Allow me to begin with an anecdote that I have myself experienced, and which stands, in large part, at the origins of the reflections I would like to share with you tonight.

Some years ago, the Committee of Social Thought at the University of Chicago, where I taught for one semester per year, organized a colloquium on contemporary art. Among the critics invited were the major apologists of contemporary art. Arthur Danto, the famous philosopher and aesthetician, was obviously part of them. He is the author of such bestsellers as *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, *The End of Art*, and *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World*.

In the vast neo-gothic lecture hall where the presentation took place, Danto entered like a guru with flowing white hair and a Mao collar. One could have taken him, in the Paris of the 1930s, for an artist from Montmartre, rather than a philosophy professor of the Sorbonne.

The moment of his talk having arrived, the Master spoke up and explained to us in Hegelian terms the death of Art and the end of History, then, by taking a brilliant turn of dialectical reversal, he described the vast territory thus liberated for Art of the postmodern and post-historical age, in which we were fortunate enough to live.

In this era liberated from all straitjackets, Art prospers like never before in the ruins of the ancient art that preceded it. The new creativity of image makers, replacing the ancient artists, found one natural leadership figure, like Michelangelo had been a leader for the Mannerists in Vasari’s *Lives*. While Michelangelo selected as his motto Horace’s *Ut picture poesis*, Andy Warhol multiplied – thanks to the magic wand of the contemporary – the *readymade* of Marcel Duchamp into so many three-dimensional masterworks, exhibited by galleries and museums in limited-edition series offered to consumption by an elite of billionaire collectors. The Brillo box, for example, in an instantaneous transformation of the banality of consumer society’s artifacts, became the star of the Art market.

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1 Implied reference to the “generation of 1968,” whose intellectual leaders, especially in France, often claimed Maoism as an ideological model, understood as an umbrella term for a wide variety of ill-defined anarchist and communist currents at the time.

2 Reference to the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

3 Latin, literally: “As is painting so is poetry.” Horace’s saying has often been interpreted to mean that poetry is like painting.

4 Andy Warhol famously bought Brillo boxes in the supermarket, signed them, and sold the “artwork” thus created in galleries. In the process, the Brillo box became synonymous with Warhol’s Pop Art. By doing so, he recycled ideas first pioneered by Marcel Duchamp during the first of half the twentieth century in his *readymades*. 
Once the erudite words of the Master, punctuated by polite applause, had come to an end, I noticed to my right a young couple of a rare beauty that did not applaud. The moderator of the session called for the ritual question and answer period. My neighbor got up immediately and, with a hand gesture, demanded to speak; by virtue of his natural authority, he attracted the attention of everybody in the room: “Dear professor, I am a poet, not a philosopher as you are, and I do not understand your reduction of Art to its own concept and its dependence upon ‘the last stage of the discursive debate’ inside what you called the actual ‘art world.’ As a poet, I prefer artworks to their concept, if any, and I do only consult, in order to enjoy them or not, my own sentiment and not at all the last conceptual trend prevailing in the ‘art world.’”

Having finished, he sat down again next to his splendid companion. Professor Danto was obviously not used to being contested. He allowed himself some moments of silence, then, turning to his challenger, he exclaimed: “You confound two different things, one is my public task as an authority in philosophy and as an expert in aesthetics, to determine the importance or the insignificance, of such and such artist, such and such installation or performance, in such and such gallery, along the actual Art context and contest. But I am also a private person, with his personal taste, and I can assure you that in this capacity, I prefer by far... Chardin5!”

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5 Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779), French painter best known for his small-format, meticulously rendered still lifes and portraits of children.
Very important and celebrated French poets have shared the sentiments of my neighbour from the Chicago colloquium. In 1855, Théophile Gautier showed himself severe towards German-style “Aesthetics,” a philosophical discipline profoundly alien to the French approach to artistic questions, or the way in which Gautier thought of art criticism. The metaphysical discourse about the arts that German aestheticians hold legitimate engendered, according to the poet, a certain form of art, philosophical in itself, which he qualified as “aesthetics of art” and about which he said: “Germany indulges itself in the aesthetics of art. In this country, people do not paint, they write ideas.”

During the same time, Baudelaire showed his support for Gautier, whom he greatly admired, dedicating, in 1861, his collected poems Les Fleurs du mal to him. The periodical L’Art romantique published, under the title L’Art philosophique, excerpts from the unpublished papers left after the author’s death, which contained a violent diatribe of the poet of the Phares against German aesthetics and their effects on the arts. Baudelaire asked:

“What is philosophical art according to the Germanic school of thought? It is a visual art that pretends to replace the book, which is to say to strike up a rivalry with the printing press so as to teach history, morals, and philosophy.” Baudelaire meant to denounce in this manner what today’s poet Yves Bonnefoy calls “conceptual thought,” which, when applied to the arts, arrests them in their development and impoverishes them of the suggestive magic capable of yielding, in the words of Mallarmé, “rewards making up for the defaults of languages.”

Reason and the faculty of drawing conclusions, which belong to the realm of the book and the written word, sterilize and desiccate the arts, while making them loose “their proper vocation for sentiment and reverie.” And, like a true prophet of the chaotic situation of the arts today, Baudelaire added:
“Is it an inevitability of today’s decadent situation that every art form longs to intrude on the territory of its neighbor: that painters introduce musical scales to painting; sculptors apply color to three-dimensional work; writers use visual means in literature; while other artists, who preoccupy us presently, impose a sort of encyclopedic philosophy onto the visual arts themselves?”

Therefore, one can speak of a true tradition of modern French poets – all of them mindful of the arts and exceptional art critics themselves – ranging from Gautier yesterday to Bonnefoy today, while passing through Baudelaire and Verlaine, that came to reject the Germanic philosophy of aesthetics, a legacy of Baumgarten and Kant. This legacy would become the mother of the conceptual art that rules today over the market.

