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## **Nicolas Clauss' ART IF I WANT: Aims, ingredients and history of an artistic-cultural project**

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# Nicolas Clauss' *Art if I want* : Aims, ingredients and history of an artistic-cultural project

By Laura Borràs Castanyer

No. 35 – 2005

The multimedia project *De l'art si je veux* (Art if I want), on line since December 2004, is led by the charismatic French artist Nicolas Clauss. The result is the response to a certain challenge and it shows an admirably balanced blend of freshness and profundity. The more one delves into the subtext of the work, the more convinced one becomes that *Art if I want* is a very special gem of digital creation and at the same time much more than one work of art. The challenge of this work consisted in creating a work of art out of an experience that is aesthetic and at the same time alive. The origin of the work is to be found in an experiment that the artist carried out accompanied by 8 teenagers (5 girls and 3 boys between 11 and 16 years old) from the des Sablons, district of Le Mans, a town that is famous for its 24-hour Grand Prix motor race. With this group of teenagers Clauss discussed the work of several modern artist such as Arman, Spoerri, Basquiat, Cattelan and Chapman, the Dinos brothers, Munch, Duchamp and Bacon. The paper describes this discussion about art and analyses its result as an own work of art.

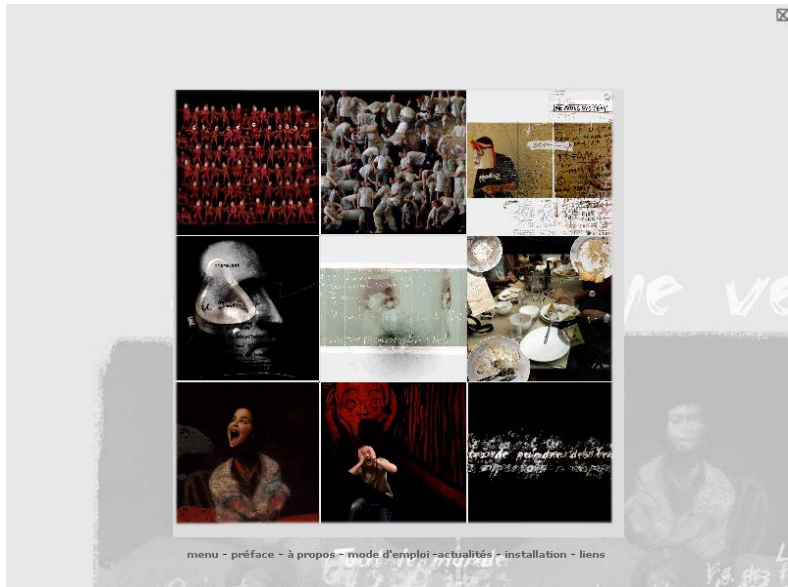


The multimedia project *De l'art si je veux* (*Art if I want*), on line since December 2004, is led by the charismatic French artist Nicolas Clauss. The result is the response to a certain challenge and it shows an admirably balanced blend of freshness and profundity. What is incontrovertible is that the more you delve into the subtext of the work, the more convinced you become that *Art if I want* is a very special gem of digital creation and at the same time it is much more than one work of art. It is a daring display, which – I make it clear at the outset – I find completely amazing. The challenge consisted in creating, in producing a work – in a word, art – out of an experience that is esthetic and at the same time alive. The origin of the work is to be found in an experiment that the artist carried out accompanied by 8 teenagers (5 girls and 3 boys between 11 and 16 years old) from the des Sablons, district of Le Mans, a town that is famous for its 24-hour Grand Prix motor race.

The meetings took place at L'Espal, a cultural center specialized in contemporary dance, theatre, visual arts and multimedia, where, during a series of workshops, youngsters and adolescents experimented with contemporary art. There were several aims. For one thing, the intention was to initiate these neophytes into modern art starting from a central idea: exploration. The project sought to lead these teenagers – their ages ranged from 11 to 16 – towards the plastic arts and to record their experience of discovery – obviously with a pedagogical motivation – and it is important to bear in mind the ideological and cultural background of those who were selected: young people from the blue-collar districts of a provincial town. Second, the project was deliberately driven by experiment and creativity: exploiting and editing the recordings of the dialogues and the experiments in order to convert the workshops into works of art in themselves. What were the ingredients that went into this? Painting and photography, both stills and movies, speaking and writing, calligraphy and typography, among other media and creative techniques, came together in the creative mosaic that makes up the work. The catalyst that has made possible *Art if I want* is Nicolas Clauss, the many-sided French artist belonging to the *Paris Connection* group, who is constantly exploring the possibilities of digital media for artistic reflections and creations<sup>1</sup>.

## Art if I want

The title of the work itself is significant. Hermeneutically speaking, it is a remarkable title: "Art if I want". This radical intrusion of subjectivity into artistic criteria strikes me as being profoundly disturbing for the commonplaces of the art world and also sometimes for the indiscriminate support for any simulacrum that smacks of modernity.



The work consists of 9 pieces, like images in a medieval retable, but what is its intention? To begin with, and bearing in mind the eminently practical and experimental origin of the project – the workshops with these privileged young participants – it is clear that it seeks to project a new look at the esthetic-artistic world that surrounds us. To this end, the group worked with, and tried to get familiarized with, the work and styles of some of the most up-to-date (and difficult!) artists: Arman (born 1928), Daniel Spoerri (1930), Ben (1935), Christian Boltanski (1944), Maurizio Cattelan (1960), the brothers Dinos (1962) and Jake (1966) Chapman – alongside the “classics” or canons of modernity such as (in their different ways) Edvard Munch (1863-1944), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) or Francis Bacon (1909-1992).

The work is thoroughly metadiscursive, even at the artistic level. To the reflections on art and on the selected artists, we must add the metanarrative reading that Clauss contributes from the very materiality of his production. In this way the work of these artists becomes the material and focus of creative reflection which Clauss himself exploits in his own work. This is an inescapable interpretative aspect and it certainly affects the reading of the project as a whole.

At the same time, however, we can detect the existence of a certain intertextual dialogue involving most of these contemporary artists. The intertextuality is an interpretative parameter of this artistic composition for two reasons. First, because Clauss has drawn explicitly on works such as Munch's “The Cry”, Duchamp's “Fountain” or any one of Francis Bacon's series “Heads”, incorporating them directly

into his creations. Second, the artists that are the object of creative thought in *Art if I want* also maintain links among themselves, sometimes due to the recurrent choice of theme, sometimes due to the accepted influences or the obsessions that they share. At another level, moreover, it is not fortuitous that some of the selected artists have returned insistently to the role of *objects* in contemporary art – Duchamp incorporates them, Spoerri shows them “decomposing”, while Arman simply destroys them – while others have made names for themselves in the field of experimentation that leads from the meditation on otherness to the juncture between the monstrous and the repulsive – Munch representing the first, while Bacon, Cattelan and the Chapman brothers represent the second and third. These are the interpretative elements that are inescapable and which certainly influence the reading that we make of the whole project.

