



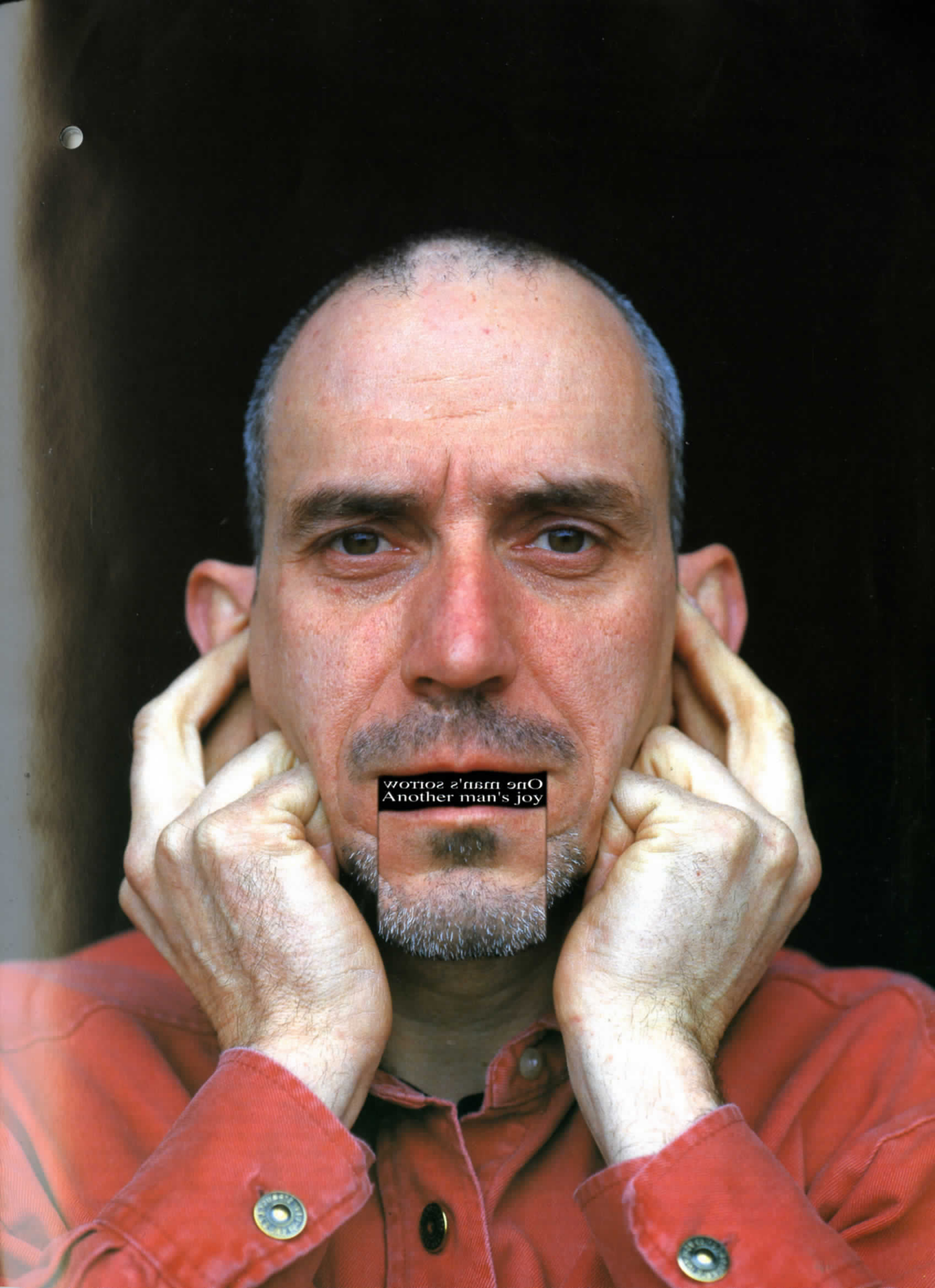
History is a fiction

Quentin Legrand talks to Johan Muyle
and Carl Havelange

The Belgian artist Johan Muyle (b. 1956) lives and works in Liège. Since 1985 his installations have expressed a constant quest for the notions of fiction and narrative that are to be found in the course of an individual's work. Journeys to India and Africa made him realise that it is impossible to understand 'other places'. This is why, in recent work, he has been seeking the visualisation of a thing and its opposite. In this way he formulates the incomprehension of 'the other', free from Western rhetoric. The illustrations by Johan Muyle on page 9 and 13 were made specially for *janus* 4.