Paul Valéry, a marvelous exegete of the proper vocation of every member in the family of the visual arts – architecture, dance, painting, and drawing – inserts himself naturally in this tradition. As an art critic, he wrote some of the most profound pages ever dedicated to Corot, Manet, and Degas.⁶ Significantly, he began his essay “About Corot” by stating that “one must always apologize for talking about painting.” (Autour de Corot, English tr. David Paul, in Collected Works of Paul Valéry, vol. XII, p. 134).

Camille Corot, Souvenir de Mortefontaine, oil on canvas, 1864.

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⁶ Nineteenth-century painters. Both Corot and Manet anticipated the arrival of Impressionism. Degas was a member of the Impressionist group of painters founded in 1874.
In 1937, in a collateral event of the Parisian World Fair, Valéry accepted to preside over the World Congress of Professors of Aesthetics. On the same occasion, he also contributed the famous inscriptions on the Palais de Chaillot\(^7\) in Paris.

![Facade of the Palais de Chaillot, Paris, with Paul Valéry’s inscription reading: “Any man creates without knowing/like he breathes/But the artist feels compelled to create/His acts becomes part of all his being/His labor of love fortifies him.”](image)

In his inaugural speech, Valéry, with perfect politeness, took the liberty to develop a vivid satire of aesthetics, extension of the philosophical arts of knowledge invented in Great Britain and in Germany over the course of the eighteenth century. He said:

“What could have been more worthy of our philosopher’s will to power\(^8\) than this order of phenomena in which to feel, to possess, to will, and to make seemed to be joined in an essential and highly remarkable interaction that defied his Scholastic, not to say Cartesian,\(^9\) efforts to split up the difficulty.” *(Discours sur l’esthétique, 1937; English tr. Herbert Read, in Collected Works of Paul Valéry, vol. XIII, p. 47)*

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\(^7\) Central building used for exhibitions on the fairground of Parisian World Fairs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The current Palais de Chaillot, erected in 1937 in the Art Déco style and adorned with Valéry’s inscriptions, subsequently housed museums.

\(^8\) “Will to power” is a key concept in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900).

\(^9\) Reference to French mathematician and philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650; adj.: Cartesian), famous for the expression *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am”
The contrast is large between the human phenomena of the conception and the reception of a work of art; the former is synthetic and the least open to analysis, the latter susceptible to abstraction and to a philosophical appetite, which loves to take hold of the creative process in order to subject it to analysis and conceptualization through theory and metaphysical philosophy. “This kind of pleasure,” insists Valéry, “is inseparable from developments that go beyond the sensibility and connect with the kinds of modified feeling which are prolonged and enriched in the channels of the intellect and sometimes lead to outward actions – on matter, on the senses, and on the minds of others – requiring the combined exercise of all human powers.” (English tr. Herbert Read, vol. XIII, p. 46; my emphasis)

Nevertheless, the philosophical will to power could not resist the temptation to colonize this domain, which poses a constant challenge. “In the presence of that mysterious pleasure of which I am speaking,” writes Valéry, “the philosopher, justly concerned with giving it a categorical place, a universal meaning, an intelligible function; fascinated by, yet curious about the combination he has found here of sensuality, fecundity, and an energy quite comparable to that which springs from love; unable in his new object of attention, to separate necessity from the arbitrary, contemplation from action, matter from mind – the philosopher, I say, kept trying to apply his usual methods of reduction by exhaustion and progressive division to this monster of the Fable of Intellect, the sphinx or griffin [...] in which sensation, action, dream, instinct, reflection, rhythm, and excess are as closely intermingled as chemical elements in living bodies, [making man] put into [art] every bit of his mind, time, determination, in short, his life.” (English tr. Herbert Read, vol. XIII, p. 48)

The “mysterious pleasure,” “the combination of sensuality, fecundity, and an energy quite comparable to that which springs from love,” which Valéry attributed to both the invention and the reception of an artwork, can be linked to a famous aphorism by Lichtenberg, published posthumously at the beginning of the 20th century: “There are very few things that we could know with all five senses at one time.” Among the things that the great German humorist alludes to only summarily, one surmises two that scare away Philosophy – the act of love making and the notion of the masterwork. Lichtenberg could have thought about Flemish paintings, representing either a collection of pictures and curiosities, or a still life, or a Madonna and Child, crowned with fruits and flowers: the sense of sight affirms itself by awakening, concurrently by synecdoche and flashbacks, where fragments stand for the whole, the sense of touch (silk cloth, linen, skin), that of taste (fruits, liquors), that of sound (musical instruments), that of smell (flowers). The synthesis of the five senses metamorphosizes into both the unspeakable joy, voluptuous at first glance, of beholding a pictorial representation and the no-less unspeakable vertigo of vanity and finitude into which we get plunged when, upon taking a second look, we discover the ephemerality of all these pleasures …

10 Figure of speech in which the whole is put for a part, part for whole, as in the expression “fifty hands,” meaning “fifty men.”
After having expounded on “mysterious pleasure” and the aesthetic philosopher who wants to explain a similarly fascinating “mystery,” Valéry deploys his irony in all its sharpness. According to him, the lively multi-facetedness, in and off itself incomprehensible, of the artistic phenomenon is as defiant to reduction to scholastic abstraction as is the act of love, even though it was forced by aesthetic philosophy to prostrate itself on the bed of Procrustes, before the instruments of conceptual analysis could be applied. “In this realm,” says the poet, “the virtues of purity, universality, strictness and logic engendered a number of paradoxes, the most startling of which is this: the Aesthetics of the metaphysicians decreed a cleavage between the Beautiful and beautiful things!” (English tr. Herbert Read, vol. XIII, p. 49)

