

BERTRAND LAVIER PRESENTS

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Since 1969, French contemporary artist Bertrand Lavier has been producing a body of work which he situates somewhere along a continuum “between the supermarket and the art museum”.¹ Following initial studies in horticulture where he trained as a landscape architect, Lavier applied the observational skills he honed there to the field of art at a time when conceptual approaches were *de rigueur*. After a decade of experimenting with language-based work, Lavier focused his visual acuity on everyday industrially-produced objects, deploying them to create hybrid forms combining artistic categories, media, and genres to explore notions of authorship and originality, representation and presentation, the real and the virtual, art and life. An exhibition of Lavier’s work might include any number of pieces from open-ended series, ongoing *chantiers* or *worksites* as he likes to call them; painted objects — a piano, fire extinguisher, or even an abstract painting by François Morellet, for example, slathered in thick acrylic impasto à la Van Gogh; *superposed objects* — a refrigerator atop a safe, a Salvador Dali-designed couch in the form of Mae West’s lips posed on a freezer, or an Alexander Calder sculpture perched on a Calder brand fridge; *Walt Disney Productions* — photographs, prints, paintings, and sculptural copies of their tiny counterparts in an imaginary Museum of Modern Art from a 1948 Mickey Mouse comic book; or *destroyed objects* — a storm-ravaged high-voltage electrical pylon, a crashed Alpha Romeo or Mobyette. These examples form a non-exhaustive list detailing some of the most productive *types*.

French critic Catherine Millet has contended that Lavier’s work has singularly succeeded in articulating how modern art is tethered to the notion of ‘exhibition value’, as theorized by Walter Benjamin in his seminal 1936 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility’ and subsequently ‘laid bare’ by later generations of artists.² Whereas Lavier’s contemporaries like Daniel Buren adamantly addressed the intrinsic relationship between the art object and its conditions of display — of the power of the container over its contents — by focusing a critical lens on the ‘frame’, Lavier took the same bull by the horns but approached it from another angle, integrating the object with the ‘exhibitionary complex’ by means of a conceptual rather than physical intervention in the exhibition space.³

To this effect, the individual works themselves often incorporate or embody basic elements of display — plinth, pedestal, mount, frame, wall, lighting, scenography. One instance of how Lavier exposes the contingent relationship between an artwork and its display is the installation *Untitled*, presented at the Parisian gallery *Pièce Unique*, in 1993 (fig. 1).

¹ *Bertrand Lavier, Since 1969*, was the title of the artist’s 2012–13 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou.

² Catherine Millet, *L’Art contemporain en France*, Paris: Flammarion, 1994, pp. 281–82.

³ Tony Bennett includes a chapter titled ‘The Exhibitionary Complex’ in his book *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 59–88.

fig. 1 Bertrand Lavier, *Untitled*, Galerie Pièce Unique, Paris, 1993.



Lavier applied his expressionist ‘Van Gogh’ brushwork to the gallery’s front window display with transparent acrylic, blurring the view of the sole object he placed inside the gallery: a red velvet rope hanging between two stanchions, also painted. Normally used as a barrier between the public and the work of art, the stanchions and cord stand in for the artwork while the window display, ordinarily intended to showcase its contents, creates a barrier frustrating vision and all but impeding view from the outside in, were it not for a small ‘peephole’ in the fuzziness of allover brushstrokes allowing passersby to peer into the gallery. This installation of ‘painted objects’ (a kind of still life) thus represents the viewing and commercial conditions of the art object. Another piece, employing a similar economy of means, balances spareness and spectacle — *Guzzini* (1996), a white minimalist monochrome square of overhead track lighting displaced from the ceiling to the wall. It frames and illuminates the wall, collapses painting and its display while literally casting light on their interdependence (fig. 2).

Fully embracing the curatorial role, as a producer of exhibitions, and in that sense a manipulator of objects, Lavier consistently undertakes responsibility for the presentation of his own work, and periodically, that of others.⁴ The activity of curating exhibitions, once considered primarily an extra-artistic domain presided over almost exclusively by museum professionals, has been progressively and punctually delegated to artists over the course of the twentieth century, such that

⁴ Most recently in *Merci Raymond* by Bertrand Lavier (27 May – 17 July 2016), a homage to Raymond Hains at the Monnaie de Paris.

