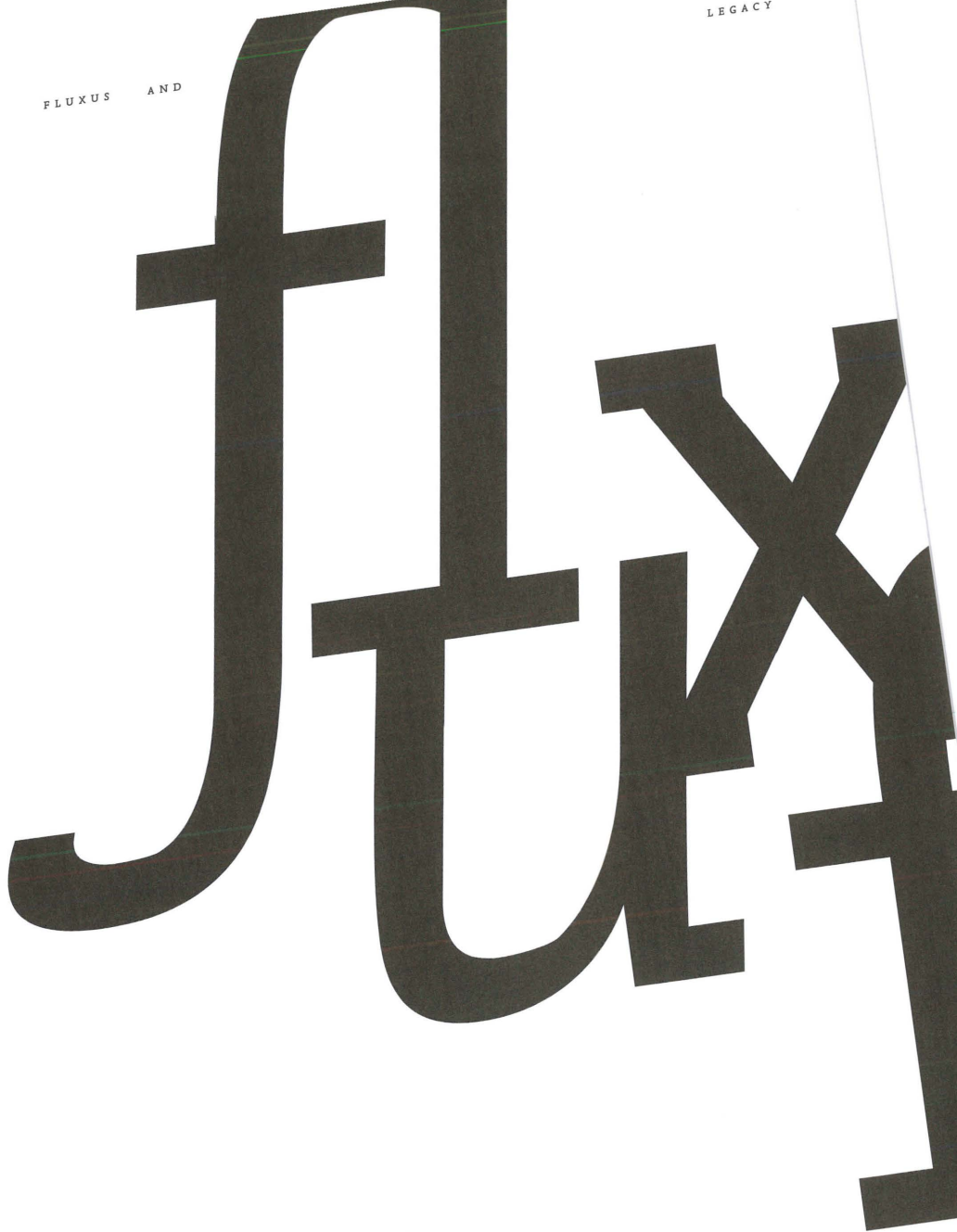


FLUXUS AND

LEGACY



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Abstract

This essay reads Ben Vautier's signature work of the 1960s as a historiographic performance that questions the notion of the avant-garde as a tradition. Vautier challenges the notion that a continuous stream of new artists finds their place in relation to an historical progression established by avant-garde practices. Vautier puts the personal signature to uses that are both ridiculous and revolting, conjuring up a world of violent personal affects. At the same time, his uses of the signature transcend the realm of individual psychology. These signatures repeat the many signature acts of the avant-garde in an obsessive and abject way. Ultimately, they produce a notion of the avant-garde itself as one grand territorializing signature gesture that can equally be seen to sign nothing at all. Vautier's repetitions are representative of a series of early 1960s event works that open the very notion of an historical avant-garde to new determinations. This type of work also has ramifications for any discussion of "Fluxus after Fluxus."



FIGURE 1 *Moi Ben je me suis assis 1 heure sur cette chaise*. Mixed media, 1972

INA BLOM

Ben Vautier's signature acts and the historiography of the avant-garde

TO RESPOND TO THE THEME "FLUXUS after Fluxus" is to confront, head on, the anxious historiography of the avant-

garde. It is, in fact, to engage with the difficult issue of "afterlife" that have haunted the avant-gardes since the very beginning—an issue that only became more acute with the so-called neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s. Two contradictory questions, both profoundly mired in the habitual concerns of art history, reflect this anxiety: 1) Who are the proper inheritors of the avant-garde tradition? And 2) Can there be

V I S I B L E L A N

such a thing as an avant-garde tradition? How can you claim a position within a tradition that was never meant to be, on the basis of work that undermines the very sense of the what tradition is all about?

Nothing could be easier than to discuss contemporary artistic practices that take up aspects of ideas and concerns developed within the context of Fluxus. And yet, to do so—to assume influences and continuities on the basis of various kinds of evidence—would be to put aside the way in which such art historical concerns were actually displaced by Fluxus artists as they struggled to find a space in between the two questions. In fact, the very terms for responding to the theme of “Fluxus after Fluxus” can be found by taking a second look at certain aspects of Fluxus practices devoted to the idea of the work of art as an indeterminate, and uncontainable, event.

This is nowhere more evident—or more explicit—than in the work of Ben Vautier. His obsessive and egomaniac signature writings confront the painful question whether there is a place for his own artistic signature (his own “avant-garde future”) after the series of famous signature events that make up the history of the avant-garde—from Duchamp signing ordinary objects to Yves Klein’s signing emptiness.