“I doubt,” added Valéry, “whether sufficient attention has been paid to this astonishing consequence of a Metaphysical Aesthetics: by substituting an intellectual knowledge for the immediate and singular effect of phenomena and their specific resonance, it tends to absolve us from the experience of the Beautiful as encountered in the sensory world. Once the essence of beauty has been extracted, once its general formulas have been noted, and nature along with art has been exhausted, surmounted, replaced by principles whose implications can be derived with certainty – all the works and aspects that delighted us might just as well vanish, or at most continue to serve as provisional examples or teaching aids.” (English tr. Herbert Read, vol. XIII, p. 59)

Half a century ahead of his time, Valéry foresaw the unsettling consequences of philosophical aesthetics, which diminish to their abstract dimension physical artistic practice and the experience of the beautiful alike, while favoring the philosophical concept of the idea of the Beautiful or judgments on matters of Beauty. In short, he had managed to diagnose, as early as 1937, the schizophrenia of an
aesthetician as brilliant as Arthur Danto, delighted by the unexplainable “enigma” of Chardin’s paintings unfolding before him, but feeling obliged, in his capacity as professional aesthetician with a reputation to defend in the contemporary art market, to legitimate its tenants. He did so even with respect to its most advertisement-like forms, for instance in the displacement of the common Brillo box from the supermarket to the rarefied and fashionable art gallery – an act sufficient to turn it into a work of art. All of these conceptual twists are self-sufficient, and they replace the absent work of art itself. The conceptualization of art does not go beyond the relabeling of the object to fit it into such-and-such a new category, infinitely more expensive, but without any value-added work performed in its transition from one place to another. The aesthetician who sanctions the legality of this transfer is perhaps the true “author” of the artwork; at least he has a better claim in this regard than the would-be artist who signed it.

Coming from the poet who wrote La jeune Parque, this prescience of readymades and Pop Art, which are our contemporaries, comes as no surprise. Valéry is the scion of a long French tradition of resistance among artists, collectors, and art critics against a school of aesthetic thought that is primarily Germanic (Kant), and secondarily British (Burke). He also emerges as one of the most insightful interpreters of the French eighteenth century from his essays on Voltaire and Montesquieu. Each one of these last two authors was also an art amateur, and both were adamant about separating the practice and the experience of taste from the theorization of the Beautiful. They followed the footsteps, in the eighteenth century, of the resistance mounted by poets and artists during the previous century against the empire of pedants and abstractions based on rules. This resistance by Corneille, Boileau, and Molière found an echo in the eighteenth century, when even the philosophers of the Encyclopédie drew the line between, on the one hand, the intelligent and loving experience of art, and on the other British or German philosophy; between a sensual and an idealist approach; between an art that prefers to think itself rather than one that lets itself be felt. It is this French war of taste against the conceptualization of art by aestheticians, such as Burke and Kant, which dominated the age of Louis XV and Louis XVI, and which I would like to further investigate now.

12 In its original form, the Encyclopédie (Encyclopedia) was published between 1751 and 1772 in twenty-eight volumes, containing over 70,000 articles and more than 3,000 illustrations. Its general editors, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, recruited a corps of contributors that comprised some of the greatest Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, or the Baron d’Holbach. Each author was responsible for writing the entries that fell within his particular field of expertise. Its secular, scientific outlook and implicit belief that all knowledge is finite made the Encyclopédie one of the outstanding accomplishment of the Enlightenment.
Since Greco-Roman antiquity the arts had to defend themselves against the philosophical logos, whose mission, in its final analysis, is iconoclastic. Plato chased the poets from his Republic, which seems to suggest that he would also have chased the artists. To defend themselves, the arts found a metalanguage of their convenience in the rhetoric and the poetics of Aristotle. This non-conceptual and non-dogmatic metalanguage – discursive but figurative, more turned towards practical sides than toward theory – gave them more points of reference and left them enough leeway to tinker at their craft (bricolage) with a greater degree of freedom and with greater enjoyment. Humanistic literature on art, like its sources in antiquity, borrowed its notions, structure, vocabulary, and its figures of speech from rhetoric, not philosophy. At the price of a mistranslation, this became the meaning of the saying Ut pictura poesis, which humanist authors of artistic literature extracted from Horace’s Epistles to the Pisos. And this is what, in the eighteenth century, the German philosopher Lessing did no longer want to understand when he published his Laocoön in 1766. Horace’s mnemotechnical apothegm established the parallel between, if not the complementarity of, the two arts of imitation, painting and poetry, under a rhetorical regime. By different means, silent painting and the word, poetic and eloquent, engage in the same activity called ekphrasis, in Latin descriptio. Both are called upon to transfix the soul of the spectator and the listener by the energéia-evidentia of their description and by the profundity of the images’ imprint on the mind.

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13 Written by the Greek philosopher Plato in about 380 B.C.E., the Republic represents perhaps the first attempt to develop a theoretical blueprint for what an ideal society should look like.

14 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) opened his treatise Laocoön, so named in reference to the famous Hellenistic sculpture group and its textural roots in Vergil Aenead, with a discussion of Horace’s saying Ut pictura poesis. He rejects Horace’s core message that painting and poetry are intrinsically related.

15 Mnemotechnical=aiding the memory; apothegm=a short saying.

16 In ancient Greece, a description of images, especially in a rhetorical context.
The literature of art was created, read, and commented, until the end of the sixteenth century, by artists from Cennino Cennini to Alberti, Vasari, and Lomazzo. This was also the case in classical antiquity, but many treatises by Greek artists mentioned by Pliny the Younger have disappeared, and modern authors of art treatises, in the final analysis, but sought to repair this loss and to fill the void left in modern archives and libraries.

The only classical art treatise that has survived quasi intact is *De Architectura* by the Roman author Vitruvius, a contemporary of Horace, who dedicated his book to Emperor Augustus. He would have had the opportunity to consult the treatises by Greek architects since lost and indeed must have done so; but as a maker rather than as a theoretician, he foregrounds his strictly Roman outlook.