Carl Havelange is an academic researcher and lectures in cultural history at the University of Liège. His studies, such as *'Figures de la guérison'* [Faces of Recovery], the historical anthropology of night, and the cultural history of the view in modern Europe, all contain an open reflection on forms of historical knowledge and the way it is passed down.

The young journalist Quentin Legrand brought them together for *janus*. In this conversation they talk about such notions as subjectivity, historicity and the visible, each from their own angle.



Another man's joy
One man's joy

Carl Havelange, could you explain briefly the purpose behind your research into perspective?

Havelange: At present I am working on the theme of night. This project, like that on perspective, arises from a perception of history which is a little different from the traditional view. In this instance it was a case of constructing an object in history which had no previous existence.

By its very nature, perspective - the way in which we perceive things - is something that eludes all possibility of objectification. Within the framework of an historian's project, the evanescence of perspective is, in some way, intensified by the obscurity of time. However, this idea is closely akin to the field of historical anthropology, according to which every presence in the world is inscribed within time, within historicity.

To this extent, perspective is necessarily inhabited by time, that is to say, by culture as well as by nature. It is not simply a matter of being equipped with a device which is both sensorial and psychological and which provides access to the visible; the time in which one uses this facility, the period to which one belongs and the culture which has brought us into the world, all these affect the manner in which one inhabits this act of perspective, making it completely different.

It is therefore possible to consider that between the visual device and the experience of each individual, the medium of our cultural time places us within a framework which, while fluctuating according to period, remains nevertheless determined. This is what is really the given: the fact that we do not view things in the same way today, and that what we associate with perspective is not of exactly the same order as it was at the time of the Renaissance, for example, stems from the time of our culture. All of which leads us to construct the idea of a Third element - that between the eye that sees and the world that is seen, there is always a kind of filter which both enables and limits our vision. This filter is composed of all those very often unconscious, latent meanings and representations which render perspective possible within the framework of a culture.

The relative singularity of the object 'perspective' stems from its being inscribed within this triple dimension of nature, culture and, of course, the individual. This is relatively new, insofar as it is rooted in a resolutely constructivist view of history, but I believe that all thought that endeavours to comprehend the world can identify with this very simple idea.

Muyle: But is the aim of history necessarily to comprehend the world? Perhaps a little

naively, I see history more as way of bringing objectivity to a path which has been chosen, to a certain extent, by chance.

Havelange: As an historian my own belief is based essentially on the difference that I make between making a given course objective and rendering it intelligible.

As I see it, nothing - and this is particularly true of the past - is capable of total objectification. The past does not exist; it exists only when one gives it a perspective. To make the past exist is not a matter of objectifying what has taken place but is rather, and essentially, a matter of selecting this past as the past. It is a matter of giving it objectivity within the dynamics of a relationship. And it is here that our approaches can come together, to a certain extent: the historian, like the artist, makes the world exist.

Paul Klee said: 'Art does not depict the visible, it makes visible.' From a constructivist perspective any historian's account can never be the description of things as they were, it is simply the institution of a relationship between a present richly supplied with questioning, drifting, anxieties, projects, etc ... and a past. What exists in terms of objectivity in that particular academic framework is the genuinely rigorous implementation of a relationship. But it is a relationship on two sets of terms, which involves the historian with an interlocutor, the past or those elements of it which have been preserved.

Muyle: In a relationship, which exists between events.

Havelange: Events do not exist. What exists are the traces we possess of these events. We enter, unavoidably, into a relationship with a document. However minimal our intervention may be, the extracts selected will completely reconstruct a past that will exist only in terms of our relationship with the document. Therefore, the document exists, the event does not. The event is always constructed.

Muyle: The document itself is already a point of view, in fact.

Havelange: This is what gives the relationship its singularity, towards two attitudes which may appear to be in opposition with one another.

One takes objectivity as its dogma, and would claim that 'events exist and the academic's purpose is to describe them as they were'. The first is a realist, positivist attitude which seeks to alienate the scholar completely from what he is analysing. In such a case 'good' academic work would be work from which the scholar's name may be

erased; another scholar, given the same elements, would reach exactly the same conclusions. This is the perspective of the objective event, of the totally autonomous fact which is, as it were, self-contained.