All the same, we go beyond the experience of the transitions between artists and works, and of the technical solutions that Clauss has selected, many of which are those of a painter making electronic brushstrokes, while others show an unwonted freshness and force. What I find very interesting is the attempt to seek a “clean view”, the “sincere” interpretations of an unbiased audience, outside the reach of cultural referents which on occasion can even produce distortion. The search is for a viewer who is frank and non-expert (I refrain from using the word ‘inexpert’, above all bearing in mind how far Clauss allows us to consider with new eyes the fallacy of the observer’s expertise and thus artistic “consumption”). This viewer is to be faced with, and in the end inserted into, the most radically up-to-date work of art. This is, I am sure, the way the work was conceived, and the front page (the entrance to the menu) is a good example. The phrases collected here are the opinions expressed by the participants on some of the works. Opinions such as: “Art serves no purpose”, “People can think what they like” or “Everything is art” give us a clear idea of the range of the reflections which the work embraces and generates. The process involved might be considered one of artistic demystification – following the demystifying role played by artists such as Warhol or Duchamp himself, and forcing us to reflect on the purpose of art in our present society. At the same time, the process is a dream factory, a space for technical creativity, and also a place for the reformulation of artistic intention, even a “second-hand” art, as Manovich calls it since it takes footage from mass media and rearranges it in a specific setting. Clauss pricks our consciences while giving us a cultural and artistic “education”. He returns to the perennial concerns and the eternal doubts that art should (or should not) take account of, and why.

In a way, the very existence, and presentation as an art object, of the aesthetic and artistic exploitation and re-creation of the materials of the experiment – expressions, opinions, images, recordings, etc. – underlines the view that everything is capable of becoming art, that everybody can think what they like, and that Nicolas

Clauss and his team of young artists have breathed new life into all this material, have turned it into “art” because they wanted to. This, then, is *Art if I want*.



Arman



Basquiat



Duchamp



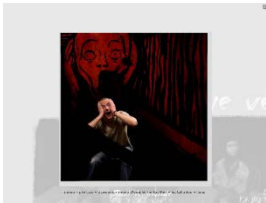
Spoerri



Bacon



Chapman / Cattelan



Munch

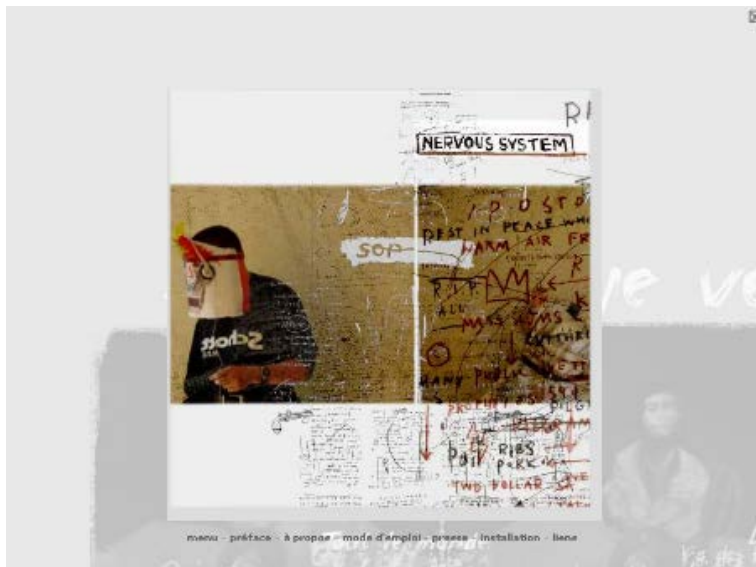


Memo / Boltanski



Art / Ben

## Basquiat



Let's talk about the important presence of music. In fact, when once one begins to navigate this tableau, the slightest contact with the words "Nervous system" produces a kind of 'scratch' on 'vinyl'. This doubtless draws on a certain musical aesthetic – of a rapper kind – which coincides with the aesthetics of the images of the figures that move and seem to dance to the rhythm that the user imposes or creates for them. The use of these elements that are common in popular culture is undoubtedly the work's idiosyncratic characteristic. Elements that derive from hip-hop, which is a movement based on rap music, from break dance and from graffiti blend perfectly in the popular aesthetics of this peculiar work, where music and especially rhythm play a very important part. This isn't anything new, but rather a recurrent feature in works by Clauss. (I am thinking above all of *Legato*, where the user can interact and create the music, becoming composer, conductor, instrumentalist and choreographer all at the same time, but the presence of music is also crucial in the interior of this artistic archipelago, where the islands/works are joined together precisely by what separates them.) It is a Clauss trademark to allow the user to interact and become the composer of a melody just by moving the cursor over the screen.

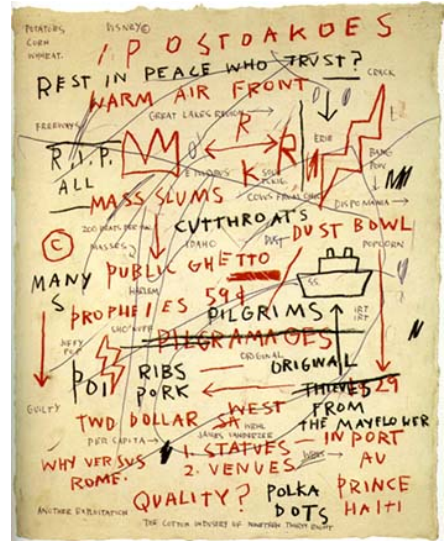


The musical effects are accompanied by others: pictorial ones (a pistol that reminds us of the famous 'pipe'); verbal ones ("Rest in peace", "Who trust?", messages that can be seen on any urban surface, from a lavatory wall to a façade, and including any public furniture); and iconic ones (a cigarette, a price tag, a bar code, etc.) as different drawings appear that serve as graffiti and which, through the manual dexterity of the spectator-agent's interaction, turn into the improvised dancers of this peculiar symphony of everyday things. When one attains a certain level of 'reading' or refreshing of the work, one can even get the creator to speak, make a poetic note appear, or elicit an explanation of how far the work is a result of the impact that, for example, Jean Michel Basquiat or Andy Warhol have had on him. It is a work that also has a humorous side, with elements that make you smile. A picture that thus serves as a counterpoint to the whole work and is completely inspired by the graffiti on the walls of New York in general, and by Basquiat's work in particular.





Notice how "Quality 1983" is incorporated directly into "Basquiat", and also "Jawbone of an Ass" (1982).