Another survivor from the ruins of the libraries of antiquity is the books XXXV to XXVI of the *Natural History* by Pliny the Older, father figure and model of the humanist antiquarian. Pliny does not attempt to theorize; he remains close to the rhetorical and poetic discourse that Greek artists used; he wrote an oral history based on the recollections transmitted from master to master in the workshops; he described summarily great masterworks; he recorded the customary anecdotes, which opened, as did Vasari with his *Lives*, a vast field of discussion topics and provided a nurturing environment – as much for the creativity of artists as for the reception of their artworks by collectors.

In the tradition of Homer’s *ekphrasis* of the Shield of Achilles, one finds, on the dividing line between silent painting-poetry and eloquent poetry-painting, the collected descriptions of artworks by two Greek authors, Philostratus and Callistratus, sophists but not artists active during the third century, whose works have escaped destruction. These classical prose poems inspired, in Giambattista Marino’s

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17 In his *Iliad*, Homer provided a description of the pictorial elements found on Achilles’ (legendary) shield.
Italy and Félibien’s or Fénelon’s France, descriptive art criticism, in which Diderot, Gautier, and the Goncourts\textsuperscript{18} brothers excelled during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

![Reconstruction of the Shield of Achilles](image)

Papal Rome, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, asserted itself as the iconophile capital of the arts.\textsuperscript{19} It was here that the discursive privilege of artists, purveyors till then of both the making and theorizing of art, was extended to virtuosi, amateurs, collectors, antiquarians, connoisseurs, and friends of artists. These groups formed among themselves an art public – a public of privileged experts for sure, but nevertheless an enlarged public. A typical but by no means isolated example of these pursuits is the \textit{Considerations on Paintings} (\textit{Considerazioni sulla pittura}), which, during the 1620s, the future physician of Pope Urban VIII brought in circulation as a manuscript. These \textit{Considerations} contained, besides a guide to good taste in matters of painting, a prescriptive monograph on the perfect virtuoso, the ideal interlocutor\textsuperscript{20} of artists. As representatives of the following generation, the Fréart brothers introduced to the Parisian situation and to the framework of French institutions the Roman model of the intenditore d’arte,\textsuperscript{21} who lends his ear to artists, is familiar with their workshops, and who has insider knowledge about their objectives, their language, and their profession. Nicolas Poussin\textsuperscript{22} took on the role, in Rome or in his correspondence, of not only the teacher of his own art to young painters (Charles Le Brun, Charles Errard, Sébastien Bourdon, Gérard Dughet, ...), but also that of an educator of French virtuosi and intenditori. The latter were his principal clients,

\textsuperscript{18} French authors and art critics of the eighteenth (Diderot) and nineteenth (Gautier, Goncourts) centuries.
\textsuperscript{19} Heyday of the Baroque period, embodied by artists like Bernini and Caravaggio. Important artistic and architectural additions were made to the Vatican.
\textsuperscript{20} Conversation partner.
\textsuperscript{21} Art Expert.
\textsuperscript{22} French seventeenth-century painter active for most of his life in Rome and best known for his mythological scenes of vaguely classical inspiration. In 1740, he received a summons by Louis XIII to return to France, but before long he was back in Rome. Poussin became a role model for eighteenth-century French neoclassical painters, especially Jacques-Louis David and his students.
whom he turned, by virtue of their acquiring specialized knowledge, into worthy collectors of his own artworks. From among this group, he taught the art writers Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613-1696), a native Roman, and André Félibien, a Parisian, the principals which he had extracted from his long experience as a French painter active in both Rome and Paris.

Two generations later, a pair of French intenditori d’arte will rise to a very high public rank. One after the other, they will assume the position of true arbiters of good taste in the arts. Both joined one of the new Royal Academies founded by Colbert, where, in principle, the best artists and writers of the kingdom united with the mission to provide guidance on the best style for the royal arts and letters. The sessions of the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, the proceedings of which have now been published in their entirety, respected the privilege conceded to artists to speak to their experience and to the knowledge of their specialty. However, the academy’s statutes provided that art amateurs, who were treated as if they were initiated to the practice of art, be admitted on an equal basis as prime witnesses of artistic activities, as interviewers, and as critics.

Roger de Piles (1635-1709), at the end of the seventeenth century, fulfilled in Paris the same role that, at the beginning of the century, Giulio Mancini had held in Rome: the archetype of one of those amateurs who were co-opted by the artists. Painter, engraver, diplomat, ingenious theoretician and art historian, he single-handedly educated two generations of connoisseurs – first through his numerous publications and later through his lectures at the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, where he was admitted in 1699 as consultant amateur. The dissemination of his ideas was essential for the

[Image of Nicolas Poussin, Ed in Arcadia Ego, ca. 1655, oil on canvas.]

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23 The term amateur mostly refers to knowledgeable art collectors and in a larger sense to anybody who can write competently about art. Soon after its foundation, the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture began to admit amateurs.
success of the taste for all things “Rococo,” which, during the Regency of the Duc d’Orléans\(^2\) and from a Parisian perspective, carried the day over Versailles’ grandeur. De Piles was a source of inspiration for the banker Pierre Crozat (1661-1740), the artistic advisor of the Duc d’Orléans. The mansion of the amateur Crozat, heavily frequented by the “colorists”\(^2\) among the painters, was built in 1704 on the rue de Richelieu, two blocks away from the Orléans Palace. Crozat turned it into the most amazing museum of paintings and sculptures ever assembled by a private collector. Following Crozat’s invitation to live and to paint there, Antoine Watteau emerged from anonymity and was elected member of the Academy in 1717, after the death of Louis XIV.