But a close reading of the movements of Ben’s signature shows us how his apparently personal and idiosyncratic writing consistently repeats the very signature of the avant-garde tradition itself. The effect of this repetition is to open up spaces that point beyond the historical determination of this tradition and its particular artistic identities. And it is precisely in these openings one should look for Fluxus after Fluxus.

future

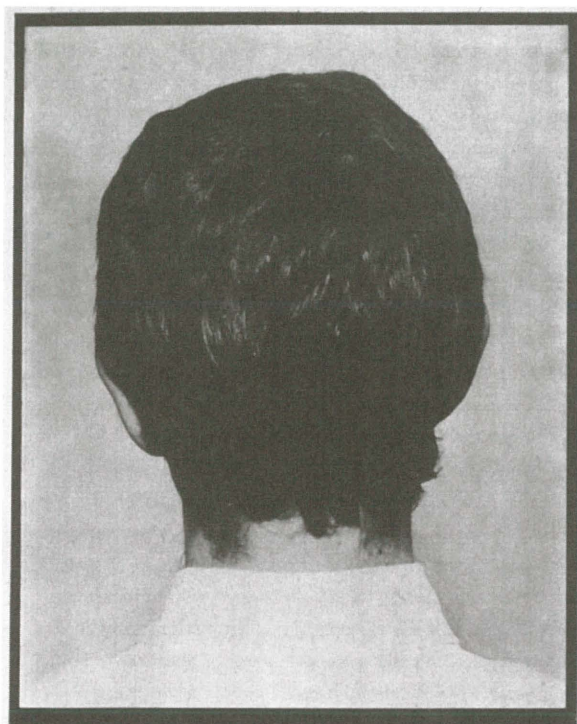
The reversed signature

THE STORY OF BEN VAUTIER'S SIGNATURE ACTS STARTS WITH A REPETITION. Exhibit A is an image in the Berlin Dada journal *Der Dada* # 1, 1919 of an ordinary black chair, followed by the text "*Diese drückte Stirners Hintern*" (Stirner's behind pressed against this chair). Exhibit B is an ordinary black chair. On the seat of the chair is written, in white paint, "*moi Ben je me suis assis 1 heure sur cette chaise.*" (I, Ben, sat on this chair for one hour). (See figure 1)

Two chairs then, two notions of behinds having been pressed against them, as if leaving a visible trace on the chairs, some sort of signature imprint. In Ben's case the imprint is literally formulated as a signature on the chair itself, as if his behind had actually done the writing. But what kind of signature could we be talking about here, if it is not a conscious writing produced by a hand that is an extension of a thinking head, but a far less controllable trace left by a behind? This is, in fact, the question that was raised with the pun in *Der Dada*. Stirner, here, is the anarcho-individualist philosopher Max Stirner, author of the 1844 work *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (*The Ego and Its Own*).¹ For Stirner, the self-enclosed ego of the individual could only be defined in terms of the ownership one has over one's own body, because this body-property remains the individual's only secure point of reference in the world. But the pun in the Dada journal undermines precisely this notion of the body as a secure and controllable point of reference: it points out that bodily processes may subvert the experience of self-possession and self-presence. Some parts of the body are always unseen or "other," and may leave traces or imprints that we do not control or possess. There can be no concept of property or the ego without taking into account the heterogeneous moments of the proper body. And since the name "Stirner" was a pseudonym—originally a nickname—that indicated the philosopher's big forehead, the anagrammatical wordplay in the construction *Stirner's Hintern* (the head's behind) even performs a scatological reversal of the writing of Stirner's artistic signature.

It is from this scatological point of reversal that Ben Vautier, usually known only as "Ben," starts to work with his own artistic signature: Right from the outset it is identified with uncontrollable bodily imprints or traces. As his work gradually seems to develop into one obsessive and megalomaniac signature gesture, no other avant-garde signature would seem to have been as jealously protective of the "unique one" that it signs. Yet, at the same time, this signature does not simply come across as "Ben's own." It seems to repeat, over and over again, the many signature acts of the avant-garde, so that in the last instance Ben's personal signature somehow seems to sign the uniqueness and specificity of the avant-garde tradition itself. The question is only to what extent the uniqueness and specificity of this tradition will actually be kept intact by means of Ben's bloated, obsessive signature. As it seems to draw all

1 Stirner, Max. 1995. *The Ego and Its Own*. David Leopold, translator. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



BEN EXPOSE PARTOUT

FIGURE 2 *Ben expose partout*. Poster, 1965

attention in the direction of the graphic movements, the lines and dots of the signature writing itself, the question of *what* exactly it is that this writing signs (except for itself) is somehow displaced. And yet, for all its explicitly graphological emphasis, this handwriting is not even necessarily very personal. To the contrary, it seems quite generic and formal. It seems to reference the kind of handwriting that is taught as a school *norm*—a clear rounded writing with circular shapes and contours. This handwriting, whose single white or black line can be followed in its almost childishly loose and loopy swings and turns, seems to give a mutely material form to the signature's performance of *encircling* an object, creating a frame or a limit around it. It repeats, in a concretely material form, the signature's necessarily *conceptual* function of encircling and delimitating a unique object.² And as the materiality of this signature turns scatological—associated with the uncontrollable, the abject and even the traumatic—it becomes abundantly clear that it cuts into the containment and

2 In "Parergon," Jacques Derrida describes the ambiguity of the signature's simultaneous "encircling," "circulation," "framing," "cutting" and "cutting-off" (*La Vérité en Peinture*, 1978, Paris: Flammarion, pp. 21-135).

self-control of the subject that signs, *as well* as the containment of that unique historical thing named “the avant-garde tradition.” Through Ben’s signature, the fundamental question of what this tradition constitutes in the here and now is opened up as if for the first time.

A 1965 poster by Ben works as an even more explicit emblem of this process of reversal, of placing the unseen and unsightly back at the place of the front. Over the headline *Ben expose partout* (*Ben exhibits everywhere*), the poster shows a large passport-style black and white photograph of the back of Ben’s head and shoulders (figure 2). The “Ben” referred to by the headline is in other words not exactly identified by the photograph, although his photographic imprint and physical outline is clearly marked off against the white background. From the back, one person is easily confused with another: the photo-imprint could have been of “anyone.” At the place of the face and its morphological composition of singular traits, we get an undifferentiated or “unsightly” mass of dark hair (all the more unsightly in contrast to the prim school-boyish white shirt that belongs to this genre of portrait). Hair is a scatological object *par excellence*—in *Parmenides*, Plato mentions hair alongside mud and dirt as examples of that which is ridiculous and which has no form and no idea.³ In this reversal, “Ben” and Ben’s “exposition” is not only what he himself can see, what he knows himself to be or to show. His exposition exposes only how self-representation exceeds its frame of reference: Ben shows more than he knows. The effect of self-exposure is inevitably indecent: beyond the reach of his own self-possession, it cannot be controlled—i.e., aimed at the right place. The indecency of exposure is that it is *partout*, i.e., all over the place. The indecent exposure is an effect of the frame itself: The *passe-partout* (the white frame that encloses Ben’s photograph) collapses into the—*pose partout*. It breaks the protective screen of the image-display, the unified and contained cover in which the subject is both inscribed and hidden. In the first instance, Ben’s hairy signature exposure means that the subject’s cover is blown, along with the historicist cover-function in which the art of exhibition is inscribed only as if within display.

A series of works from the late fifties onwards puts such a scatological perspective squarely in the foreground. In these works Ben’s signature is concretely engaged in an appropriation of diverse bodily excretions (he signs piss, vomit, pimples, running noses, dirty water, etc.) or of the bodily holes through which excretions pass. An image of the asshole famously served as an illustration for Ben’s signing of holes in general.⁴ It is clear from Ben’s development of these themes that the scatological is fundamentally identified with the signature and vice versa. And so, Ben’s total identification of the space of art with the working of the signature would initially seem to set up an association between the personal emotional investments in the avant-garde work of art and the psychological processes of abjection.