Clauss sets us very cleverly in the role of creator, of 'writer', (since graffiti artists are styled 'writers', not 'painters'). In effect, what is crucial to them is the wish to create words on public surfaces such as walls. It is a wish to express yourself through the creative process, which is more important than the permanence of the product. Graffiti are thus temporary, even ephemeral. It is a subversive artistic form that allows the expression of feelings or ideologies. Here, the reference is specifically to sadness, to illness, to AIDS, and so on. Obviously, artists such as Picasso or Arman had already used walls as 'canvases', but the work of today's artists like Basquiat has made a deep impression on Clauss. What particularly interests him is the importance of the material, of the role of design or of painting the material that he uses, of his own personality.

This graffiti-work is an art of recognised artists such as the ones he mentions, but at the same time an eminently anonymous art. Thanks to the city surfaces that are transformed through the spray and aerosol creations, this art leads to a certain revolution that is visual and clearly also political. The streets are turned into improvised galleries of the least tamed of the arts.



## Duchamp



This part of the work is wholly inspired by Marcel Duchamp's work, just as the title indicates. His presence – in image, voice and creation – is constantly present. It all begins with shadows playing on the artist's face, and we immediately see blocks of letters that appear on the screen, and our clicks make the sound of a typewriter. For a moment (which we have captured in the following illustration), the mixture of the image, the photo of the artist, the presence of his signature, i.e. his name, and the titles of his own works – the ready-mades, to be exact – appear united and

dissolved at the same time under the title "titre.txt". This is of our times, completely up to the minute, the mark of a finished digital document: a perfect eye-opener. Thus, in this fleeting moment, I see the philosophy underlying the whole project, which inevitably has Duchamp as a reference point. His whole career seems designed to show that the absence of production on the part of the artist does not diminish the value of his work as art. And the same goes for the assemblage and the fact that the works were not unique. We are thinking above all of his ready-mades, where what counts is the choice, the selection, the decision to remove an object or a series of objects from their natural surroundings, to present them afresh and rename them, thus giving way to a symbolic play of representations evoked by the objects chosen. In fact, every selection is intentional. Is this not the creative philosophy shared by Clauss, who takes material recorded from everyday experiences (that is to say, not new, not original) and arranges and presents it under the guise of subjectivity?

But let us continue. When we begin to move the cursor, we notice that our movement generates a round bubble that moves and allows us to glimpse a distorted image, whose appearance coincides with the disappearance of the face of the person responsible, Duchamp himself, and his handwriting, his signature. A sort of collage of the titles of Duchamp's works – "Faux-Vagin" ("False vagina") (1962-1963), "Belle Haleine" ("Beautiful Breath") (1921) – together with reproductions of these and of other works, – "Etant donnés" ("Being given") (1946-1966), "Fountain" (1917), L.H.O.O.Q. (1919), etc. There are also allusions to ready-mades like "bouche-evier" ("mouth-sink") (1964), "roue de bicyclette" ("bicycle wheel") (1913), "La Bagarre d'Austerlitz" ("The Rumpus at Austerlitz") (1921) o "en prevision d'un bras cassé" ("in anticipation of a broken arm") (1915); objects such as "Torture-mort" ("Torture-death") (1959), paintings like "Nude descending a staircase" (1913) or puns such as "A Guest + A Host = A Ghost" (1953). It was Samia, thinking of the playful intentions that she saw in Duchamp, who had the idea to include the titles of the works. Duchamp was a great chess player, and this is why Clauss incorporates into the work an image of him playing chess over a urinal, as well as the Gioconda with a moustache and other references to his work.

There are innumerable possible transformations of this Duchampian show. Each click allows us a new mixture, a new 'mixtification', which is accompanied by various voices that talk about the works and about their creator. Voices of boys and girls who as soon talk of vulgarity as of provocation. Harsh judgements of his art, which is seen as 'sacrilegious', 'extraordinary', 'vulgar', 'magnificent', 'superb', 'nasty', are found alongside reflections on his character and his actions, such as: "He put a urinal in an art gallery", "He messed about with the titles so that some of his works have nothing to do with the titles", "He didn't need to be able to paint to be an artist because he used things that already existed to make art". Lastly, we also find attempts at interpretation, at understanding, such as: "Duchamp speaks about

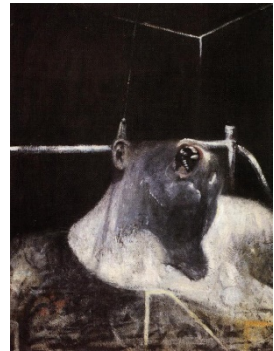
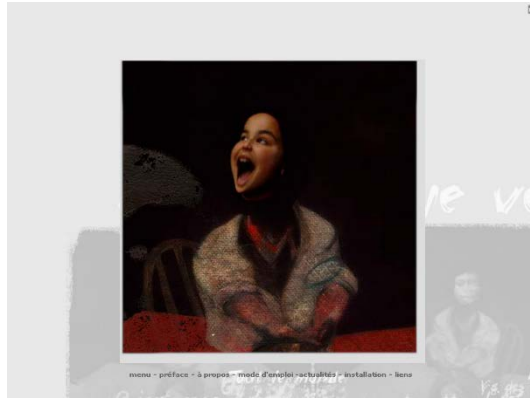
painting and sculpture in every one of his works", or that he creates 'realistically', that, like the Dadaists, "he likes to play with words", and this explains "Rose Selavy" which, as well as being transvestism, is also a play on the popular French expressions "c'est la vie" and "la vie en rose".



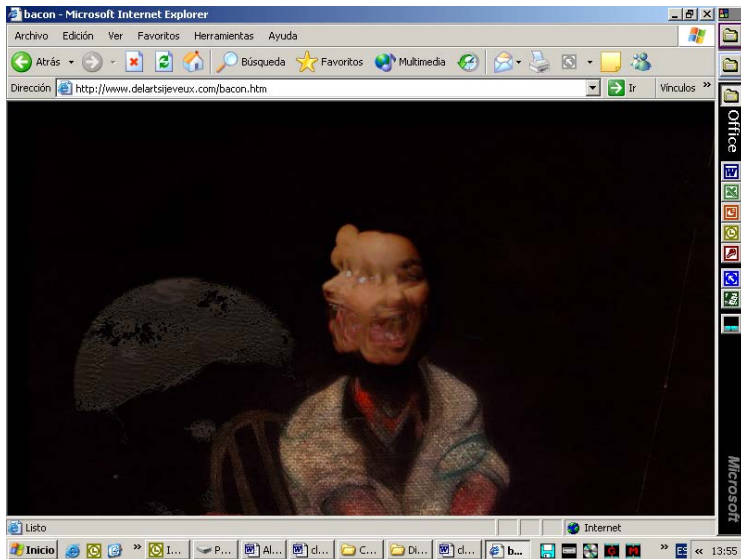
The spectator can make up his own particular set of opinions, a kind of music for human voice (in the style of John Cage's *Mesostics?*), where every thought, every male or female voice is superimposed one on another to turn all this chattering into noise. However, Clauss has also incorporated Duchamp's own voice, his own reflections, a kind of self defence in this particular context. So, with a sustained click, we hear Duchamp speaking in English about the interpreter, the spectator. He maintains that the work of art "is not performed by the artist alone"; that the spectator constitutes the other artistic pole. Putting the work in touch with the interpreters, who contribute by using their store of recorded and photographed cuttings of reality – is this not what Clauss also wants to get across with his *Art if you want?*

## Bacon

We are now in a setting with colours that are typical of Francis Bacon: intense red, 'red-wine red', used since "The Magdalene" (1945-6) – with influences from Poussin and the massacre of the innocents; black, which is omnipresent in the 50's; and a set of greys and whites as in "Head I" (1949) from Richard S. Zeisler's collection.