At the other extreme, there are the relativists, some of whom consider that all this is simply false science, illusion, idle fancy. They maintain that the only reality in the historian's account, for example, would be the reality of the person producing that discourse; forgetting, to some extent, how much depends on the historical traces in question.

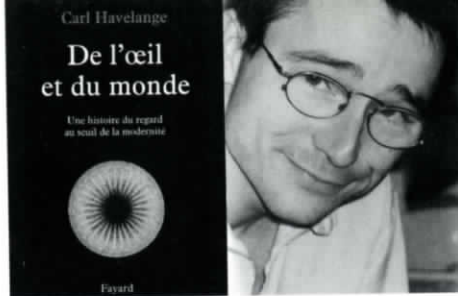
The attitude that I support is different. By rejecting excessive positivism - according to which things exist, that it is enough simply to describe them - and also the attitude that maintains that things do not exist - that it is only the individual who describes them that exists - we are able to see that what does exist is the simple truth of a relationship. In the case of the historian, the two terms of this relationship are the present and the past, the historian and the traces of the past he selects by way of documentation.

PERSPECTIVE AS AN EXPERIENCE

Muyle: A notion I find interesting, when considering the idea of reality on the one hand and the idea of history on the other, is that of 'fictionalisation'. Personally, I can well imagine a whole area of my life operating on the principle of 'fictionalisation'. In such a framework I sometimes have the feeling that this goes against a broader notion of history one would like to see exist. I have the impression that history presupposes, to a certain extent, an abandonment of the idea of the individual.

Havelange: The idea of subjectivity or something of that kind? Yes and no, once again. The extreme relativist attitude would be to claim that a scholarly account is simply fiction and it is therefore the genre that should be analysed. Any work in the social sciences of course includes a literary dimension, because in a framework of this nature, if our comprehension of the world is to be transmitted, this must be done through the medium of the word.

However, one can accept this idea while



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bearing in mind that this is a very particular genre of fiction, since, at all times, it receives its direction from a group of elements which cannot be reduced to anything other than themselves: a document is a document - a trace of the past.

Therefore, history is always a fiction, insofar as it is a matter of creating a bridge between the present and the past, with, moreover, a possible perspective on the future. If we believe that the past does not exist, to give it existence is necessarily to give substance to something which has none. But the type of fiction or literature involved is not something random, it obeys criteria of 'verifiability'.

The middle way would be to say that 'we move in the direction of objectivity'. It is therefore a matter of acknowledging that things as such cannot be described. The particular type of description involved has its own laws, methods and rigour - like the artist's approach (which also, to a certain extent, has its own framework) - though the historian's is in a specific register and has very different objectives.

Muyle: Does all of which make the artist a more pretentious character, in as much as he writes his own history? Since the 1970s, the attitude of the artist has become completely indissociable from what he produces. Evidence of this can be found today among young artists, now between 25 and 30 years old, who in essence, advocate attitude as artistic production. Which is why I suggest that perhaps the artist is pretentious, inasmuch as he creates his own history and presents it to be regarded as exemplary or 'exemplative' history?

The artist is endeavouring to produce an alternative testimony ...

Muyle: A distinction obviously needs to be made between this and the idea of representation. In the plastic arts, representation is sometimes taken to be a form of illustration. Certain artists illustrate their period, and it is also clear that an artist's production is indissociable from the period in which he lives. If we accept the idea that one

cannot be dissociated from one's period, the reading one can make of one's time is bound to be relatively egocentric. Egocentric in terms of the idea that one can think as a group and ethnocentric in the sense of ethnocentricity, though of an individual nature.

I think, fundamentally, that this egocentricity is a mistake. But it is, to a large extent, unavoidable. I believe it is a parameter which must be taken into account, but it is not the objective: the objective is neither to illustrate the period nor to illustrate oneself. Nor one's own fictional path. In my opinion, it must be permanently re-deployed as one of the working parameters. Because I believe that various other parameters are themselves media, and are used and are to a large extent determining.

I believe that the artist's path, the establishment of different preoccupations through the different media, through different notions, means that the intention or image produced exceeds its limitations. Through experimentation it goes beyond the initial concept. But what interests me most is the idea that, establishing parameters and experimenting with them as in a sort of laboratory, leads to the production of things which operate essentially in a metaphorical relationship. And hence to things which elude consciousness or objectivity. The artists I prefer are those who set up this kind of experimentation and who, in terms of what they offer, allow the viewer to formulate his own response or responses. This is where I try to dissociate myself from this idea of 'ethnocentricity'.