3 Plato. 1966.
Parmenides. Ideene, det Ene og det Andre. Egil A. Wyller, translator.
Oslo: Aschehoug, p. 27.

4 Ben Vautier. 1964.
Flux Holes (plastic box with photographs of holes and samples of actual holes). New York: Fluxus edition.

However, there is no straightforward thematic connection between art and the processes of abjection here: Ben's signature strategies are operations that continually displace any concept of artwork that might serve to designate him as the unique source of both its "form" and its "content." This means that his signature operations can not be accounted for by recent art theories that describe how art manages to give symbolic form to the difficult individual or social processes of separation or abjection. Abjection—the rejection of all that seems heterogeneous to the proper body—is arguably an indispensable process for the constitution of a separate I as well as for the constitution of society. What the ego rejects in this process is no other than itself—abjection both points out and separates the ego's own heterogeneous body. In a similar fashion, the stability of any society depends on a ritually enacted separating off of something that is termed "off-limits," unclean or improper.⁵ In Julia Kristeva's view, art performs or repeats such ambivalent experiences of abjection, both on the level of subject and society. This is a generalist perspective in that it sees all art as in some way or another involved in processes of abjection, and none more so than an art that takes the ritual place of religion in a thoroughly secularized society.⁶ Both art and religion are described as processes of sublimation—not in the Freudian sense of a displacement of a desire, but in the sense of an exchange in which dirty is separated from clean, improper from proper, etc. In this perspective, abjection is the most "archaic" kind of sublimation, since it sets up the first, ambivalent limit between the subject and what is not yet its objects, not yet completely separated out as something alien. Art, not quite so archaic, gives language to this abjection by repeating these ambivalent bodily experiences in symbolical form.

In Kristeva's thinking, this process involves an all-important moment of catharsis: A "cleansing" of body and soul takes place through a complicated process in which the bodily affects are translated into sound and meaning—i.e., into *effects*.⁷ But it is precisely such cathartic and emotive functions that are so hard to find in Ben's signature work: In many ways he seems determined to avoid them. His writing is vested in a flatly transparent informational language with no poetic accent or ambition. Seen as visual art, his graphic traces seem to indicate the laborious work of painting only in the most distanced or even parodic manner. His affects (which are everywhere present as the affects of Ben) appear not in a formalized, symbolical form, as effects, but as if in a dumb and unprocessed state where they remain on the level of affects only. The lack of catharsis, or formal translation from affect to effect, ultimately indicates how his signature strategies exceed the reference to the individual subject that expresses its emotional states *within* the frames of the "work." Kristeva's account of art and abjection tends towards a stabilizing and a-historical mode of description, which can be tracked in the way gender is mapped onto a process of negativity. Despite her warnings against seeing the pre-oedipal state as

5 Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-10.

6 Kristeva
(*Powers of Horror*, p. 18) describes this secularized world as "the world in which the Other has collapsed." Here, "the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression."

7 Kristeva
Powers of Horror, 5-12 and 26-29.

essentially prior to the Symbolic, ambivalence arises because of the identification she makes between poetry and pulsating pre-oedipal and pre-syntactic connection to the maternal body. She seems to see the Symbolic as fully subsumed under “the Law of the Father”: poetry may repeat the ambivalent process of abjection that also involves the all-important moment of the rejection of this law, but will not displace it. Abjection may evoke the revolting and the heterogeneous, but the repetition of this negation is ultimately contained within the positive stability of the symbolic in that it is allocated to the exceptional cases of poetry or psychotic discourse, which rejects thought itself.⁸

This *process* of negativity is of a different order than the *event* of the reversal instigated by Ben’s scatological signature, which systematically opens up a void under all of the terms and categories which it itself seems to both produce and support. The event of this reversal is the mechanism through which Ben’s signature cuts itself off from the link with his own “personal” history. Because of this, its performance is not a repetition of primary affects that return as artistic effects. It does not reenact traces of a more primary process of rejection within the free space of the art work: instead it opens up onto the whole operation of framing through which such affects will inevitably have to be projected back on to someone who supposedly “owns” them. Ben’s reversal opens questions about the proper belonging of affects and their different registers of containment, notably the private space of personal emotions, the public space in which affects may be interpreted as “madness” and works of art where private emotions are understood to have found a communicable public form. Because of this, his work does not provide a cathartic cleansing, but rather a short-circuiting of the process in which bodily affects re-inscribe themselves as—for instance—the fragmented wording or imagery of certain types of avant-garde art. The emotion, pain, embarrassment and seduction of his work is not identified with the *formations* of a work of art through which the subject redistributes the historically given elements of the signifying system. It is, rather, identified with the signature operation that encircles the concept of such work and guarantees the presence of affects.

How to sign affects

THE QUESTION THEN IS HOW TO INTERPRET BEN’S PRESENTATION OF affects when they cannot be immediately explained in terms of a cathartic, or poetic perspective. For his scatological work with the signature is all about affects. Few artists could be said to externalize their private affects to the same degree as Ben, to present them so to speak in their “raw” state. Yet, in this raw state, they are also emphatically public. Ben advertises his affects in the same way as he advertised his “exhibition” in the *Ben expose partout* poster. Again, he uses posters to announce affects that will “take place” both in public and private. A 1962 poster, printed in bold black on red invites you to take part in a

8 Kristeva, Julia. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Margaret Waller, translator. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 117–126, and Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, pp. 79–93. Butler launches a critique of Kristeva’s particular mapping of gender onto this process of negativity. Despite her continual emphasis on the ambiguity of the abject, Kristeva still seems to keep the conflicting terms in their right places. Abjection is on the one hand a revulsion against the maternal, but also a perversion or *père-version*—a reversal of the Law of the Father.