More than 600 images have been combined into a photo-composition of children's faces which, on a movement of the cursor, display a whole range of deformations exactly in the style of the artist. The superimposition of expressions reveal screams, shouts, laughs which are at the same time gradually deformed so as to become a dynamic homage to Bacon. We are thinking, for example, of the work entitled "Head VI" (1949), a seminal image from the long list of re-workings and quotations from Velazquez's painting of Innocence X, together with this screen grab of a child laughing, so distant in the depiction of the open mouth, and at the same time aesthetically so close.



This contrast makes me think of the dual intention of pastiche and iconoclasm on the part of both Bacon and Clauss. Even the structure of the space, almost in the form of a triptych, with another figure that is also subject to the most varied metamorphoses, recalls the most famous triptychs or triple studies from 1962 and 1983.

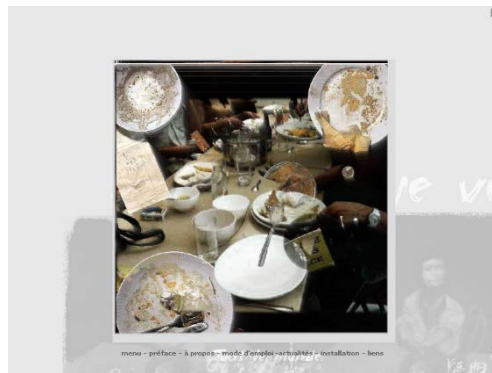




The work allows a play with distance and proximity, and when the cursor moves across the face, deformities are generated that arise from the development and

superimposition of features and expressions that create a totally grotesque image. In this sense, the grotesque nature of the 'work' is reinforced by the body that belongs to the face, the body of a dwarf. This is all accompanied by background music and, when we reach the far left-hand side, a young voice is heard speaking of deformity, of cruelty, and even of selfishness. A set of clicks recomposes the fragmented figure. As the artist has explained me, the teenagers have understood Bacon's work by themselves and they have finally said: "Bacon shows us on a external way how we really are inside. And we are cruel, bad, egoists..."

## Daniel Spoerri



Daniel Spoerri is one of the signatories of the *Nouveau Réalisme* manifesto proclaiming "new perceptive approaches to reality" and he is also a member of Fluxus. This part of *Art if you want* is devoted to him and is clearly based on works like the one that was shown, and partially 'consumed', by the visitors to the 1979 Sydney Biennale.

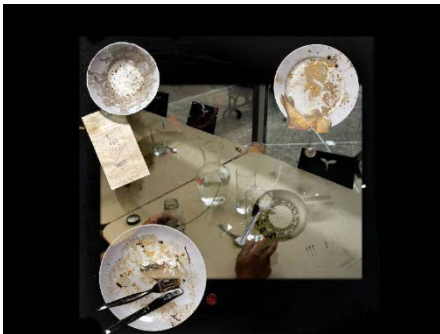




Spoerri's artistic offerings appeal in effect to the 'physical experience' of art, an art that can be seen, felt and eaten. This eat-art is a way of incorporating feelings into art, a kind of 'gastrosophy' rather than 'gastronomy'. In the 60's he transformed the first floor of the Jeu de Paume, the prestigious Paris art gallery, into the 'Spoerri Restaurant', where he put on 10 special dinners for 150 guests.



At the Allan Stone Gallery in New York, in the course of the exhibition '31 Variations on a Meal', he served up the remains of a dinner for famous guests from the world of pop-art such as Ray Johnson, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rosenblum, Marjorie Strider and Andy Warhol, among others. In 2003 in Barcelona there was the exhibition-banquet at the Palau de la Virreina, with numbered tickets at more modest prices than the earlier events. For just 20 euros one became a guest at the feast-performance entitled "Un coup de dés" ("A throw of the dice"), an obvious reference to Mallarmé's poem and also to the idea of chance. The event began when a girl's innocent hand seated the guests in the theatre, divided into poor and rich according to whether the whim of the dice turned up odd or even, and it ended as an exercise in anthropological hyperrealism: undoubtedly a peculiar and unique cultural happening.

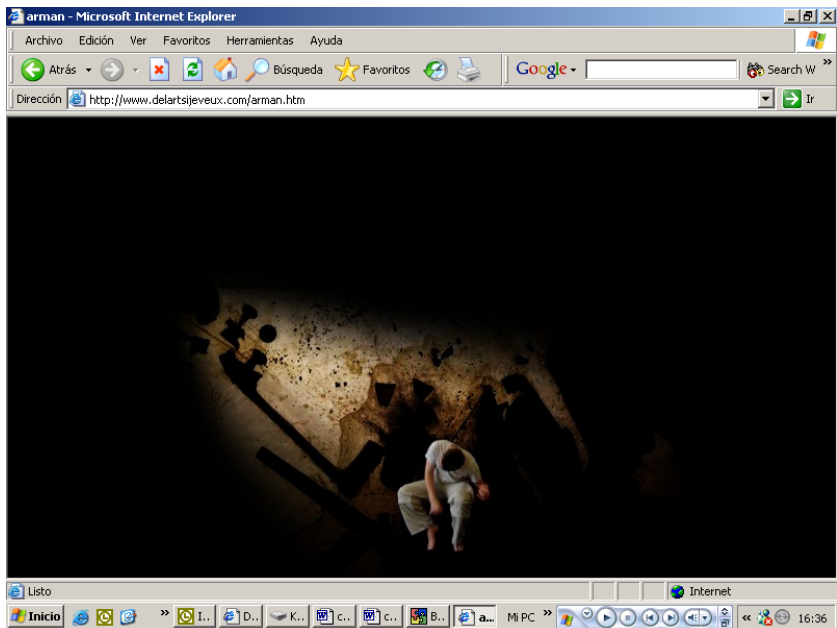
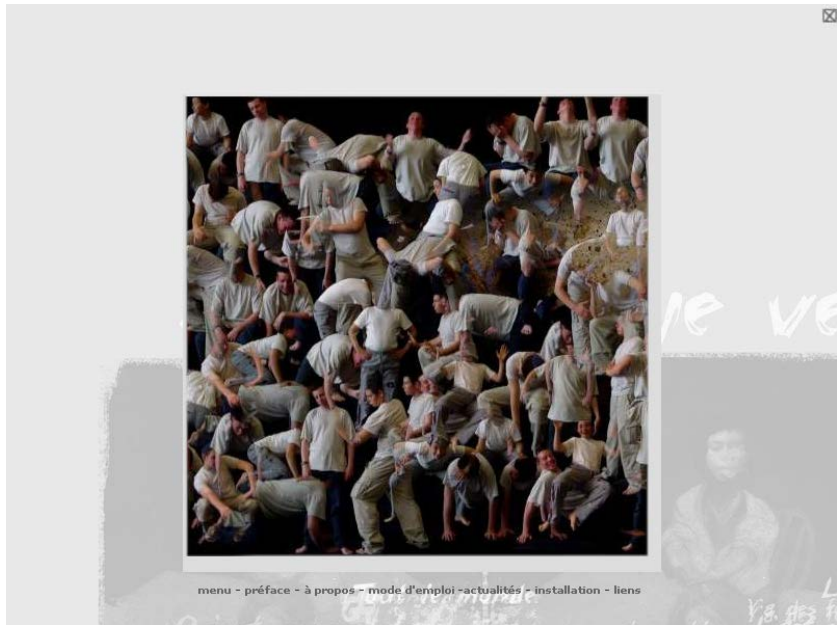