The case of Abbé Jean Baptiste Du Bos (1670-1742) is a little bit different. He entered the French Academy triumphantly in 1719, immediately after the publication of his *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting (Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture)*. Unlike de Piles, Pierre Jean Mariette, or the Count de Caylus, he was not a quasi-professional art amateur. His talents as a diplomat, his historical erudition, his profound rhetorical culture combined to make him the uncontested master of an artistic taste, which kept its distance from fashion. “He read a lot,” insinuated Voltaire in *The Century of Louis XIV (Le Siècle de Louis XIV)*, underscoring the extraordinary success of the work.

\(^2\) Shortly before his own death in 1715, Louis XV had lost most of his children and grandchildren, leaving the succession of the Sun King unresolved. Since his surviving great-grandson was still a minor, a distant relative from the Orléans line stepped in as a Regent until Louis XV would reach maturity. The period of the Duc d’Orléans’ interim rule, 1715-1723, is called the Regency.

\(^2\) Reference to a quarrel among painters in the Academy at the turn of the eighteenth century. The “colorists” were followers of Peter Paul Rubens, who were opposed by those who subscribed to the emphasis on line drawing, embodied by the art of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665).
Taking a leaf out of the book of the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, Du Bos, an adept of the Pascalian distinction between intellectual acuteness (esprit de finesse) and the spirit of geometry, diverted the world of the arts away from that of the empire of scientific and philosophical reasoning. The visual arts, like poetry, have as their engine ut pictura poesis not the search for truth, but the convincing and emotionally charged imitation of nature; above all, human nature. The final objective of these arts of imitation and of representation is to give more or less complete satisfaction to “the necessity to be occupied and to escape boredom.” In the final analysis, Du Bos sketches an anthropology of “distraction,” upon which he erected a universe of arts and spectacles. Here again, the subtle Abbé takes his inspiration from Pascal, great theoretician of tedium; but what is more, from a Pascal who would have retained many things from Epicureanism. Du Bos likes to quote the Suave mari magnof the Epicurean poet Lucretius in order to make his point about the difference between the imitation of passions, source of delectations, and their unmitigated experience, which makes one cruelly suffer. He cites another Epicurean motto, taken form Virgil’s second Bucolic, Trahit suam quemque voluptas, to underline how much the unlimited variety of human inclinations determines the extreme diversity of artistic forms.

This anthropology of leisure dispenses Du Bos from any metaphysical investigation of the Beautiful. In matters of taste, he strips pedants and geometric minds of their authority to pretentiously judge works of art according immutable rules, as opposed to the effect genuinely experienced by the audience. This approach also allows him to put himself in the place of the public, which knows very well if the painting, the poem, the play entertains or annoys. “Like in matters of cooking,” writes Du Bos, “one savors the meal without knowing the rules, and one recognizes whether it is good or not.”

“Innate in all of us,” concludes Du Bos, “is a preordained aptitude to judge works that engage in the imitation of objects as found in nature.” He calls it the “sixth sense,” which does not need either rule or compass to make up its mind. Masterworks, and notably those of antiquity, emerge from the prolonged rallying over time of the “sixth sense.” They serve as a touchstone to correct the premature and biased weeding out that fashion does in contemporary art. On election day for taste, the healthy innocence of ignoramuses is polled, while the pretentions of pedants are excluded. Molière, for one, first consulted his servant. While it is true that the consensus of ignorant people concerns but the work “in general,” it fails to appreciate its “particular beauties.” For this reason, they cannot have the last say. Moreover, Du Bos borrows from Cicero, Quintilian, and Vaugelas the doctrine of sanior pars, pioneered by Roman conversationists – witnesses and arbiters, in the final analysis, of the good use of language and of the best delectio verborum. Boileau, defending Homer against Perrault, confronted

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26 Reference to Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French mathematician, physicist and philosopher.
27 Philosophy stressing the enjoyment of sensual pleasures (f. ex. good food) and the absence of suffering to create a state of happiness, named after early fourth century B.C.E. philosopher Epicurus.
28 The full Latin quote reads in translation, “it is pleasant, when the winds are buffeting the waves on the great sea, to watch from the land the great struggle of another,” which is frequently interpreted as an expression of the comfort found in the truth of philosophy (as opposed to those “struggling” souls who neither seek nor find it).
29 “Each one is drawn by his own delight”
30 The “sounder part”; for instance, in an electoral assembly.
31 Pleasure of the word.
the admiration for the Greek epic poet by the Prince of Condé, the Chancellor d’Agusseau, and the Marshal de Turennes with the disdain of pedants and the difficulties of ignoramuses. Du Bos drew the outlines of a true "arts public," whose authority is stronger than the dictates of fashion. It is composed of “persons who have acquired insights, either through reading or by getting around in the world.” “They are the only ones,” he added, “who can rank poems and paintings, although such rankings can also be found in many excellent publications, which can stir the feelings of the people and make them speak out.” This aristocratic sociology of judging matters of taste concludes an anthropology of tedium, from which the arts emerge as a civilized form of therapy from ennui.

Du Bos elevated the opinion of the public, and not his proper reason, to the touchstone of good taste. He similarly failed to be a rationalist when he turned the focus of his discussion to the question of literary and artistic genius and to the times when this genius prospered. Science and philosophy are capable to compound progress, in linear time, while arts and letters, which speak to feeling and not reason, experience, over the course of their cyclical lifespan, but short bouts of increasing refinement, then attain rare peaks of perfection – the “Great Centuries (Grands Siècles)” – succeeded by decadence. At times of decadence, to prevent collapse or to escape it, it is important to affirm the mind set and the taste established during times of plenitude, exemplified by classical works destined to last for long periods. This attitude of resilience with respect to the torrents of time is the one adopted by Voltaire in The Century of Louis XIV (Le Siècle de Louis XIV); Du Bos borrowed it from the treatise On the Sublime by the Pseudo-Longinus, and Tacitus’ Dialogue on Oratory.