Havelange: What you are saying identifies very directly with the scientific approach as I see it. If one considers this type of exaltation of the self, it raises the question of subjectivity. According to the relativist conception of the social sciences, only individual writing exists: this results in a form of 'ethnocentricity' of the intention and to an entirely fruitless and sterile narcissism. I can see a parallel here between a highly contemporary attitude in the writing of

history and what you describe happening among artists who, to some extent, are overly self-centred.

Furthermore, what also interests me greatly is the idea of experimentation. As an historian, one is always experimenting with a possible relationship between the present and the past, of the effects of which one is not always aware: one is always tinkering about to a certain extent. It seems to me that what one does is to put everything together, in this instance using the medium of words - relying on documentation, traces of the past, testimony - but without knowing exactly where this is leading.

It is this structuring of things, this tinkering about, that produces a coherence which makes a book an object in its own right, something which can therefore lead its own life and, if possible, be linked satisfactorily to the world it addresses.

Muyle: Because I constantly tell myself that the same object or the same concept can be seen from thousands of different points of view, I have to say that in the end the individual matters little. And, if taken to the extreme, that the period in which one lives is of little significance. From the point of view of history, the particular history chosen matters little: it is a form of tacit participation in something completely abstract. This ties in, to some extent, with the notion of fiction which I find very attractive in this type of thinking, because it helps me to accept the somewhat broad and harrowing idea of the void, of the vastness, of the expanding universe.

Havelange: Or, conversely, our apparent responsibility to speak and to act.

Muyle: Yes, it does indeed bring a great responsibility; but as far as I am concerned responsibility is one of the essential parameters. If one is to assert things, one must be responsible; even if one cannot master all the limitations, one remains responsible at every step for what one brings about.

Havelange: For example, there is no objective reason for my interest in the subject of perspective. I find it an interesting subject

but as soon as one addresses it one is transformed by it. This too becomes a sort of experiment. And once the experiment is under way you become responsible for it. It is up to you to take it where you see fit and to employ the means at your disposal. But it is really what is in motion that produces meaning.

Muyle: It is indissociable from a sort of egocentricity ... I think it is impossible to dissociate any particular path followed, any piece of work or desire to do something, from the desire to transform oneself. I believe that a 'good' artistic project is necessarily egocentric, but that it must, to a great extent, co-opt the idea of generosity. It must also establish elements that allow it to be comprehended or co-opted by others. I am very sensitive to the idea that, in an installation or in images presented, even if I do not control them all, there should be various possible levels of reading and that, moreover, all the elements presented should allow formulation by others. I do not think

trying to formulate earlier when talking about structuring. A 'good' artistic project, or project of any kind, is one which is structured around many different dimensions in the world in which it is presented.

Muyle: It is also impossible to control the notions of time, space, cultural context, etc.

Havelange: Indeed you can't. And besides, that is not the point. To be a 'bearer' of one's period or culture does not mean to illustrate it either. It simply means that one has at one's disposal a certain 'set of tools', a space and time that allow one to tinker about and try out this type of experimentation.

ONE QUESTION CO-OPTS AND TRANSFORMS ANOTHER

Muyle: There is another idea I find interesting and that is the idea of metaphor. I am aware that I am not very familiar with the academic milieu, however, it seems to me that this notion is often absent from academic preoccupations.

infinitely and indicating that these things as such do not exist. That is why I am particularly interested in metaphor, because it is this very form of expression that enables us to say that we are drawing closer to the world, that we are grasping it.

Muyle: In all its complexity.

Havelange: But if we grasp the world with the aid of a metaphor it amounts to saying both 'This is the world' and 'This is not the world, it is a metaphor of the world'. I find this a beautiful position. Because not only does it not relinquish our concern to comprehend but it also situates this concern within the landscape of the multiplicity, the complexity of perspective - inasmuch as it is perspective that gives existence to what we look at.

Muyle: I am particularly fond of the intuitive, multiple, superficial, imprecise aspect it lends; but when one operates within a metaphorical relationship between images, or between words and an image, one can



© Johan Muyle 1999, (left) We don't know him from Eden, Centro De Arte Contemporaneo Wifredo Lam (CUBA) 1999, Installation (detail), (right) We don't know him from Eden, XXIV Biennale de Sao Paulo 1998, Installation (detail). Photos Marc Lander

there is any possibility of co-opting artistic intention or an intention of any kind if there is not generosity, nor in the idea that others should not simply have to respond 'yes' or 'no' to what is presented.