⁵ Although in France the relationship between the academy and the museum privileged the appointment of artists to directorial and curatorial positions in institutions. See Gérard Monnier, *L’art et ses institutions en France: de la Révolution à nos jours*, Paris: Gallimard, 1995.

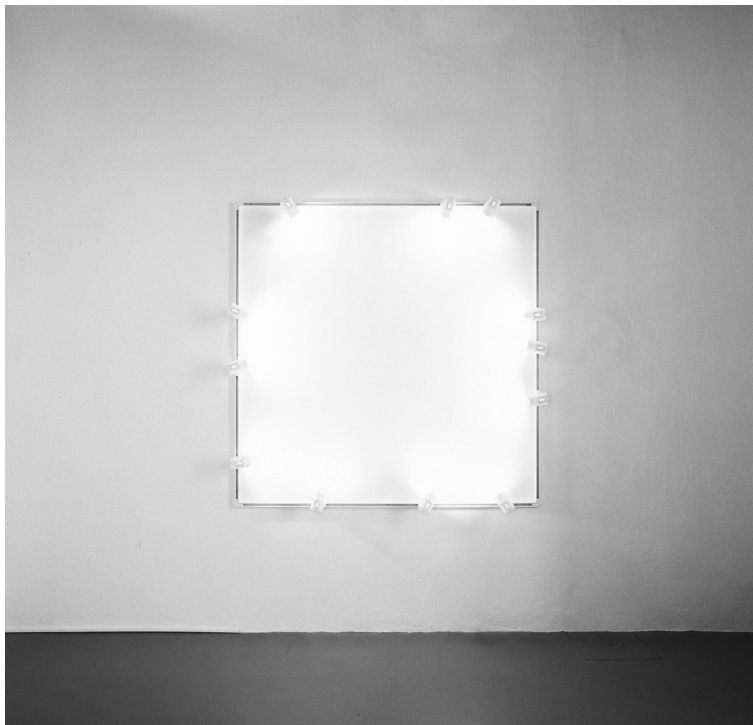


fig. 2 Bertrand Lavier, *Guzzini*, 1996, 12 lamps on electric rails, 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 in. © Bertrand Lavier. Photograph by: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano.

today, curatorial activity often achieves the status of artistic practice.⁵ The cult of the artist as curator — an authorial role hailed in contemporary art circles, but only recently marshaled by even the most traditional of art institutions and included within the expanded purview of art history as a discipline — has even paved the way for an emerging cult of the curator as artist.⁶ The multiplication of publications, exhibitions, and institutional programs dedicated to the study of exhibitions in the twenty-first century demonstrates this shift in focus and attention (witness the 2013 Palais de Tokyo exhibition *Nouvelles Vagues*, featuring fifty-three mini exhibitions by twenty-one emerging curators on view not only at the art space, but in thirty participating galleries across Paris).⁷ The blurring of boundaries between the artist and the curator, the work of art and its exhibition, pervades Lavier's oeuvre and constitutes an essential aspect of his approach.

Since 1981 with his solo show *Five Easy Pieces* at the Eric Fabre gallery in Paris, the artist has integrated curatorial activities relating to the exhibition of artwork into his practice. Lavier's creative process thus begins with the exhibition space, which he first inspects in order to determine which works he will include — combining newly created pieces with already

⁶ Capitalizing on the hype and growing interest in contemporary art, major museums such as the Louvre, invite artists to intervene and shake up static, worn narratives by reinterpreting and thus reinvigorating their permanent collections.

⁷ The Palais de Tokyo touted the show as "a unique opportunity to emphasize the emergence of this new definition of the curator, a position that has flourished alongside the artist for the past decades", citing a lineage of innovative 'exhibition makers', such as Harald Szeemann, Germano Celant, Jean-Herbert Martin, and later Hans Ulrich Obrist or Klaus Biesenbach; the former was a member of the selection committee alongside Jean-Hubert Martin and others.

⁸ 'Faites-vous repeindre by Lavier: Propos receuillis par Daniel Soutif' in *Bertrand Lavier: Conversations, 1982-2001*, Geneva: MAMCO, 2001, p. 24.