Writing under the rule of Louis XV that had just begun, Du Bos introduced an element of anxiety about decline and thus facilitated the onset of a deepening sense of nostalgia about the “Great Century,” the Grand siècle – that of Louis XIV. This epoch was exclusively associated, in 1715, with the terrible political mistakes of the Sun King, blanketing out that it provided a reliable benchmark for taste which contemporaries were only beginning to re-appreciate. Ever since 1719, Du Bos, whose writings anticipate Voltaire’s Temple of Taste (Le Temple du Goût, 1733), called into question the “Rococo” style, which the previous generation of critics, clustered around De Piles, had embraced with enthusiasm as a reaction against the “Grand Taste,” or “Grand Goût,” of Versailles.

Nevertheless, neither Du Bos, nor Voltaire, subscribed to an immediate diagnosis of decadence. They wanted to believe in the existence of an elite composed of persons with taste, which, enlightened by the ups and downs of history, is capable to short-circuit, by virtue of its natural authority, the temptations of barbarity or the “death of Art.” In 1772, Voltaire, indulging in a kind of optimism so typical for the Enlightenment, still opined in the Supplement to the Questions of the Encyclopédie (Supplément aux Questions sur l’Encyclopédie):

“It is the persons of taste who govern in the long run the empire of the arts [...]. Eventually, the connoisseurs will carry with them the general public, and this is the only difference that exists between the most ‘enlightened’ nations and the most primitive ones, since the Parisian simpleton is in no way

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32 Louis XIV, late in his rule, started several wars and left state finances in disarray.
ahead of another vulgar person, but there exists in Paris a large enough number of cultivated spirits that can lead the crowds.”

III

The anthropology and sociology of the arts suggested by the Abbé Du Bos – and to which Voltaire unreservedly subscribed – take us back to Ciceronian, Virgilian, and Horatian rhetoric and poetics, transposed to Paris and into the French language. French, as a metalanguage, escaped dogmatism and pedantism for a long time, and enjoyed the almost unconditional support, in the eighteenth century, of the courts of Europe. If French rhetoric and poetics required some philosophy, it is an eclectic philosophy, conciliatory but hostile to any systematization; one in which the Platonism of the New Academy balances the idealism of the Old Academy with its own skepticism and Epicureanism. This eclecticism is perfectly adjusted to capture the facets of the sensible and fantastic experience of the Beautiful. The plausible and convincing representation of human actions and passions that painting and poetry can accomplish falls under the Greek term *eikos* (in Latin, *verisimilitude*); the agreeable and coherent organization of the plot pertains to the Greek term *prepon* (in Latin, *decor*); the element of surprise and unpredictable coincidences enters into the category of the Greek *kairos*. This last notion, paradigm for the impossibility to translate the Greek notion of discontinuous time, could find its Latin equivalent in *occasio*, and, as imperfectly, in the French expression *l’instant propice* (the right moment).

Nothing could be further removed from this “improvised tinkering,” or *bricolage* (to borrow once again this metaphor introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss) than the *episteme* of Cartesian or empiricist sciences; but nothing could be closer to the trivial and brief experience of a lifespan and to the oratory and dialogical practice of surmising, the *doxa*. When this “improvised tinkering” (*bricolage*) is applied to poetry or the imitating arts, it no longer assigns them as central mission to teach (*docere*), but to please (*deflectare*) and to move emotionally (*movere, flectere*). All of these rhetorical notions lack analytical precision, which is the pride of science and philosophy. Their skepticism with respect to reason’s ability to explain the arts culminated by the seventeenth century in the preterition of the “I don’t know what” – or, in French, “Je ne sais quoi.”

However, it is precisely the shortcomings of the rheto-poetical language, which prevent it from imposing on the arts and letters an oppressive and sterilizing regularity, while endowing them with a fluid and subtle reflexivity that prevent them from falling for the shoddy unfinishedness of subjectivism and aesthetic relativism.

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33 Language and (cultural) symbols used to investigate matters pertaining to language itself.
34 Although of Greek derivation (Gr. “espistemai”: to understand, to know for certain, to believe), the expression *episteme* is closely associated with the French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault (1926-1984). It designates figures of speech or institutions, which are generally held to be true and eternal, but may not be so.
35 That which is passed by or left out (especially in speech).
As much as he may have come across as a “modern” during the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,\textsuperscript{36} Fontenelle, perpetual secretary of the Academy of Sciences, concurred with Boileau and Du Bos in the following respect: “Speculations about the nature of rules does not bestow genius on those who are lacking them; rules do not help very much either those who follow them, and most frequently individuals of genius draw no benefits from speculation. For what is speculation therefore good? It helps some people who like reasoning go back to primordial ideas of the Beautiful; these are the people who enjoy reducing, under the pretext of philosophy, things which seem furthest removed from thought [for example, art], and which are commonly believed to follow the eccentricities of taste” \textit{(Oeuvres, 1754, pp. 375-76, cit. Saisselin, p. 127)}. Even though, over the course of the eighteenth century, the circle of art authorities expanded from artists and amateurs of the Academy to Salon critics,\textsuperscript{37} the language of this extended circle of discussants remained constraint to the oratory topos. This moderation was the subject of a consensus to which even the French philosophers of the Beautiful subscribed, and from which neither the Jesuit Father Yves-Marie André, in his \textit{Essay on the Beautiful (Essai du Beau)}, published in 1741, nor the Abbé Charles Batteux, in his treatise entitled \textit{The Fine Arts Reduced to One Same Principle (Les Baux-arts réduits à un même principe)} from 1746, deviated.