Havelange: I believe that this idea of co-opting is closely allied to the notion I was

Havelange: Perhaps because of the long tradition of concern for objectification which seeks to isolate the 'real' as something capable of being described in all its aspects and in an irrevocable manner.

Metaphor causes a shift in things. It is what intensifies things, increasing them

explain the content of the metaphor by circling around it. As for the metaphor itself, it seems to me that it cannot be formulated - which is what I really like.

Havelange: One is turning around something that is inaccessible.

Muyle: A kind of mystery.

Havelange: There again, I think that a certain type of scientific approach is very closely allied to a certain type of artistic approach.

Through research and development one creates increasingly successful instruments for perceiving the world. At the same time one learns that things are more complex than they appear. Do you think that this links metaphor with present-day scientific development?

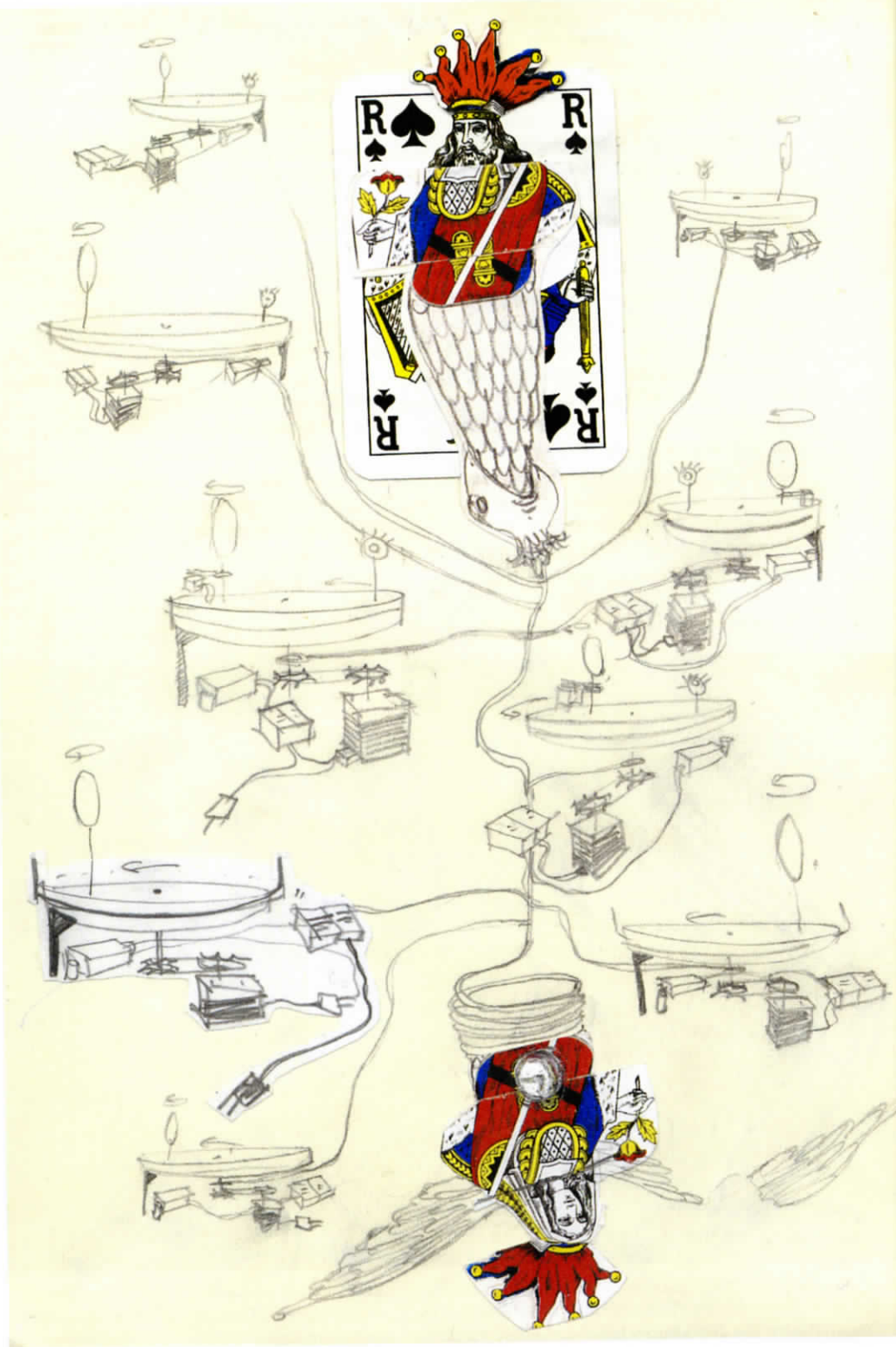
Muyle: The more one sees things, the more one realises that there are things to see. And the more people are placed in communication, the less communication there is. It is true that the more one tends to encompass the whole, the greater the gulfs one encounters. That is why it is important in an artistic project to define, more or less, the working parameters.