9 Vautier, Ben. 1962.
Crise et Depression, poster.

Crise et Depression Nerveuse le ... a ... heures, Galerie d'Art Total, 32, Rue Tondutti de L'Escarène, Nice, France. (*Crisis and Nervous Depression on at*) Another poster from the same year announces a *Crise et Depression chez Ben et Annie le ... a ... heures*.⁹ He announces shame, *J'ai honte d'être ici pour me faire voir (I'm ashamed to be here just to be seen)*, as well as jealousy:

Je peins par jalousie (...) C'est souvent après avoir vu une exposition de groupe que je rentre chez moi et, jaloux comme un tigre, je me dis: « Tiens, je vais leur montrer ce dont je suis capable, à ces petits cons. » (I paint out of jealousy (...)) After seeing a group exhibition, I often return home in a jealous rage, telling myself, "I am going to show these idiots what I am capable of.")¹⁰

10 Vautier, Ben. 1987.
 Ben. *La Vérité de A à Z*. Toulouse: Editions ARPAP, p. 104.

This description of jealousy, which is one of the entries under the letter J in Ben's dictionary, *Ben de A à Z*, refers to one of his most frequent affects—the “theme” of numerous works.¹¹ Other affects that are announced over and over again are ambivalence, anxiety and ambition: *L'angoisse ca existe. Peint pour la gloire. Je doute. Je suis paresseux est jaloux. Je reste inquiet et dans la doute.* (*Fear is real. Painted for fame. I doubt. I am lazy and jealous. I am anxious and filled with doubt*). All of these statements appear as signature writings on canvases: the explicit public exhibition of jealousy, doubt, ambition and anxiety is at once painful and embarrassing, titillating and repulsive. As Ben exposes his affects, he generally evokes a sort of embarrassed laughter. This laughter may indicate the extent to which his affects are perceived to be “real”—one is unwillingly and embarrassingly confronted with raw pain. But a comic effect may also arise due to the painfully mechanical operations of self-reference to which the emotion is subjected when it is not transformed into artistic form. For Ben's signature and its self-referential operation work precisely in terms of the “raw” affect: It both titillates and repulses. It is both an invitation to look and a prohibition to look no further. With this mechanism and its comedy, Ben's signature affects cuts through the habitual image of the artwork as made up of sublimated pain. And what takes place here is, essentially a complete reversal of the usual notions of cause and effect in the historical field of modern art. Pain and trauma is not the cause of the artwork. On the contrary, it is the avant-garde work of art—or rather, the notion of a work in which “the subjective” is radically inscribed—which appears to cause pain, to produce the signature affects of doubt, anxiety and jealousy. For all of Ben's affects are in one way or another linked to the question of avant-garde art. His affects produce the comedy of someone who is always aware of somehow having missed out on its redemptive potential for self-expression and self-production. With this missed encounter the circle of abjection/becoming (of Kristeva's subject-in-process) is cut apart.

The point is that there seems to be a missing link in Ben's art, and this missing link cuts into the exchange between affect and effect implied by

11 Under the letter B (for Daniel Buren), the theme of jealousy reappears in crude terms: Buren. 1) *Je suis jaloux de Buren. On parle trop de lui. Ceci dit, il est malin comme un singe. Il a réussi a gonfler un baudruche.* 2) *Je me demande s'il est aussi important que ça. J'envie sa rigueur, mais il n'est pas riche en imagination. Personnellement, il m'ennuie.* (Vautier, Ben, p. 40.)

Kristeva. It is this halt or cut in the subject's process that the embarrassed laughter comes to fill in or cover up. Here, one could perhaps say that Ben's work takes on the structure of a joke: in its apparent joining of incongruous registers, it appears more or less as some kind of fallacy. As several of Ben's commentators have noted, it is difficult to take him "seriously."¹² Ben seems to posit several figures of simultaneous unity and disconnection. He posits the work of art as a marker of subjective inscription, but a subjective inscription that is now strangely detached from the exchange mechanisms through which the private body marks its adaptation to the social order. The private bodily affects that should have "ignited" these exchanges seem curiously detached, out of place: They are, from the outset, too public.

To take the example of jealousy: In the work of Ben, it figures as something, as it is both too private and too signified to be part of some higher poetic construct. But if it appears like an out of place affect, it is because it works obsessively on the missed encounter with the work of the avant-garde. Hyperconscious of dates, of timing, Ben never ceases to present himself as being *too late* in relation to modern art history. Right from the start of his career, he is continually making lists of the achievements of the avant-garde, and the point of these lists is to evoke all the things that have already been done, and which it is therefore now too late to do. But here the strategic or operative dimension of Ben's affects come into play. Jealousy is an affect that could be seen to appear primarily in relation to experiences such as lateness. And it is precisely because of its apparently absurd and unreasonable relation to an irrevocable past that jealousy usually seems abject or excessive. Derrida puts it this way: one is never jealous of a present scene. Jealousy is excessive because it occupies itself in an obsessive way with a past that has never been present and that will never present itself or hope for presentation.¹³ It is because of the experience of having been cut-off by this absolute past that the obsessive jealousy in Ben's work appears as a detached affect—as if administered by its own uncanny logic. On the other hand—and this is the important point—Ben's signature jealousy then also works to produce the avant-garde itself as precisely such an excessive non-present—a present that has never been. As a detached affect, his jealousy also cuts him off from the avant-garde tradition.

WHEN AFFECTS APPEAR SO CLEARLY IN TERMS OF SUCH A RADICAL DETACHMENT, it becomes hard to tell the difference between primal affect and artistic effect. The problem of distinguishing affect from effect becomes apparent in Ben's quite explicit fusion of jealousy and the signature. This fusion seems to activate the question, posed by Derrida: *how to sign an affect?* It is a rhetorical question, but it may work as a commentary to the suggestion that works of art *are* effects that return to the subject in the sense that they

12 Blistène, Bernard, in Ben Vautier. 1995. *Ben. Pour ou contre*. Marseille: Musées de Marseille, pp. 8–11.

13 Derrida. 1981. *Glas*. Paris: Éditions Denoël/Gonthier, pp. 187–188.



FIGURE 3 Ben's store in Nice, 1958

constitute it through a repetition of its affects. This return to the interiority of the psychic domain seems to place art forever within the closed circulation of abjection/becoming. And it is this circulation that the question about “signing affects” serves to break into.¹⁴

The rhetorical question of how to sign affects first of all highlights the fact that affects will necessarily have been “affected” by the signature, before eventually making imprints as “pure signifiers” which pulls everyday language apart and turns it into art.¹⁵ Secondly it points out that if this is the case, then the excess of the affect simply derives from the fact that it takes part in the duplicity of the signature. For the signature underwrites the personal singularity of the affects *at the same time* as it gives them a social significance that already undercuts this purely personal realm of signification. Here is the point of crisis, elaborated over and over again by Ben. Nothing would seem to be more personal than affects, but since they must then

14 Kristeva describes the temporal discontinuities of the abject in a way that might indicate radical cuts and breaks in this circularity, but in the end she posits both art and the subject in terms of the internality of the psychic domain.

15 In Kristeva's interpretation, abjection of self is the signified, to which the work of art is the signifier. The affect makes its imprint in language in terms of the "pure signifier" which operates at the point of desecrimentation (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 49).

necessarily be associated with the signature, they also cut into the domain of proper ownership: the private collapses into the public. Derrida has his own set of metaphors for what happens here, and these metaphors strike up some startling analogies with some of Ben's most well-known and risky actions. They appear in terms of further rhetorical questions: *Comment donner le seing a des affects? Comment le faire sans simulacre ou s'afficher de tout? par postiches, fétiches, pastiches?* (How does one give the seing to an affect? How does one do it without a simulacrum to attract the attention of all? By postiches, fetishes, pastiches?)¹⁶ In this not quite grammatical sentence, the neologism *s'afficher de tout* plays on both the notion of "not giving a damn" (*il se fiche de tout*) and "putting up posters" (*afficher*). What is astonishing here is the link that this sentence sets up between the affects of the signature and the two elements that converge in *Ben expose partout*: notably that of posters and fake hairpieces. For one can safely say that Ben *s'affiche de tout*—particularly in the early sixties he puts up posters everywhere, posters announcing or advertising his own affects or his own signature.¹⁷ At this point Ben would appear to be less an artist than an *afficheur*, less a creator and more of a businessman or an advertising agency.¹⁸ He never stops talking about art, but by putting up posters rather than painting he also appears not to give a damn about it. His signature and his posters are truly "all over the place," but particularly inside and outside the small record shop that he ran from 1958 onwards—a business/work of art through which ordinary merchandise was actually sold (*figure 3*).