In a similar vein, Clauss presents his 'Spoerri' as various postprandial scenes, where at first a white plate – the only hotspot on the first screen – makes music and moves, thus generating a faint aura to and fro on a table partially cleared, where the animated repetition of the images creates an effect of movement. In the following scenes, we find ourselves in a restaurant atmosphere, with its accompanying sounds, where the noise of plates and cutlery mixes with the talk about food and about Daniel Spoerri, an original artist who, continuing the path of the ready-mades, makes art out of everyday objects.

As we continue our navigation, we find various tables with different objects, sometimes in black and white, sometimes in colour, with a peculiar music derived from noises that are produced by the kitchen and table utensils. In a play of appearances and disappearances, movements around the screen/table, the rhythm of the objects is the rhythm of the music, where a spoon becomes master of the musical and culinary ceremonies. Again and again there is emphasis on the importance of the presentation of objects on a table. There is also a thorough investigation of how objects of everyday use, and even those of instant consumption, become 'art' through manipulation or the repetition of filmed images. It is a piece that is living, in movement, where the ingredients change before, during and after the 'duration' of the show. The traces of the food that remain, the absence of what has disappeared ... the whole thing becoming a digital artistic creation, which is at least a little inconsistent if we bear in mind what Spoerri has claimed. In Barcelona he maintained that he didn't hold with the culture of computers and multimedia, and he didn't even visit the 'Banquet' show because several works there were produced with digital media. He put it like this: "I don't understand how one can mount a computerised show about food. I still like to touch, see and smell it." However, Clauss does not reach the level of Homaru Cantu, the Rumanian chef who 'cooks' and serves sushi in his restaurant in Chicago, making edible menus out of soya paper and differently flavoured organic inks that he makes himself. But with the piece that bears his name, Clauss apparently seeks to convince this flamboyant chef that it is possible to cross the digital frontier and that doing so does not necessarily imply losing the artistic dimension. At bottom it is perhaps only a temporary phenomenon. We should bear in mind that Spoerri has declared that "art does not exist; it is merely a way of reacting to the age in which we live, and it is each one of us that marks the difference between what is and what is not art." If Spoerri invented eat-art, artists like Clauss continue to explore the artistic paths of net art and digital creation so that one day eat-art might have a perfect translation in the digital world.

## Arman

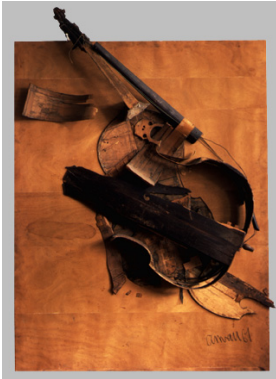
On a dark stage, with noises that sound something like a shipwreck, a human puppet comes alive as soon as the cursor touches it. We immediately see a human wheel that moves, approaching and receding, with overlapping voices, just as the views and assessments of contemporary art overlap.



At first the verbal messages are intelligible – there is talk, for example, of ‘nouveaux realistes’, artists such as Arman and Spoerri - but the moment comes when they seem to revolve to the rhythm of the wheel, and the words become musical notes that are rudely incorporated into the melody of the work.

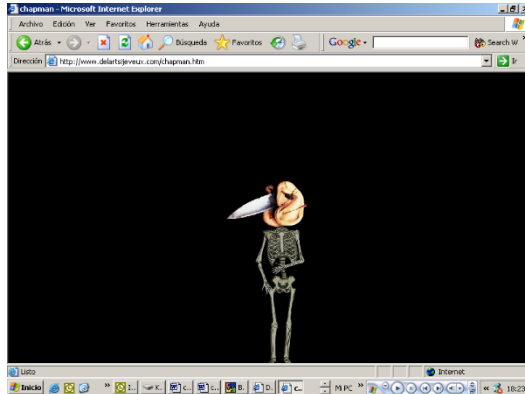


The wheel turns and turns to the rhythm of this gloomy music, offering us a kaleidoscope of movements of someone seated on a chair and posed as if to play the cello or perhaps the double bass. The turning wheel shows us the movement of the putative instrumentalist, and so we see him turning and twisting in the most varied postures. The teenagers considered that Arman makes accumulations and that's why they asked Clauss to make accumulations of gestures, postures and persons. Behind, blending with it/them, pieces of wood that constitute the materiality of the instrument. At the same time, however, it is a direct intertextual reference to the work of Arman, who did not give a title to the work. I am thinking of works like the series of “Colères” (Rages) of 1961, 1962, 1970 or the untitled works of 1975. The ‘rage’ of the double bass on the wood is here subtly reproduced, although the violence is attenuated to make way for the materiality of the work's components and for the turning wheel of the human-puppet's syncopated movements, a performer who turns into the material performed, corporal textuality on an artistic stage provided by Arman's own work.



## Chapman

The artistic creation/entertainment of the ever controversial brothers Dinos & Jake Chapman, on the one hand, and Maurizio Cattelan, on the other, are represented here by 'Chapman', a piece very much involving the participation of one of the project's adolescents, Anthony.