Very modest in his ambitions, the Cartesian and Malbranchiste\textsuperscript{38} Father André advanced a divine Idea of the Beautiful inaccessible from the here and now, except for in the perception of a rainbow, epitome of Beauty apprehensible through the senses, the nuances of which, in all their classifications and descriptions, take up most of the space in his book. As for the Abbé Batteux, a famous rhetorician who taught at the Collège de France and who was elected in this capacity to the Academy of Inscriptions (1754), and then to the French Academy, he piped in with Abbé Du Bos’s language. He helped himself to the same Ciceronian and Quintilian vocabulary as could be found in the speeches that artists and amateurs delivered before the Academy of Painting. “Taste in the arts,” he wrote, “is the same as intelligence in the sciences.” And furthermore, “taste must be a sentiment that tells us whether the imitation of Nature was well done or badly butchered.” He was so uninterested in the roots of the judgment about taste that he did not shy from writing: “I will leave it to the profundity of Metaphysics\textsuperscript{39} to sort out the most secret motivations of our soul and to dig into the principles of its workings. I find no need to enter into these speculative discussions, where one’s talk becomes as obscure as it becomes sublime.”

The challenge launched by the famous Batteux against Locke’s British sensualist and Wolff’s idealist German philosophy will soon be answered by the British Edmund Burke and the Germans Lessing, Baumgarten, and Kant – the fathers of philosophical Aesthetics. In France, even the

\textsuperscript{36} Famous intellectual controversy in France, which reached its peak around 1690, dealing with the issue whether classical antiquity or modern-day ingenuity should be the guiding light of humanity.

\textsuperscript{37} Salons=Official art exhibitions organized by the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Salon critics were art critics who wrote about the art on display in the Salons.

\textsuperscript{38} Reference to Nicolas Malbranche (1638-1715), a French rhetorician and philosopher.

\textsuperscript{39} The term metaphysics, here and in other places of Prof. Fumaroli’s speech, must be largely defined to allude to thought models and philosophies that are overly and unnecessarily convoluted or abstract. Originally, the term pertained to that branch of philosophy which deals with the character, nature, causes, etc. of God; by extension it became an expression referring to any (pseudo-) science dealing with the supernatural or magic.
philosophes\textsuperscript{40} who compiled the *Encyclopédie*, following the tracks of their leader Voltaire, carefully avoided to break away from Aristotelian-Ciceronian language, which had triumphed so brilliantly in the French fine arts and letters. Theoretical without ever losing sight of practical aspects and of reality, this non-systematic, non-dogmatic language, and its attending rhetoric guided by moderation, made Paris in the age of Louis XIV and Louis XV the capital of classicism – an intersection for a wide range of national schools and minds. D'Alembert, in a *Dialogue between Poetry and Philosophy* (*Dialogue entre la poésie et la philosophie*), published in Berlin in 1753, makes philosophy subscribe to Horace's famous saying *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci* (*He who minglest the useful with the sweet carries away the prize* [of the opportune or supreme moment of the *kairos*]). The saying represents an application to poetry and painting of the three objectives of oratory art: to combine the useful aspect of instruction, *docere*, with *movere* and *delectare*, that is sweet pleasure.

The mathematician inside d'Alembert revealed himself to be a great rhetorician, when he demanded that novelty reinvigorate the “sweetness” of poetry and the arts. He understood novelty as an expression analogous to what Cicero described as follows in the *Orator*: “In my works, one can interpret novelty to mean very ancient things that are but too little known.”

But the most consequential case is that of Diderot. It was Diderot, who, in 1751, wrote as metaphysician the *Philosophical Researches into the Origins and the Nature of Beauty* (*Recherches philosophiques sur l'origine et la nature du Beau*), which he published in the following year as the dictionary entry under the heading “Beauty” in the *Encyclopédie*. He concluded that in all the areas where the beautiful manifests itself, it consists of an awareness for the relationship between that which is perceived and the one who is perceiving. Given that he does claim to be the purveyor of an absolute notion of Beauty, the beautiful perceived is held to be as impossible to define as taste, itself notorious for being inconsistent and capricious. From 1759 through 1763, Diderot, in order to keep up to date with the chronicle of the “Salons” in his *Correspondance littéraire*,\textsuperscript{41} imposes himself a true artistic re-education program. He frequents the studios of great artists, such as Chardin, La Tour, and Falconet.

\textsuperscript{40} Collectively, the authors of the *Encyclopédie*. See also note 11 above.

\textsuperscript{41} A newsletter, written by Diderot, that circulated in manuscript format in German and Eastern European courts about current cultural events in France (especially visual arts, literature, etc.)
He familiarizes himself with their working methods, their problems, their language. Lacking the pedigree of an amateur, understood in the sense of an erudite and refined art collector like the Count de Caylus or Mariette, but having been trained all his life in the arts, Diderot became an eloquent art critic. He invested his determination to share his pleasures or displeasures inspired by the paintings in the Salon with his virtuosity as rhetorician and all of his talent as an actor. When writing about the Salon of 1765, he infused the antique saying by Horace, *ut picture poesis*, with new life for the princely subscribers of the *Correspondance*. To this end, he did not hesitate to present himself as a latter-day Philostratus:

“I will describe paintings to you, and my description will be such that with a small amount of imagination and taste, you can recreate them in space and introduce, one by one, objects such as I have seen them on the real canvas.”

Diderot added to the reflective language (or metalanguage) engaging the artwork’s creative genesis another rhetorical level, customized for the recipients of his Salon criticism, who resided far away from Paris. This is a receptive, mediating, and appreciative rhetoric evolving around the artworks on display, which the critic had all the time to see, admire, or detest, sparing his correspondents the trouble of a long travel. The geographically distant reader must contend himself with retaining only the conclusions of Diderot’s discourse and the retracing of the critic’s footsteps. In this other rhetoric, where Diderot revealed himself to be an inventive orator-actor-improviser, the reader never loses sight of the work of art, and, by extension, shares in the author’s mimetic and erotic proprieties or improprieties.

