simultaneously the invention of a new medium in that art which demands seriality, hence further instances, underlies that "each instance of a series maintains the haecceity (the sheer that-ness) of a material object" (117).

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