Likewise, the big head of hair in *Ben expose partout* evokes the notion of the *postiche*. As the hair is seen from the back, it also appears as if cut-off: since it has no connection to a face there's a kind of a massive wig-like quality to it. In any case the connection between hair and fakery is overdetermined. The word *postiche* translates as fake hairpiece, but it can also just mean fakery in general. While Kristeva primarily focuses on the abject in terms of bodily substances such as shit, vomit, hair etc, she also mentions that the abject can be evoked by the experience of injustice, crime, fakery and corruption, like "the artist who practices his art as a business."¹⁹ The link between the signature, the poster and the fake hairpiece evokes the notion of the public or symbolical reversal of the self as a fake or a copy. Through the various affects of the signature, Ben's artistic self appears to be already a pastiche.

THE QUESTION ABOUT SIGNING AFFECTS THEN SIMPLY SERVES TO POINT OUT that the inevitable and self-referential identification of affects "as mine" is already an inscription in a system of meaning—an inscription that already opens up the question of the proper place of affects. Affects can not be thought apart from the operations of a signature—and vice versa. Ben's affects are nothing but signatures—alternatively one could say that his signatures are nothing if not affected. This point can be made with reference

16 Derrida, *Glas*, p. 59. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand, translators, in *Glas*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, p. 42.

17 "Il m'est arrivé, dans les années 60, de faire des affiches sans faire d'exposition, juste pour le plaisir de coller des affiches dans la rue." Ben Vautier, *Ben*, p. 12.

18 1) « Une oeuvre d'art est une publicité pour son créateur car derrière chaque toile se cache le message publicitaire: « Regardez-moi, c'est moi qui a peint ça. » 2) « Ben vend ses idées pour réussir, Discretion assurée, » (publicité passée en 1964). Ben Vautier, *Ben*, p. 148.

19 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 15-16.

20 Foster, Hal. 1996. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 100.

21 Hollier, Dennis. 1994. "The politics of the signifier II: A Conversation on the Inform and the Abject." in *October* 67, p. 7.

22 As Hal Foster points out, in Kristeva's writing the distinction between the desire to abject and the desire to be the abject is notoriously ambiguous. However, Carin Franzen's description of the different conceptions of the Platonic notion of *chora* in the work of Kristeva and Derrida respectively, points more concretely to the different directions in which such a distinction would lead. In the Platonic tradition, the notion of *chora* indicates a spatial and temporal origin of ideas and feelings. Kristeva emphasizes this spatio-temporal notion of the *chora* by seeing it as a maternal receptacle of sound, rhythm and light which allows the infant the negativity of the first impulses towards rejection. For Derrida, on the contrary, it is essentially a figure for the undecided and undecidable, and for this reason its particular substance should not be decided upon. Its spatial and temporal character is identified with the materiality of the written sign and its differentiating operations. (Franzen, Carin. 1995. *Att översätta känslan*. Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag, pp. 96–99.) Kristeva's ambiguous and unresolved slippage between these two alternatives may in any case point to the urgency of a problematic which turns away from her own emphasis on sublimation and catharsis.

23 Seltzer, Mark. 1997. "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere." *October* 80, pp. 10–11. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

to the association between the abjection and the signature in Ben's work. It is not enough to say that Ben simply evokes the abject by continually creating homologies between his signature and various (other) kinds of bodily discharges and excrements. What is crucial is the performative force given to this abject signature. Here, one can distinguish, as Hal Foster suggests in a different context, between the desire to abject, to separate in order to enter the Symbolic order, and the desire to *be* abject—that is the desire to *operate* in terms of the essential ambiguity of the abject.²⁰ To *be* the abject then means to continually perform the abject's act of separation. As Dennis Hollier puts it, the question of the abject is not only an epistemological question. It is not primarily a question of identifying abject substances. There is also a pragmatics of abjection, which links it to the force of the performative. For if abjection becomes only a classificatory problem, then the subjective element—the position of the subject in a pragmatic reaction—disappears.²¹

What Hollier seems to imply is that any abject operation (or act of reversal) in the terms of a given culture can only come about by *passing through* the "subjective" position. This seems to be an insight intuitively shared by Ben. The fact that the personal signature is a typical case of a performative doing by naming, points to the pragmatic operation in Ben's work and suggests precisely such a desire to *be* abject rather than to abject. When he advertises his affects all over town, his signature short-circuits the negotiations through which two fields (private and public) are kept separate.²² There is no longer the image of a *relation* between these separate registers, presented in a terms of a work of art which negotiates their varying degree of closeness and distance: the relation is simply cut across as the one is folded into the other. The negotiable limit of separation between the two registers is in fact opened up, like a wound. As Mark Seltzer has suggested, the collapsing of the separation between the private and public is the very sign of trauma or what he chooses to call "wound culture." The impure and abject character of the psychic mechanism called trauma—which is foundational to psychoanalysis—is also what makes it break out of the domain of individual psychology. The impurity of trauma is not the mark of this domain's autonomy but of its displacement—in the sense that what the trauma demarcates is precisely the breakdown between the psychic and social register, the private and the public.²³

The predominant notion of the work of art in modernist aesthetics provides a model for maintaining the distance between these registers by separating private affect from formal effect. The affects are understood to have somehow *generated* the works—forms are relegated to its limits, to the space of the signature and biography. Ben collapses this distance by positing what is felt as a continual failure of distance with respect to the representation of the self. With this failure of distance, it is precisely the status of the pain as cause—an "internal" cause that would have "external" effects (either art or destructive

behavior)—that is being questioned. With psychoanalysis, the traumatic collapse of the boundaries between self and other—i.e., the violence that is the “other” side of the social bond—is made internal. But this internalizing hides the very breakdown between internal and external that trauma or its affects serve to mark in impure and ambiguous ways. And for this reason trauma poses a radical breakdown in the determination of the subject, both from within and from without. The attribution of trauma bends event-reference to self-reference, transferring interest from the (real or posited) event to the subject’s self-representation.²⁴

²⁴ Seltzer, “Wound Culture,” pp. 8–11.