⁹ Bertrand Lavier, interview with Fabrice Bousteau, *Beaux-Arts Magazine*, no. 340 (October 2002), p. 107.

¹⁰ "I make exhibitions. I am not a producer of works. I don't have a studio. The works originate in relation to an exhibition. For me, a good exhibition presents a statement, a kind of exploration in a specific direction or not, whereas a bad one is a simple alignment on a wall or in space, the latest series of seascapes." Op. cit. (note 8), p. 23.

¹¹ Stemming from the growing art historical interest in exhibitions, during the 2013 Venice Biennale Harald Szeemann's iconic *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) was recreated in the Venetian palace that is now home to the Prada Foundation.

¹² The survey's enigmatic starting point of 1603 refers to the year English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, an advocate of the scientific method and the father of empiricism, was knighted by King James I. Curator Jean-Hubert Martin thus provocatively contends that the premise for *La Peinture des Martin* derives from the same rational, positivist methods as art history.

existing ones — and how they will be deployed. He compares them to characters that perform a particular role.⁸ Like a theatrical representation, the exhibition offers a stage where Lavier can also 'play' with both the spectator and art historical discourse.⁹ This method seeks to materialize an enunciation rather than present a grouping of recent work or a chronological progression, a strategy which purposely undoes conventional curatorial logic.¹⁰ As the exhibition is the predominant form for the work, the artist often reactivates former exhibitions, substituting different works for the ones he had used previously rather than recreating the show with the originals.¹¹ For his 2001 retrospective, titled *Bertrand Lavier: Exhibitions 1976-2001*, at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO) in Geneva, Lavier restaged fourteen of them, again avoiding any sense of chronology and eschewing a literal recreation as well.

The work that most convincingly conveys the centrality of the exhibition form is Bertrand Lavier Presents *La Peinture des Martin: from 1603 to 1984*, which debuted at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1984 (fig. 3).^{12/13} More of a project than a work of art, this exhibition within an exhibition occupies the shifting, mutually dependent territory linking art and institution.¹⁴ With *La Peinture des Martin*, which translates awkwardly in English to 'The Martins' Painting', Lavier ventures to make visible — via the presentation of a stylistically heterogeneous suite of mostly unknown paintings or works of art, all attributed to a 'Martin' — the underlying values, consecrating mechanisms, and adopted behaviors governing institutional strategies of display, underscoring while subtly sapping the power they wield over the work of art. *La Peinture des Martin* thus offers the point of departure for an analysis of how the exhibition form, integral to the artist's practice, constitutes a subversive strategy. Nearly two decades after feminist theorist Judith Butler weighed in on the contingent nature of subversive practices, one might wonder what constitutes subversiveness today when all attempts to upend the established order are subject to rapidly accelerating recuperation into an all-consuming system.¹⁵ Fully aware of art's limitations, Lavier operates gleefully within these confines.

Speaking in 1983 of the forthcoming *La Peinture des Martin* project for the Kunsthalle de Bern, Lavier revealed that the idea was to create an anonymous anthology of the history of painting.¹⁶ Tweaking the common rules for

¹³ Jean-Hubert Martin, then director of Kunsthalle Bern, authored the preface to the artist book-cum-exhibition catalogue devoted exclusively to Bertrand Lavier Presents *La Peinture des Martin*, which like its exhibition counterpart mimicked traditional curatorial codes. Following in the footsteps of Harald Szeemann, Jean-Hubert Martin was an advocate for the artistic role of the curator, engaging artists like Bertrand Lavier to shake up the established rules of museum presentation and even going so far as to claim that an artist need no longer fabricate objects to offer a novel interpretation of the real, but henceforth could display already existing objects "assembled in a certain order" to the same end. Signally, while discussing Lavier's position in a genealogy of artists who address the exhibition form — from the Surrealists to Marcel Broodthaers and Daniel Spoerri — Martin fails to mention Marcel Duchamp's crucial contribution to this corpus of artist-cum-curators. In her recent book-length study, Elena Filipovic focuses a scholarly lens on this major blind spot in the voluminous critical literature devoted to Duchamp, thereby inscribing the artist's canonical works within his polyvalent practice. See Elena Filipovic, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2016.

