

ON BEING REDUCED TO THE IDENTITY OF ONE'S MAKER

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Full disclosure: when wearing an art writer's hat, I usually don't care much about what the artist has to say about his or her own work. The best thing an art writer can do—"best" being defined as the most useful thing for the artist whose work is under scrutiny—is give an uncluttered but probing response to the work at hand, such that the artist, upon reading it, thinks either, "yes, that's exactly what I meant!" or, conversely, "I can't believe I didn't see that in the work before..."

This is inconvenient when one must discuss work one has not seen, in that it poses the obvious logical problem of there being nothing there (yet) for the art writer to respond *to*. Such is the case here; *S.A.P.* is, after all, a performance, and (to paraphrase *The Enigma of S.A.P.*'s H. and G.) is therefore too messily excessive to fit into any standard art-criticism mathematics.

S.A.P. proposes a consideration of the packaging of art, of its performative recipe—an expression, so to speak, of a nonexistent Fluxus score instructing us how to *be* in an art gallery.

By an odd coincidence, I happened to discover an old note in my phone the other day. It reads, "FAUX / and French authenticity." I forget writing it—perhaps I'd had too many hors d'oeuvres at an opening just before—and yet I can't help but find it relevant.

"Faux," adopted into English from French in the 1600s, means false, fake, or fraudulent... or it *almost* means those things. Such a translation seems simple enough in everyday use; one might be described as wearing a bit of costume jewellery in the form of a *faux* pearl necklace... but we would never say that an accused white-collar criminal is guilty of *faux* accounting.

Where is the difference? It lies entirely in the nature of the performative gesture, and in the logical problem of authenticity.

Why would we use the French "faux" instead of its English synonyms? In short, precisely *because* it's French. We attach many things to French-ness, but the synthetically

virtual does not seem to be one; even the language itself, thanks to L'Academie Française, is bound up in authenticity, being prescribed officially such that—more than any other language—one can know exactly which words or phrases (and therefore which thoughts) are really, truly, genuinely French.¹ To other Western cultures, France represents materialism², its denizens luxuriating in the sheer sensuous pleasure of actual wine, actual cheese, actual clothing and actual kissing. French-ness is real-ness.

So it's not much of a leap to realize that the word “faux” offers a delicious compromise between the literal and the figurative; literally, it exposes a falsehood or a fakery... but figuratively, it colours its subject *avec une Française actuelle*,³ and with all of the vicarious authenticity that suggests. *Faux*—that transformative performative⁴, that fusion of pretense and embodiment—lets one both get away with a fraud and confess to it, at the same time.⁵

Such a paradox, too, is found in the exhibition-as-performance of *S.A.P.* The paintings are bluntly, obviously paintings—real paint, probably applied with real brushes—but they're also fake paintings by a non-painter; they're not quite satirical, but neither are they earnest. The paintings represented in the video *The Enigma of S.A.P.* are the opposite. They contain no paint, and as digital representations of hypothetical paintings they are not real, either. But they feel real-ly digital, inasmuch as they employ 8-bit colour and low resolution and a kind of napalm-kitsch colour scheme. It might be most useful to think of them as actors; embodied as they are, they perform the roles of fictional paintings. *S.A.P.*, on the whole, a Faustian endeavour; with an earnest nod to Artifice (or fakeness, or theatricality, or mockery) and a playful wink at Authenticity (or honesty, or pragmatism, or sincerity), it pits both its masters against each other in the hopes of showing us a way out.

¹ Much to the chagrin of the Post-Structuralists

² To elaborate on this term, I point to Alan Watts, who has claimed, rightly, that if America were a materialist culture, it wouldn't care as much as it does about virtual/ideological things such as money, status, and broadcast entertainment.

³ I am aware that this is probably not actual French.

⁴ I owe this turn of phrase to Eve Sedgwick, though I suspect I may be bastardizing it utterly.

⁵ ... while authenticity usually operates in the opposite direction—"genuine leather," for instance, is always suspect.