BEN’S AFFECTS DO IN OTHER WORDS NOT SIMPLY DEPART FROM THE sphere of his own subjective realm. Aligned with the signature event, they open up the whole problematic of determination with respect to the boundaries between the subject and its immediate sociality. However, this is not yet a very precise description of the particular operation of Ben’s signature. The violent sociality that is marked out by Ben’s trauma-signature has a more specific function. “Ben” is not simply a body broken up by the social in general: despite his apparent obsessions with all kinds of terrors, from war and famine to illnesses and excretions. The big themes of threatening sociality, such as violence, war and the judgment of others are evidently present in his work, but these themes have themselves been curiously amputated and particularized: stuffed, as it were, within the limits of the signature. From 1960 onwards, Ben starts a series of signature acts through which he seems to appropriate specific parts of the totality of the world, and some of the things he signs are the phenomena that are recurring themes of art itself, such as pain, illnesses and violence. He signs all of these; in a gesture to the (then fashionable) existentialist philosophy, he even signs *others*.²⁵ In this way, these subjects of violent sociality no longer appear as *themes* or instant markers of trauma in themselves, but only as effects of Ben’s signature!

²⁵ Vautier, Ben. 1975. *Textes Theoriques Tractes 1960–75*. Milano: Editore Giancarlo Politi, p. 20.

This particular signature strategy has one important consequence. With its “publication” of affects it is not only Ben’s subjective determination that is made to seem uncertain. The determination of the specific sociality that relates to his trauma is equally ambiguous. From this point onwards it seems that the sociality of this trauma can only be approached through *another* name that keeps circulating through Ben’s signature—a name that is repeated over and over again, as if in affect. This double naming act confuses the proper name of Ben with the name of avant-garde art. As Ben’s wound demarcates the painful folding into one another of avant-garde art and personal artistic destiny, we can start to see the historiographic implications of this particular turn from event-reference to self-reference. Ben’s affective signature interrupts the “normal” historiography of the avant-garde precisely as it interrupts the imagined continuity between the singular presence of the artistic self and the

generalized presence of a *history* of the avant-garde. Ben seems to realize that any continued presentation of the avant-garde is only possible if one manages to cut into the event-reference of avant-garde history *precisely as it reserves a place for him*. He will in other words have to *miss out* on the process of identification through which he would find a place in that particular history. This, then, is the abject performance of Ben's signature. By repeating the avant-garde signature, by pursuing its endless circulation around itself, it becomes increasingly apparent that what his signature encircles is simply this *missing out*—i.e., the artist's missing out on the historical time and place at which he is expected.

AS A PRELIMINARY, THEN, ONE COULD SAY THAT BEN'S "OWN" SOCIALITY is that of art. In an interview Ben externalizes his artistic identity in terms of simple sociological facts: Born of artistically inclined parents in a petit-bourgeois milieu, he sees himself as more or less destined to ask the kind of questions on art that he does.²⁶ More specifically even, "his" sociality is that of an avant-garde art whose signature strategies have already marked out the collapse between subject and society, the private and the public. This is important, for it shows that Ben's collapsing of the separation between private and public is not hands-on revolutionary, but mimetic or repetitive.

The signature-strategies of the avant-garde appear, in other words, as both unbounded and overdetermined. And this complex sets up some peculiar problems. The signature acts of the *historical* avant-garde may in part have served to reformulate art in utopian terms. By displacing more traditional notions of subjectivity, avant-garde signature operations served to open up an imaginary space that could romanticize notions of new modes of collective being. But from the vantage of a neo-avant-garde working through the historical traces of these signature acts, the romance of this perspective gets distorted. Now the significance of Dada's signature appears as if reversed. What was, initially, formulated as a boundary-displacing opening is inverted to the terms of appropriation. The limitless scope of the avant-garde signature now appears in its terrifyingly totalizing dimension. The drive to appropriate appears as the dark side of the signature, exposing itself as if for the first time. For appropriation essentially means taking on "the world" by means of the artistic signature—reserving it "for art," so to speak. The signature becomes a gluttonous instance that swallows everything, up to and including the limits of the world that it signs.²⁷

Ben's signature act could be read as a paranoid response to this gluttony—a demarcation of the trauma that is produced as this all-consuming signature engulfs the singularity of his own signature or the possibility of his "own" difference. And his demarcation of the trauma of this scenario serves to displace the perceived internality of appropriation. For appropriation is

26 "Dans ma famille, il y avait deux ou trois peintres du côté de mon père. Du côté de ma mère, c'étaient des commerçants, mais ils parlaient culture. Quand j'ai été mis dans une librairie d'art, je me suis intéressé à l'art. J'avais le sentiment que c'était naturel parce que mon père et ma mère parlaient d'art." (Vautier, Ben, p. 56.)

27 Both Derrida and Kristeva seems to correspond on one point concerning the function of either the signature or the abject: they indicate the limits of the world. "A la limite, du texte, du monde, il ne restera plus qu'une énorme signature, grosse de tout ce qu'elle aurait d'avance englouti, mais d'elle seule enceinte. (Derrida, *Glas*, p. 55) "... a phobic, obsessional, psychotic guise (...), more generally and in more imaginary fashion in the shape of abjection, notifies us of the limits of the human universe. (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 11.)

fundamentally an act of identification—the closure around a self. When the avant-garde signature returns as pure internality and pure appropriation, it is as if it were the return of a monster—the monster of an art movement all wrapped up in its own identity—its own historical certainties.²⁸ With this colossal abstraction, the identity of the avant-garde signature seems to be the limit of the world. This is Ben's concern, and his own strategy both mimics and undermines the presence of this historical monster. By repeating this monstrous signature, Ben ensures that the difference between appropriation and expropriation *in the name of art* may be as undecidable as the distinction between private and public.

Fear of the hungry signature

THE AVANT-GARDE HURTS. THIS IS ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS YOU LEARN from Ben, and he is probably the first (avant-garde) artist who is willingly parting with this information. The avant-garde does not hurt because it is revolutionary or radical, but because its signature strategies eat up space. From the perspective of the late 50's artist looking back at the history of the avant-garde, it might have appeared as if this history, with its emphasis on infinite possibilities, could be imagined in the figure of an open space. Donald Preziosi has described the way in which the discipline of art history is founded precisely on a series of tacitly spatial assumptions, through which time and place converge into a harmonious whole. This approach has several sources. On the one hand it has its origins in a spatial geometry in which relations between object and context, art and its ground are articulated as linear or multi-linear connections. On the other hand, the effect of a tacit space is also produced by the Cartesian notion of the neutral zero-point of the analyst-historian: This point of looking implies a perspective in which the apex coincides with the historian's position.²⁹ But from the position of Ben's paranoid look at this history, it could easily appear as if the promised "open space" of the new had in fact been "taken," so that now there was "no space left" for the present.

It is the gluttonous avant-garde signature that has eaten up the space; Ben is quite clear on this point. The history of the avant-garde appears to him as a terrible determination taking the form of a simple game of appropriation. The point of departure of this game is conquest and acquisition—a conquest of the *new*, which a paranoid Ben constructs as a territory. "*L'histoire de l'art est une histoire d'appropriations. A partir de Dada, on peut même s'approprier la réalité.*" (*The history of art is a history of appropriations. After Dada, one can even appropriate reality.*)³⁰ These conquests started with Duchamp's signing of ordinary objects in a way that "revealed" art to be a question of externalizing intentionality through use of the personal signature. For Ben, the importance of Dada resides in this possible capture of all through the signature, and he makes long lists of things captured in this way: Everyday objects, environ-

²⁸ Bataille points out how appropriation is a process of identification and homogenization—appropriation establishes identity between the possessor and the object possessed. (Bataille, Georges. 1993. *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Translated by Alan Stoekl, translator. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. 95.)