¹⁴ See: Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham, (eds), 'Tracking the Art of the Project: History, Theory, Practice', in: *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005, pp. 1-30.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge, 1999, p. xxi. "I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I not believe that such judgments endure through time ('contexts' are themselves posited unities that undergo temporal change and expose their essential disunity). Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricality as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value. The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to."



fig. 3 Bertrand Lavier Presents *La Peinture des Martin: from 1603 to 1984*, Installation view. © Kunsthalle, Bern, 1984.

organizing a group show (by artistic movement, style, period, theme), Lavier adopted a droll constraint: works by artists with the same last name — Martin, the most widespread French surname.¹⁷ This strategy deftly operated a leveling effect, whereby unknown, minor, and acclaimed artists were shown side by side, eliminating any notion of hierarchy.¹⁸ Arranged in alphabetical order by first name, the hanging also interrupted any chronological sweep that could have conformed to the standard linear development of art history.^{19/20}

The installation proposed a counter-history of the medium, a foil against which the artist staged his own production, hinging on painting's claim to representation and the institution's monopoly on presentation. Throwing down the gauntlet to the established history of painting since the Renaissance, the exhibition within an exhibition also challenged the conditioned reflexes of the average art museum visitor, who accustomed to established institutional codes of display but prevented from relying on a label with a name to determine a sort of pedigree, was thereby forced to do a double take. Sparking what Lavier calls a 'short circuit', the ensemble left the viewer stranded in a sort of limbo, unmoored from established curatorial codes, art world conventions, and spectator expectations, especially given the contemporary contexts within which it was presented. The visitors would no doubt have been dumbfounded to find themselves suddenly stepping into a gallery, which

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'L'art du commentaire de Bertrand Lavier. Interview with Christian Besson, Xavier Douroux et Franck Gautherot', in: *Bertrand Lavier: Conversations, 1982-2001*, Geneva: MAMCO, 2001, p. 22. In another conversation with Catherine Francblin, Lavier relates *La Peinture des Martin* to some of his first conceptual works exploring the relationship between language and reality, such as *Café de la Gare* and *Hôtel des Voyageurs*, photography-based exposés, which demonstrate the differences between things with the same name. Bertrand Lavier interviewed by Catherine Francblin, 'Redonner à la Tour Eiffel la place qu'elle mérite', in: Catherine Francblin, *Bertrand Lavier*, Paris: Flammarion, 1999, and republished in *Bertrand Lavier: Conversations, 1982-2001*, Geneva: MAMCO, 2001, p. 176.

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A brief survey of the most common surnames according to Wikipedia ranks 'Martin' as #1 in France, #31 in Belgium, and #17 in the United States. Variants of the name 'Martin', such as the Spanish 'Martinez' or the Italian 'Martini' were excluded from the selection. The commonality of the last name 'Martin' would thus presumably ensure a large enough group of works from which to make a selection. Given Jean-Hubert Martin's complicity and undeniable support for the project, the choice of the surname seems hardly coincidental although Lavier downplays the connection, claiming that the image on an old ad for the Ripolin brand of acrylic paint triggered the idea. 'Redonner à la Tour Eiffel la place qu'elle mérite', Op. cit. (note 16). Naming, and its commercial counterpart branding, form a thread running through Lavier's work as the reference to dual authorship in the title attests.

looked utterly familiar yet offered a stark visual contrast to the rest of the show featuring Lavier's language and object-based works.

In staging staging, exhibiting exhibition, Lavier exposes its constructed character and reality-conditioning nature, a manner of also registering how the real is engendered through and in art. One might contend that in mobilizing the institutionally-sanctioned procedures to subversive ends that Lavier's tactics play into, rather than against, those normative systems, an ambiguity that Jacques Rancière identifies in contemporary installations and exhibitions, which "play on the fluctuating boundary between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning, and between the form of the exhibited work and that of the instituted space of interaction."²¹