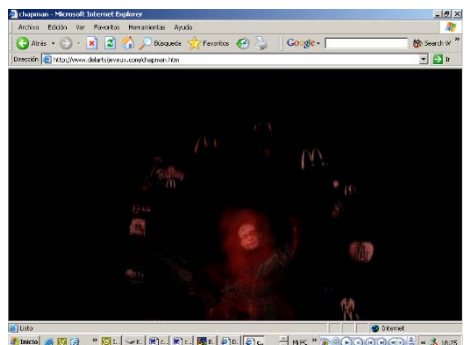
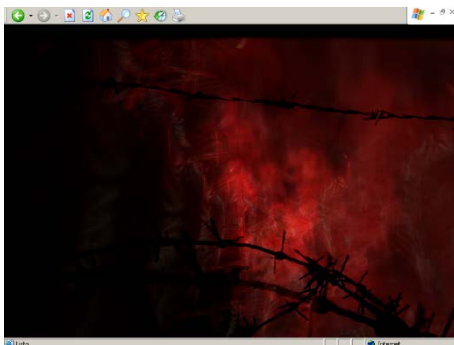


The piece begins with a peculiar articulated skeleton that dances ecstatically when it is touched by the cursor. This 'Frankenstein' was created by introducing an upside-down element from Hiëronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. It moves as if it was dancing to the rhythm of the organ cacophony that we ourselves, acting as performers and orchestra conductors, harmonise in a chaotic melody that gives way to an accelerated version of the Sex Pistols' song '*Anarchy in the UK*'. This famous

song with its 'provocative' lyrics, "I want to be an anarchist", "I want to be an Antichrist", is playfully deformed and in a way ridiculed by the childish voice that results from the manipulation caused by the increase in speed. This jest is a kind of homage to the common practice of a technology that today has practically disappeared: vinyl records. Almost all of us have heard 45s played at 33 and vice versa, which produces the effect of what is reproduced here.

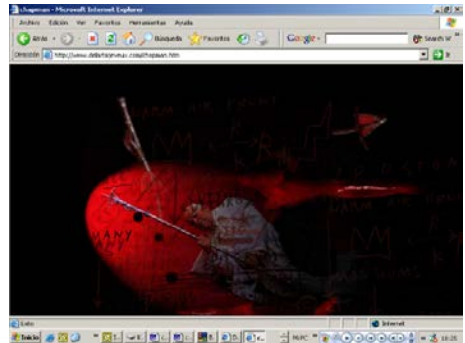
As from this moment, navigating modifies the work and makes it move through very different spaces, always guided by the commentaries from the conversations of the Chapman brothers and Cattelan. Basquiat and Munch also appear because Anthony, the 17-year-old who made the selection, 'adores gore' and considers that that gore is what all these artists have in common, though not all to the same degree. So, as they did in "Hell", a tableau in which thousands of toy second world war German soldiers mutilate and kill each other and themselves in a psychotic Nazi orgy, and had it interpreted as a profound comment on the Holocaust and its representations: "The idea of making 5,000 little toy soldiers all running round mutilating each other, and then find pathos in that - it's alarming that people are prepared to cathartically reappropriate these things which are so redundant and void," says Jake. "It took us three years to make 5,000 people. It took the Germans three hours to kill 15,000 Russian prisoners of war."

It therefore occurred to him to take his own toy soldiers, scan them, dye them red, and integrate them into the composition. Struck by the works of the Chapmans, Anthony reviews some of the most famous works of these English brothers, and Clauss mimics elements from them to make his own composition. He even draws on the brothers themselves, first their faces raining down at the side of the well-known M of McDonalds, and then he turns them into miniature red soldiers for which they provide the faces and thus begin a sort of war just like the machine games for killing Martians.



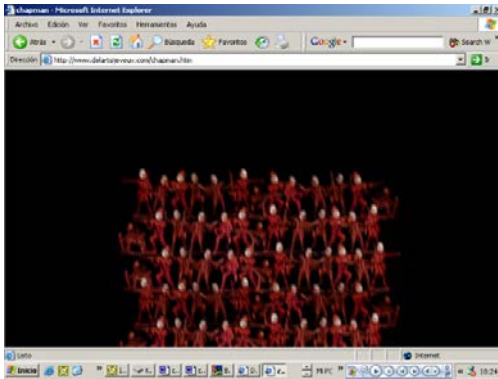


All of this against a dismal, bloodstained, black and red background of trenches, where death is the ubiquitous motif, with the continual noise of shots and cries. One of the scenes that we reach in our navigation even takes us to the transition between artists. The use of the image of the Pope as an icon is a subversive, provocative element that links Cattelan to the Chapman brothers. The latter always strive in their work to push back and expand frontiers and cultural taboos. They are aggressive, with a subversive black humour, dealing frankly with topics such as violence, death, torture, sex and war because they want to create 'moral panic'. Cattelan also seeks to provoke people and stir their conscience in order to test the limits of social tolerance. Antony is in tune with their position and says that when he saw Cattelan's *La Nona Ora*, where the Pope is trapped in a meteorite, he found it a great lark: "I had a good laugh."



The image of Cattelan is included directly in the work, and is then given movement and life as it is reshaped and manipulated. Here lies another of the strong points that are common to all the fragments of the piece and which, from a philosophical point of view, expressly links to the Chapman brothers' thoughts: in a world where artistic reproduction is a fact, it is impossible to distinguish between original and reproduction.

What's more, in alluding to the title of the Chapman brothers' exhibition at the Kunsthhaus in Bregenz, 'Explaining Christians to Dinosaurs', the works of the British artists are fused with those of the Italian.



After all, the whole work provides striking evidence of the provocative principle that the Chapman brothers have chosen as the hallmark of their work. In a way, Clauss is nodding in the direction of the Chapmans' actions in their 'intervention', for example, on the work of Goya. It is well known that the brothers bought a complete set of what has become the most revered series of prints in existence, Goya's Disasters of War. And to be able to see which was the popular opinion, let's remember what "The Guardian" commented at that time: "It is a first-rate, mint condition set of 80 etchings printed from the artist's plates. In terms of print connoisseurship, in terms of art history, in any terms, this is a treasure - and they have vandalised it." They explained it like this: "We had it sitting around for a couple of years, every so often taking it out and having a look at it," says Dinos, until they were quite sure what they wanted to do. "We always had the intention of rectifying it, to take that nice word from The Shining, when the butler's trying to encourage Jack Nicholson to kill his family - to rectify the situation," said Jake. "So we've gone very systematically through the entire 80 etchings," continues Dinos, "and changed all the visible victims' heads to clowns' heads and puppies' heads." The "new" work was called "Insult to Injury", and the exhibition in which it was shown for the first time, at Modern Art Oxford, was called "The Rape of Creativity".



Goya's Disasters of War is a precocious modern masterpiece, a work left by its creator as his final savage bequest to the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries - it was far too anti-clerical and unpatriotic to be published in his lifetime, and the first ever edition came out in 1863, three and a half decades after his death in 1828. From the very start of its public existence, it has been experienced not as a historic but as a contemporary work, its images so urgent and truthful that they function as living, new art. And it is this colossus whose masterpiece the Chapman brothers chose to defile. Perhaps they also wanted –like Clauss proposes us in this piece- people to reflect on the concept “work of art”.