Rediscovered at the beginning of the Bourbon Restauration (1814-1830), Diderot’s art criticism inspired one of the great literary genres of Romanticism, handed down with renewed genius from one
generation of writers to the next by Stendhal, Balzac, Gautier, the Goncourt brothers, Baudelaire, Fénéon, Mirbeau, Proust.\textsuperscript{42}

This French fidelity to rhetorical metalanguages and to the reversibility of verbal and non-verbal painting, which marked the success of French art since the reign of Louis XIII, can no longer be taken for granted in 1750s Europe. It is strongly called into question in England and Germany. In 1750, Alexander Baumgarten published the first part of his \textit{Aesthetica}, treatise of a new philosophical discipline that he is the first to name. He pretended that aesthetics would replace, one step at a time, French art theory with the systematic rigor of his master, Christian Wolff. Seven years later, Edmund Burke published \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful}. Wandering on the tracks of Lockian sensualist epistemology,\textsuperscript{43} he broke, in the name of the Bible, Shakespeare, and Milton, the French rheto-poetic compass of \textit{decor} [in the sense of \textit{convenientia}, or \textit{prepon}; English: decorum]. The young philosopher separated the Beautiful and the Sublime, until then but two rhetorical modes of the grand style, into two resolutely antithetical subjects. Implicitly, he associated French taste, designed to absorb and to calm disquietude, with the Beautiful, while the King James Bible, Shakespeare, and Milton, which incite the nervous system, fell under the category of the Sublime. In 1764, it was the turn of the German Johannes Joachim Winckelmann, known for his francophobe attitude, to interpret the history of art in terms of conceptual aesthetics. He elevated Greek art of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century to the model of absolute Beauty – without precedent and without successor, especially when compared to classical art from the century of Louis XIV.

Two years later, another great German mind, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his \textit{Laocoön}, tackled the motto \textit{Ut picture poesis}, the keystone of the French classical edifice. He countered the saying with the radical antithesis between Poetry and Painting-Sculpture, declaring the first a temporal art, and the two others spatial arts, and as such incompatible with each other.

Nevertheless, as we saw, this vigorous anglo-germanic assault on Paris, capital of the arts, did not get anybody upset in France, except Voltaire, who lashed out against the very same Shakespeare, whom, in 1734, he had imprudently introduced to the French people in his \textit{Philosophical Letters (Lettres philosophiques)}. Even the word aesthetics was not part of anybody’s French vocabulary before the 1850s. The new discipline introduced in 1750 by Baumgarten and reconfigured by Kant’s \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgment} in 1790, did not become part of French education until the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, but has since had its day of revenge, even in art schools.

The painter Amaury-Duval, a student of David and a close friend of Ingres, commented, in 1801, Kant’s third \textit{Critique} as follows: “The French will not believe this, but Germany’s Plato\textsuperscript{44} has just demonstrated that it is by instinct rather than by reason that they have experienced up to this point some success in the fine arts […]. We hurry to receive with respect and gratitude the sublime principals of this scholar so celebrated by the universities on the other side of the Rhine River. Kant will dethrone one day, with much more success than Mercier, Locke and Condillac […]. It is possible that the ignorant

\textsuperscript{42} Some of the most famous French nineteenth-century novelists and poets.
\textsuperscript{43} The branch of philosophy that is concerned with the question how we know what we know.
\textsuperscript{44} Ironical swipe at Kant.
mass of readers will not understand this sublime fragment of *Transcendental Philosophy* [previously cited by Amaury-Duval in Charles de Villers’ translation]. We recommend that they read it one more time, and another time, until they understand. And then they can go visit our picture galleries and our schools to judge what constitutes the *truly beautiful*. Let us commiserate the poor Abbé Du Bos, who wrote three large volumes to teach a system that Kant’s club reduced to dust.”

The ideologues of the periodical *The Decade (La Décade)*, who informed Stendhal’s thought, recycled Amaury-Duval’s arguments against Germanic metaphysics. “All the aesthetics in the world,” wrote one of them, “do not lead to the creation of a single masterwork, and are not worth one either.” “Research on beauty, as happy an occupation one imagines it to be,” wrote another, “is not worth a single artwork conceived from beauty. It is better to produce living beings than to dissect corpses.” And again, “there is too much inequality between the artist or the poet who produces and the critic who judges in order to put them on a level playing field.”

Accustomed to a rhetorical language and its modest but time-honored approach towards the creation and the reception of a work of art, the French readers of Kant rejected a judgmental analysis of beauty, which, incidentally, denied beauty any other form of existence but that which is physically apparent. Before there emerged the great French school of art criticism, which I cited at the beginning of this essay – Gautier, the Goncourts, Baudelaire, and their likes – Germaine de Staël, in her influential book *About Germany (De l’Allemagne)*, took sides, in 1810, with Abbé Du Bos and against the invasion of Europe’s fine arts by the metaphysical language of Aesthetics:
“In [Schiller’s] essay on grace and dignity and in his letter on Aesthetics, that is to say the theory of Beauty, one finds too much metaphysics. If one wants to speak about the enjoyment of the arts, to which all human beings are susceptible, it is better to always rely on received impressions, rather than to indulge in abstract forms that make one lose track of these impressions.”

She also advocated, as an antidote against philosophical abstraction, the continuation of rhetorical art criticism, reinvented in Paris in the context of the Salons, and carried to new heights by Diderot:

“The lively description of masterworks,” she wrote, “is a much stronger inspiration for criticism than general ideas floating about subjects without defining any of them.”

The circle is closing, and the opinion that Mme de de Staël expressed in 1810 on the Germanic Aesthetics of Kant and Schiller, reinforced, only with different words, that of Paul Valéry in 1937:

“The Aesthetics of the Metaphysicians demanded that one separate Beauty from beautiful things.”

Marc Fumaroli, de l’Académie française.

(translated by Darius A. Spieth)