In Bern, *La Peinture des Martin* was a group show within a one-man show, anchoring Lavier's oeuvre with respect to the history of Western painting and thus signaling his major problematic at the time — a critical dialogue with the pictorial tradition. And as Rancière points out, the installation underscored the artist's conceptually-based concerns related to authorship and meaning. The second and only other iteration to date of the piece was reactivated in the context of *Voilà: Le Monde dans la Tête*,²² held at the Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris from June through October 2000 in celebration of the new millennium.²³ Titled *Bertrand Lavier Presents La Peinture des Martin 1900-2000*, the startling group exhibition within the larger group show reinforced the eclectic and encyclopedic dimension of *Voilà*, which presented a collective inventory of the twentieth century according to contemporary artists (fig. 4). Not only did Lavier revisit the Martin piece, but he and Christian Boltanski also performed dual roles in *Voilà*, as exhibiting artists and co-curators in charge of selecting the participants and determining the spatial arrangement of their contributions.

Located roughly midway through the marathon trajectory of sixty installations by international contemporary artists, the large gallery featured a traditional presentation of mostly paintings, some sculpture and video on monitors. Despite Lavier's updated selection of Martin works, which effectively recast the ensemble, situating it within the history of twentieth-century modern and contemporary art, the jarring yet ordinary display begged similar questions: about the contemporaneity and pertinence of the Martins' work and its resonance with that of the other artists, about attribution, genealogy, originality, aesthetic judgement,

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Lavier points out how the arbitrary character of the Martin selection produces a vision of rather mediocre painting, with a few exceptions like Agnes Martin. Op. cit. (note 16); Elsewhere he also explains how the commonplace nature of the surname insured a stylistically heterogeneous grouping across a variety of painting genres, which the name Smith would have produced a similar cross section in an Anglophone context. 'Redonner à la Tour Eiffel la place qu'elle mérite', Op. cit. (note 16) and 'L'art et la manière de disposer de l'art. Interview with Mo Gourmelon', in: *Bertrand Lavier, Conversations*, Op. cit. (note 16), p. 51.

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This basic ground rule had also determined the order of hanging for the 1917 Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, the alphabetical order commencing with the letter 'R' according to the random procedure of picking out of a hat. Echoes of Marcel Duchamp reverberate through Lavier's oeuvre and while this lineage no doubt seems obvious in Lavier's choice of industrially-produced objects of mass consumption, the artist recuses the operative process underpinning the Duchampian readymade whereby the object 'switches function', foregoing its original function while adopting that of an art object. According to Lavier, unlike the readymade, the objects he employs retain their initial function, such that a piano or a radio can still be played, so to speak, even after the object has been essentially removed from its original sphere of use. Therefore, while the status of the readymade as art object was contingent upon relinquishing its non-aesthetic function as well as appropriating the institutional and curatorial codes guaranteeing its aesthetic status, not merely the gesture of selecting and submitting the ordinary commodity as a sculpture.

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Although the randomness of the alphabetical hanging eliminated any degree of curatorial subjectivity, Lavier mentions that the effect was not unlike Rudi Fuchs arrangement of painting and sculpture for *documenta 7* in 1982, which did not follow a chronological, stylistic, or geographical order. 'L'art et la manière de disposer de l'art. Interview with Mo Gourmelon' in *Bertrand Lavier, Conversations*, Op. cit. (note 16), p. 51.



Fig. 4 Bertrand Lavier Presents *La Peinture des Martin, 1900-2000*, Installation view. © Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris, 2000.

typologies, hierarchies and narratives. What was the bewildering yet déjà vu and motley collection doing in a cutting-edge contemporary art show?

What exactly was so disarming about the seemingly banal display of painting, sculpture, and video? By what criteria, if any, could the piece be considered subversive? Striking a dissonant chord with the other installations on view, many of which were sweeping in scope within self-contained galleries, *La Peinture des Martin, 1900-2000* purportedly offered a survey of art spanning the century that had just ended, a quasi-permanent collection rotation, such as visitors might encounter on the museum's lower level, with a twist. Rather than the customary teleological development of styles and movements from Fauvism to Cubism, Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism to Conceptual Art and so on, the alphabetical order imposed an erratic and nonsensical progression.