Anyway, some of the opinions were: “Defacing a work of art is possibly the last taboo of the liberal, Britart-loving, Tate Modern-going public.” Or “to destroy a work of art is a genuinely nasty, insane, deviant thing to do”.

It seems clear to me that Clauss incorporates a reflection on manipulation, on play, on transgression, but fortunately he does so in a virtual form. At least in his case, the ‘artistic intervention’ or attack on the history of art is ‘reversible’, is not permanent.

## “Art”



We are now considering what is undoubtedly the most ‘textual’ work in *Art if I want*. Here the allusion is to the artist Ben Vautier, with works like the following, where the meta-artistic reflection is very obvious.



However, what stands out is the extent to which Clauss wants to disorientate us regarding the creative boundaries. The first thing we see is the statement: "anybody can set a wheel on a stool", in an obvious allusion to Duchamp's work from 1913,



*Bicycle Wheel*, which presents a bicycle wheel mounted on a kitchen stool and which was intended as a decoration for the artist's studio. It was the first of a long series of ready-mades. Marcel Duchamp started the tradition of selecting objects and exhibiting them because he was convinced that. "Aesthetic actions should derange the set of symbolic representations that are spontaneously associated with these forms."

But back to Clauss, simply by moving the cursor around the screen, the statement starts to move and is transformed into a question, which I think is the final purpose of the whole work. With a simple click that provides the work with movement, this statement, now converted into a set of letters (paint on the screen), starts a dance in which the words come and go. They swing to and fro, seeming to snake from left to right of the screen, becoming legible just for a moment, then suddenly turning brusquely, making a circle and repeating the same step as if it was a dance. This dance of

letters is incomprehensible but, because it is text, it pleads to be understood. In fact, it is a challenge in a cruel game where Clauss tries to confuse us by offering sequences of words that could have meaning, but which do not make up an intelligible message. At first it is a turn in a dance, but it immediately gives way to a dance of messages.



On a black ground, which emphasises the corporeality of the white words, appear the replies that various visitors to the l’Espal exhibitions have given to the question: “What is art?”; they first appear on the screen as a few pixels, but they then grow in size. Here we are faced with some reflections that quickly become aphorisms or that turn into lapidary expressions, while others are simply trite and stupid. “Every work has a history.” “Art is amusing.” “Stop painting nude women.” Everyone is an artist.” “Art can be everything or nothing.” And so on. In this stream of declarations, which go from the sublime to a simple insult, we find a host of opinions and the controversy that contemporary art has generated. It is a mixture of written text and speech, and out of this litany of contributions, we can pick out opinions that reflect the most classical views of art: “It gives a certain aesthetic pleasure”, “it generates feelings”, “it communicates what cannot be said in words”, “something is art when it has no utility”, and more provocatively: “To be an artist, you don’t need money; you only need to be heard and get your idea across”, “We don’t always understand it, but when we do, we see that it has sense”, “the spectators can think what they like”, “We sometimes include as art things that are stupid”, “what is art for us is not art for others”.



## Memo

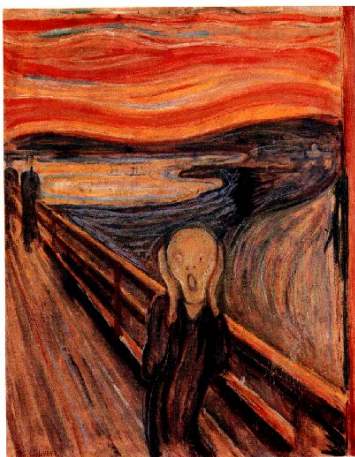


As soon as we enter this piece, we hear music that sounds to the nebulous rhythm of a blurred swarm of numbers and ages that we can move around the screen as if they were flies or bees. In this frenetic movement, they change texture and colour and leave a trace behind on the screen, starting as more or less black and then becoming a whole gamut of greys that gain or lose definition, depending on the case. If we make a click, we are immediately taken to a new screen in the centre of which we have a sort of blackboard. This is the setting for the recollection, for the memory mentioned in the title, since this piece is a memorial where the whole l'Espal team appears, from the director to the technicians, and it is charged with intimate memories. Each of the 17 participants holds an object that represents something important for them, and they explain in words the objects that they hold. If we move the cursor from left to right, the image is broken into four parts, and the stage of the story is fragmented and in movement. By contrast, if we leave the central square, it is the object that becomes the focus of attention, while we see the sketches of the statements that the protagonists make concerning the objects that they have chosen. It is always a matter of recollections related to their age – and this is why the ages that appear initially are important – and to the objects themselves. There is a photo of a 6-year-old child showed by his mother, a Chopin score that is a family heirloom, a book of songs that is a memento of the father, since it was a present that his father gave him when she was 8 and which he has always kept by her side because it reminds her of her father and of his childhood. There is also a picture that is part of the personal, intimate geography of the man holding it, a teapot from Morocco that brings memories from a trip and from one's cultural roots, a coin given by a friend that transmits the force of friendship, a dead father's watch, an old photo of the mother, of the past, in fact, that was lost and is now recovered through recollections and mementoes.

The memory of objects is evoked in this piece by the power of things to let us relive our past, which we do not want to forget and which comes back to us through a look, a touch, the reconstruction of memory – in a word, through idealisation. The work of Boltanski is present as a background to this Memo since the different participants in the project invented a biography for him and, in a way similar to his work, it is constructed as a fragmentation of reality that is reconstructed, presented and experienced through objects, collages, montages, mementoes; the object and the recollection are used here as the key that opens the Pandora's box of our life's reminiscences. Like Boltanski, Clauss seems to invite us to reconstruct and create our own personal history starting from objects. It is a personal, capricious route that is somewhere between individual and collective memory, remembering and forgetting, zones of light and shade and, above all, between art and truth since it shows how can we transform everyday objects in a piece of art, this "Memo" takes part of "Art if I want".



## Munch, "Le cri"



Edvard Munch: "The Scream"



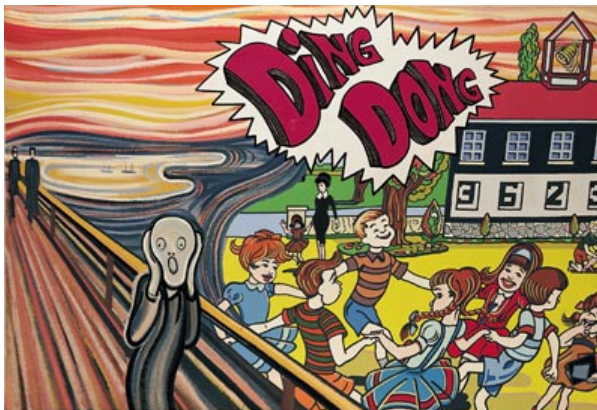
Tempera on cardboard stolen from the Munch Museum, Oslo, at gunpoint.