One idea from which I would sometimes like to escape is that of egocentricity or ethnocentricity, because, where culture is concerned, the fact is that it cannot be dissociated from the dimension in which one lives and I believe that an idea such as the Internet or globalisation brings with it both the best and the worst. To a great extent the best, because it seems to me that thought - whether artistic or scientific - is governed by its immediate cultural context. There is now a world or global cultural state which it is also interesting to consider.

Havelange: With regard to your wish to do away with this ethnocentric or egocentric perspective, we could perhaps introduce the idea of otherness.

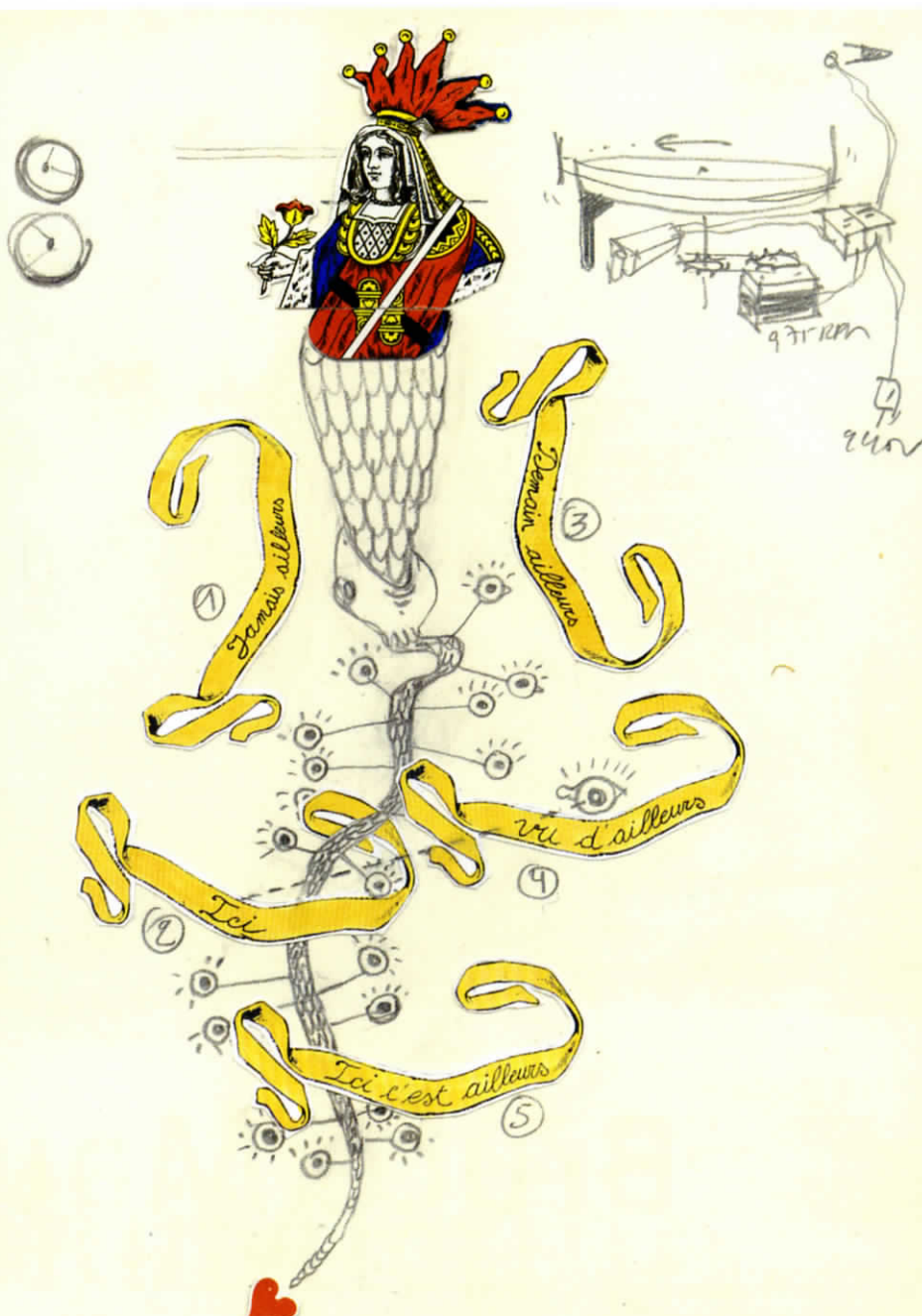
If we look to the past, the traditional concepts of objectification produce the same results. In the history of science, for example, we see the great figures of ancient science acclaimed, judged to be the forerunners of modern times: we see Galileo and Kepler, for example, presented as the creators of modern science. In the field of science, this is the attitude that prevails above all others: an egocentric, ethnocentric or 'time-centric' view - linking everything to the present.