²⁹ Preziosi, Donald. 1989. *Rethinking Art History. Meditations on a Coy Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 36-39, 43.

³⁰ Vautier, Ben, p. 17.

ments, even intentionality itself. The next important conquest happens as John Cage uses the principle of chance operations in order to identify any object of the world with the concept of music. This principle gets even more pervasive with Allan Kaprow's all-inclusive Happenings and La Monte Young's positing a single sound only as a whole musical "universe."³¹ The history of the avant-garde is in other words understood as an accelerating conquest under the signature. Not surprisingly, the paranoid dimensions of this perspective gets more pointed as Ben approaches his own closest environment: notably the signature actions of Yves Klein, Isidore Isou and the French New Realist-movement. This is where the violence of the signature-conquests is most pointedly felt. While Isou sees the personal signature as the only valid guarantee for the continual production of the new, Klein's signature conquers the absolute. Having taken on the territories of the monochrome, the theater of emptiness, and the "acceptation of everything possible," Klein's most significant conquest is the ultimate act of appropriation:

Le monde entier est à prendre et à transformer en oeuvre d'art. Ce qui n'est pas art doit le devenir. En prenant possession de l'air, du feu, du vide, de l'immaterialité et du monochrome, il a rejoint l'esprit total de Dada et de Duchamp.

(The whole world may be seized and made into a work of art. What is not already art should become so. By appropriating air, fire, emptiness, the immaterial and the monochrome, he has joined the totalizing spirit of Dada and Duchamp.)³²

What comes after this is only a matter of specialization. The New Realists see the world as a picture, a big fundamental work in which each artist appropriates his own specific part. Arman has accumulations of trash, César has compressed cars, Hains, Villeglé, Rotella et Dufrêne has torn posters, Manzoni has excrements, Spoerri has old table settings, and so on: "Everyone has something that is physically different from the others, but they are all doing the same thing."³³ The signature has moved into every available corner of the world.

From this perspective, Ben's choice to work with the signature itself is at once extremely curious and mercilessly logical. For Ben suffers loudly from the double bind across which the huge, overblown, signature of the avant-garde history is stretched: through the duplicity of the signature, the limits of the subject are at once affirmed and imploded. But in Ben's work, the duplicity of the signature seems to return as two separate, homogenizing terms. Ben's description of the strategies of appropriation obviously reduces the signature to one such homogenizing and totalizing term. But the other aspect of the avant-garde signature's double moment—the dispersion or "killing" off of the subject—also appears in an equally totalizing guise. In the late 50's, the explicit actions of appropriation are followed by an equally explicit quest for anonym-

³¹ Vautier, *Textes Théoriques Tractes*, pp. 28–31. On this matter, La Monte Young compositional strategies are often interpreted as both the opposite of Cage's and as the logical continuation of his ideas.

³² Vautier, *Textes Théoriques Tractes*, p. 30.

³³ Ben continues his list with the American pop artists as well: Warhol has mechanical reproduction, Johns has the American Flag, Lichtenstein has cartoons etc. (Vautier, *Textes Théoriques Tractes*, p. 30.)



FIGURE 4 *To Change Art Destroy Ego*, photograph, 1969

ity: as in the Zen-inspired aesthetics of John Cage, the “death of the author” has become ideology. Ben suffers from the violence of the signature that leaves him no space: between appropriation and anonymity all ground is covered (even the possibility of a silent anonymous no-space). Having identified the quest for the new with the appropriation of the signature, he jokes: “I could be the first to not make something new.”³⁴ Ben’s trauma is mired in the following contradiction. On the one hand the signature-appropriations of the New Realists effectively prohibits the presence of the new by designing the world as a total work of art. On the other hand, Cage’s suppression of the personal signature as an instance of a “dirty” self-interest is equally totalizing, since it posits the appearance of a world only in the disciplined withdrawal of a self.³⁵

A strange 1969 photograph plays up this contradiction. The photograph shows a sort of messy terrain-vague across which a huge banner bearing the words *To Change Art Destroy Ego* is suspended (figure 4). In front of this banner, however, Ben’s own young daughter is portrayed, standing with her doll’s baby carriage. Juxtaposed with this image of the growing child (which obviously appeals to our experiences of the precarious processes of ego-formation), Ben’s sloganized formulation of what could be called a quintessential 1960s “avant-gardist” stance is made out to appear at once dogmatic, cruel and plainly absurd. Its totalizing terms are in other words fully displayed in their traumatic dimension. However, the absurdity of the slogan is not only produced in its encounter with the image of Ben’s child, but also in its encounter with the terrain-vague—a quite strange choice of a ground across which to stretch a banner. Banners and placards are usually affixed to walls, or suspended

34 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 33.

35 Vautier, *Textes Theoriques Tractes*, p. 33. Ben invariably describes the quest for anonymity as hypocritical.

36 Ben signs *terrains-vagues* in 1961. In *Ben. La Vérité de A à Z* he claims their artistic significance for the following reasons: 1) the atmosphere of intense tactile pleasure that they provide; 2) their rarity; 3) their horizontality: thanks to *terrains-vagues* the concept of sculpture will be released from the demand to verticality. What emerges from his arguments is the paradoxical image of a scattered or vague sensual experience, the pleasurable or seductive qualities of a non-form which places itself outside the boundaries of form, but which, because of these qualities, also designates something rare, exceptional or singular. (1987, p. 171) His arguments have certain significant points in common with Derrida's use of the notion of the *terrain-vague* as a metaphor for what he calls the *vague beauty* of the signature (a depletion of the pure beauty which Kant ascribes only to the inside of the work itself). (Derrida. 1978. *La Vérité en Peinture*. Paris: Flammarion, p. 105.)

37 Vautier,
Textes Théoriques Tractes, p. 71.

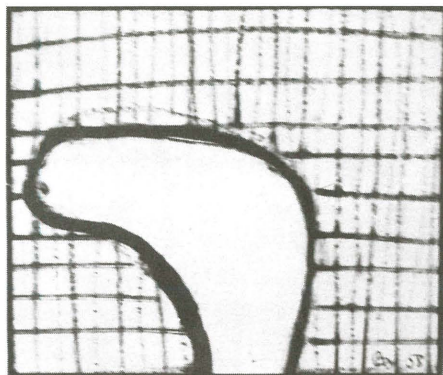
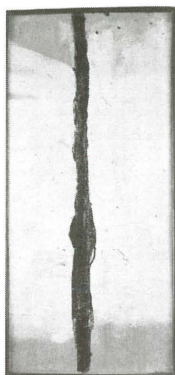
38 Vautier,
Textes Théoriques Tractes, p. 69.

above opinionated masses, which provide the appearance of a firm support, a ground or a background for their claims and demands. The *terrain-vague*, across which this banner is (quite limply) hanging, provides no such support. It simply undercuts the experience of the tacit space to which the historical representation of the *avant-garde* itself will be affixed. For, since 1961, the *terrain-vague* has been identified as another one of those abject or ambivalent phenomena that Ben identifies with his own signature. Bounded precisely as an unbounded, pointless, insignificant—and, for this reason, *rare* phenomenon, the *terrain-vague* ultimately performs the signature's paradox of the singular existence which is singular only in its continually signifying of vagueness, that is, of nothing in particular.³⁶ In the very ambiguity of its performance it quite literally neglects to provide a firm backup or a continuous ground.