When we enter this piece, we see a dark stage with a chair supporting Munch's 'The Cry', a true icon of the modern experience of feeling alone in a crowd. Through this direct reference, we might say that Clauss is in a way following in the wake of artists such as Erró, Robert Fishbone and Andy Warhol, who also cite this Munch canvas in their work and re-use it to generate their own messages. They appropriate it, and thus devalue its originality, and in the context of the consumer society that pop art is aimed at, they throw doubt on art as a consumer product.



**Erró**, *The Second Scream*, 1967 Acrylics on canvas, 75x85cm



**Erró** *Ding Dong*, 1979 Acrylics on canvas, 140x130cm





Robert Fishbone *The inflatable scream*, (1991)



**Andy Warhol**, *Scream*, 1984 Synthetic polymer silkscreen print on canvas,  
132x96.5cm



**Edvard Munch**, *Scream*, 1895, Lithograph

Munch executed four versions of the painting, of which the most famous are a tempera on cardboard version (measuring 83.5 x 66 cm) in the Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway (shown below), and an oil, tempera, and pastel on cardboard (measuring 91 x 73.5 cm) in the National Gallery (shown to the right), also in Oslo. A third version is also owned by the Munch Museum, and a fourth is owned by Petter Olsen. In 1895, Munch transformed the picture into a lithograph, so that the image could be

reproduced all over the world. This ease of reproduction means that we find 'The Cry' on t-shirts, bags, mugs and neckties, which evidences its status as an icon, but at the same time this trivialisation debunks the work for a public that 'consumes' it in these various formats. But let us concentrate on Clauss's piece, on CLAuss's "Cry".

We have a dark stage, where the red and black of the painting predominate. Without clicking, and while Shockwave is loading, a black shadow passes in front of the face of a person who is seated at the side of the painting and who seems to imitate its gesture of desperation. A mournful continuous rhythm accompanies the notes that appear when the cursor is placed over the central figures. When we click, there are new notes and sounds, and different people replace the initial character and, with each new click, we hear their explanations of Munch's painting. We experience, then, a whole series of personal descriptions of 'The Cry', thoughts on what the painting inspires to different people.



And all of this on a stage where we find reproductions in movement of the painting's most striking motifs, such as the face, which releases the great cry that is mute with horror. There is a background music of syncopated beats and a child crying can occasionally be heard. This disturbing painting is 'explained' for the visitors to the exhibition while some of them act it out, so that they themselves become the person who screams, since they are positioned just inside the painting on the screen that Clauss has turned into a canvas. We thus get readings/interpretations that talk of desperation, panic, anxiety, fear or the terror of someone who seems to be frightened in the middle of a storm. Others feel that the cry verbalises suffering, a

cry of agonising horror that derives from the pain of knowing that there is no way to avoid the suffering, and so the painting is full of violence, of menace, of unease. People repeatedly mention the haggard, deathly, horrified face, as well as the malaise in our souls when we are faced with human misery. They speak of the man on the bridge, of his age – some say he is not a child, but an old man – of his protruding eyes, of his distorted shape indicating that he is sick. People also speculate about why his hands are about his head and, in this regard, some think that he is covering his ears as not to hear the pain of the world, the cries of the world, the misery of humans. Others think that he is someone from hell or that the moment that the painting captures and represents is related to the destructive Apocalypse, or alternatively that it is just before or after a catastrophe or an earthquake. In reference to the image, we know that Munch wrote:

“I was walking along a path with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature”.

This is why there are critics who believe that the central figure is not emitting a cry but reacting in desperation to the cry that is ‘passing through nature’. In 2003 astronomers declared that they had identified the moment when the work was painted. It seems that the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883 caused some very unusual sunsets throughout Europe in the winter of 1883-1884, which Munch might have captured perfectly in his picture. There are others who maintain that Munch was inspired by a mummy that was sent to the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889, or an Inca mummy in the Natural History Museum in Florence. We must also remember that Munch’s sister, Laura, was a manic-depressive confined to the mental hospital situated at the foot of the Ekeberg hill, the landscape that the painting depicts: Oslo fjord as seen from Ekeberg.

In any case, what I think is most notable about the work is the wish to show how works of art are depending on what they are for those who view them. That is to say, that art transcends the incident that caused it to be made and goes well beyond it. In this sense, Jung said: “It is a recognised fact that physical events can be seen in two ways, from the viewpoint of mechanics or of energy. The mechanical viewpoint is purely causal; from this point of view an event is conceived as the result of a cause. The energy viewpoint, on the other hand, is essentially final/teleological; we follow the event from the effect to the cause on the understanding that energy is the essential base of the changes in phenomena.” Both points of view are indispensable for the understanding of physical phenomena, but T. S. Eliot, relating this Jungian quotation to poetry, found this explanation to be an extremely suggestive analogy. In effect, one can try to understand a poem – and now we can make one last change and substitute “a piece of art” for “poem” – by investigating

what it is like, which causes led to it, in other words the mechanical viewpoint. However, in order to understand a poem – or in the last analysis a “work of art”– it is undoubtedly essential to grasp what the poem or the work of art is and what it intends, and here there is always an inexplicable element. Because “when the poem (or the piece) has been created, something new has happened, something that cannot be completely explained by what has gone before”; it is what has motivated, inspired, aroused, summoned, engendered it – take your pick. And here is part of the meaning of the work. As Eliot reminds us, it is dangerous to suppose that there is only one correct interpretation, but there is also the danger of assuming that the interpretation of a poem necessarily has to be an explanation of what the author consciously or unconsciously intended. Poems or works of art have meanings that also respond to the sensitivities of different readers. And this leads me to think of a Catalan poet, Joan Margarit, who is perfectly aware of this and considers that a reader of poetry (and I continue to insist on the transfer to the visual arts) has more in common with a musical performer than with the concertgoer, the spectator. This view is particularly enlightening in the world of digital art and literature, where the user who wants to execute it has to cooperate physically, has to put it into practice, has to progress by taking actions that are not always trivial but that, as this cases shows in a paradigmatic way, are absolutely inspiring and fascinating.

## Notes

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1. It is quite obvious that the reflection is clearly artistic and that the work under analysis must be taken as a work of digital art, not of literature. All the same, it is a good example of hybrid creation, straddling different borders and genres. Consequently, it is very useful to take the fundamental reflection that lies behind *Art if I want* and extrapolate it into the terrain of literature, of digital textuality, since the textual, verbal, oral, calligraphic, typographic and musical message is always present and takes on a marked protagonism in several of the pieces that make up the work.