A more anthropological attitude and one more closely allied to what you are saying, is to see in the past something which no longer identifies with ourselves. Something which questions, which troubles and which disturbs the present. Not Galileo in terms of his contribution to the future of physics or astronomy but Galileo as someone who belongs to a time that is not our own. At this point the focus of the historian's relationship becomes otherness: of what we are able to render intelligible in the past it is that which is profoundly other and yet which we have,



however, inherited; that is to say, with which we are nevertheless, in a certain way, linked. At this point, through the medium of very concrete objects - a research project, a book, etc. - we attain something which is profoundly destabilising: something which,

precisely at the start of the determinations that make us what we are and make us ask a certain type of question, transforms that question. One moves, in some way, from the myth of the precursor to the reality of the other.



ONE MAN'S SORROW - IS ANOTHER MAN'S JOY

- ① NEVER SOMEWHERE ELSE
- ② HERE
- ③ TOMORROW IS SOMEWHERE ELSE
- ④ SEEN FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE
- ⑤ HERE IS SOMEWHERE ELSE

And perhaps the same is true of a work of art. A work whose ideas you do not completely control, not because you are not 'capable' of controlling them but because its very impulse comes from the fact that you have placed yourself in a position of non-

control. This impulse allows you to find in the work something which is not altogether you and which reveals you to others as the manufacturer of the work.

Muyle: I very much like this idea that it is the question which is transformed and which

becomes another question.

Havelange: Which is why I am against the idea of a history whose sole vocation would be to render the past objective. This is what distinguishes this form of history from a history which seeks to render the past intelligible. To render something intelligible means to provide a series of questions that give access to the world. The point of such questions is to lead the interrogation somewhere other than where we have come from. At the same time we need to say that we are of our time, quite simply, but that the fact of doing something removes us outside of our time, outside of this type of determination. And almost in spite of ourselves. Perhaps, in the plastic arts field, this is achieved through the impulse of the piece which is created; and in the historian's field, through our reliance on testimonies, the otherness of which is a dimension we accept.

When you spoke of the artist as perhaps being pretentious this is perhaps because this otherness is generated by the object produced: the relationship is established almost within oneself.

For the historian this relationship is generated by testimony: witnesses who speak another language, who do not think in the same way, who have other images, other metaphors, another manner of seeing and of resolving the questions with which they are confronted. Therefore, there is perhaps in the historian's approach a greater principle of externality than in the artist's, as I conceive it.

Muyle: I believe that we are immensely fortunate to be in the space and the place in which we find ourselves. I think this in terms of the fantasised idea one sometimes has of the artist. And this odd habit which turns certain artists into symbols of a culture. I am thinking of Joseph Beuys in particular, whose attitude I basically like, though I can barely tolerate the fact that he stands as a symbol for Germany. The artist agrees to become a kind of symbol, or to play into the hands of dogma or of belonging to a culture. I believe we are enormously lucky to be in a country which does not, in some respect, belong to a dominant culture. This gives us a much greater liberty to be - once we have accepted the vagueness, the imprecision and the lack of definition as a parameter in itself.

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One man's sorrow is another man's joy
 double page for janus from sketchbook
 21 December 1999
 Photo Marc Lander