While disrupting rigid categories and classifications, the random sequence opened up a space for unimaginable juxtapositions of utterly unfamiliar artworks. Initial confusion quickly turned to consternation, a common reaction for viewers, and even Lavier himself, when confronted with the work.²⁴ This is also the desired effect and a positive criterion by which the artist measures its efficacy. Lavier readily argues that for something to be interesting it must have shock value, but as to whether it can be productively subversive is questionable, since it has long been recognized that shock tactics and scandal no longer operate in opposition to convention but rather are absorbed into it.²⁵ Perhaps an aesthetic jolt

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Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. by Steven Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, pp. 59-60. It is interesting to note that Rancière actually discusses both iterations of Lavier's *La Peinture des Martin* in regard to this observation. He also notes the shifting significance of the piece conditioned by the context in which it was presented. Thus, situated within *Voilà's* thematic taking stock of the passing century, amongst the seemingly exhaustive array of artist collections and inventories, the Martins installation registered an additional memorializing meaning.

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This limited repetition of *La Peinture des Martin* is distinct from Lavier's *chantiers* or *worksites*. In a 1999 conversation with Catherine Francblin, who published the first monograph on the artist the same year, Lavier confides that he would like to restage it in the context of a retrospective.

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The title of which pays tribute to Harald Szeemann's aforementioned exhibition, whose full title was *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*.

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Eric Troncy describes the experience as a cross between an amusement park ride and a virtual reality game, which more aptly describes *Walt Disney Productions* than *La Peinture des Martin*. 'Entretien avec Eric Troncy', in: *Bertrand Lavier: Conversations, 1982-2001*, Geneva: MAMCO, 2002, p. 139.

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Ibid., p. 138; Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985, pp. 25-26.

would more accurately describe what occurs. The striking visual dimension of Lavier's work unleashes a conceptual chain reaction whereby the viewer experiences a range of sentiments — from humor to intrigue and perplexity. The initial flash lingers, not so unlike the way looking at the sun or a bright light leaves an imprint on the retina, the afterimage triggering mental speculation. This seems to be what Lavier means when he reverses the Duchampian dictum by declaring that it's the work of art that makes the viewer.

Orchestrating his work with equal panache and restraint, Lavier adeptly captures the viewer's attention and captivates him by artfully rendering visible the overlooked or ignored. Practicing an art of appropriation (he claims an affinity with the work of Sherrie Levine) while at the same time critiquing it, and thereby exposing the profoundly schizophrenic nature of art, Lavier puts his finger on this tension by elaborating a system of 'visual thinking', in which the simplicity and fragility of his interventions productively cast doubt in the mind of the viewer.²⁶ Engaging with this ambiguity or undecidability of meaning, claims Rancière, is the only remaining subversive tactic: "to suspend, in a society working towards the accelerated consumption of signs, the meaning of the protocols of reading those signs".²⁷

For Lavier, subversion is a mindset rather than a specific action. Unlike revolution, which has a beginning and an end, it's ongoing.²⁸ What is subversive about his practice is that it never ceases to shake things up, all the while adhering to a finely-tuned approach that remains conceptually consistent yet visually provocative and proliferating. The artist develops a speculative mode of addressing the imbricated relationship of painting to the ready-made, the work of art to its conditions of display, such that his production is often hybrid; container and content, presentation and representation eliding in the form of an autonomous yet contingent work of art. Inherently bound to its framing devices yet paradoxically untethered from institutional authority, the artwork retains its status beyond the limits of art world venues, insists the artist. Converging at the intersection of two coordinates — horizontally, the traditional categories of artistic classification such as medium and genre, and vertically, the para-artistic aspects like art historical discourse, presentation devices, and curatorial practices — his oeuvre surreptitiously gains currency and potency by circulating within the ever-widening sphere of contemporary art. In an economy of recycling and repurposing threadbare modern art clichés through visual puns and sly juxtapositions, Lavier harnesses extraordinary generative combinatory logic to destabilize and refresh artistic paradigms, producing works whose agility and mobility engender their endless reactivation in the fertile field.

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Hal Foster has argued for the necessity for art to expose rather than reconcile these contradictions in the present, indeed to intensify them. Ibid., p. 179.

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Jacques Rancière, 'Problems and Transformations in Critical Art', in: Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation*, London: Whitechapel, 2010, p. 89.

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'Redonner à la Tour Eiffel la place qu'elle mérite', Op. cit. (note 16), p. 165.

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