The limp projection of the *avantgardist* slogan onto the disappearing background of the *terrain-vague* becomes an allegory of the signature event through which Ben enacts his distancing of the *avant-garde* ideals. He does not, as he says, “believe in Zen.”³⁷ With appropriation, the power of the signature (or the ego) appears to be unlimited, with anonymity the signature (or ego) is said not to exist. Between these positions, Ben describes himself as suffering from “the illness of the ego”—an illness in which the double moment of appropriation and rejection is kept dangerously active. His “illness” evokes either the nausea of overeating, or the rejection of food: “I want to eat myself but I am not able to do it.”³⁸ The continually repeated signature is here explicitly linked to the traumatic experience of the double bind. His signatures become obsessive, because there is no way he can *stop* signing the identity of the *avant-garde* that has produced him. The only possibility left is to continue to repeat the signature.

THIS PERTINENCE OF THIS REALIZATION, AND ITS DIFFERENCE FROM THE profusion of New Realist appropriations can be illustrated by juxtaposing two signature acts that appear to be the same. Yves Klein's most important and notorious act was to sign *all* (*Tout*)—the *all* which he formulated as the unlimited blue air. Klein in fact sets up a contract for an exchange in which his signature will function as a guarantee. A piece of the *all*—specified here as the absolute nothingness of blue air—was to be bought in solid gold against a receipt of Klein's signature. In order to realize this absolute *all/nothing*, however, the gold would be thrown in the river and the signed receipt would be burned, equal for equal. Klein's appropriations does in other words work within an economy of exchange in which the signature will guarantee the way in which value may pass from one object to another, from *all* to *nothing*, from the substantial to the insubstantial, from the material to the immaterial.

One of Ben's earliest gestures was to sign *all*, as well (*Je signe tout*), as a matter of taking part in what he called “the *avant-garde* of the absolute.” But here a shift in emphasis takes place. Ben's signing of *all* does not appropriate more

FIGURE 5 *Ligne*, Oil on canvas, 1955FIGURE 6 *Forme de la banane*, Oil on canvas, 1958

substances or territories for art, and neither does it exchange art for “nothing” or (as in Klein’s case) “the immaterial.” Whereas Klein signs *all*, Ben signs *all*, and this subtle difference is crucial. In Ben’s dictionary, the definition of the word *all* (*tout*) immediately references another dictionary entry—notably that of the *signature*. In the case of Klein, the emphasis is on the substances that have been signed—the color blue, the immaterial etc. In the case of Ben, however, there is no such emphasis on substances. Rather than any particular notion of an *all*, we get only the signature itself: written in white on black or black on white. Unlike Klein, whose totality remains firmly outside the signature that guarantees and demarcates its existence, Ben recognizes that only the signature itself will supply a “total” totality. Totality cannot be thought from outside the signature. By positing the signature as the outside guarantee of totality, Klein was able to imagine an exchange or bargain through which the material value of the world would be transformed to one immense substance of blue air or nothing. Ben’s identification of the *all* with the writing of the signature itself makes such exchanges impossible. Totality evokes nothing but the tracing of the circle, yet can never be circled around. For this reason it can not be produced through the kind of circulation where one thing is exchanged for another. With view to this complication, the question of Ben’s strategy of continuing to sign totalities can be reopened: *what* is it that he is signing?

The birth of Ben’s signature

TO ANSWER, ONE CAN START BY PAYING ATTENTION TO THE TRACES LEFT by this signature—where it first appeared, how it developed. It may even be necessary to invoke a graphological reading of its loops and circles, the movements of the hand. For it is possible to follow the traces of this signature backwards, like a trail, to a series of abstract paintings made in the years between

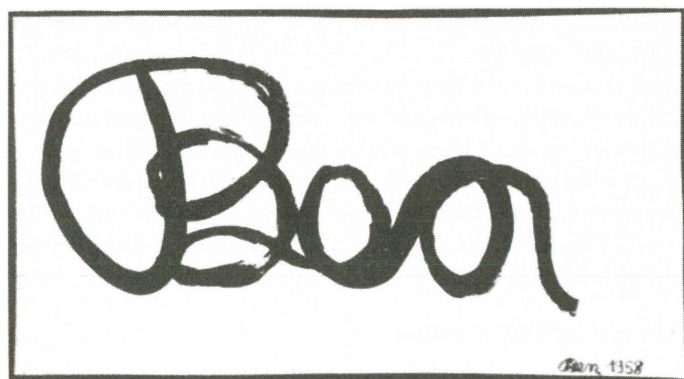
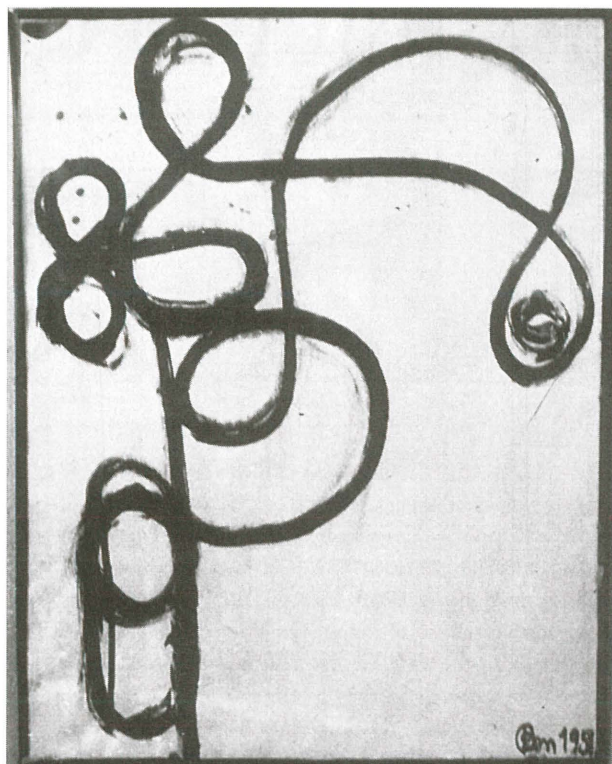


FIGURE 7 *Recherche de formes*. Oil on canvas, 1958

FIGURE 8 *Signature*. Oil on canvas, 1958

1950 and 1957. In these works, Ben could be said to search out his signature, to look for its proper forms. At this point in his career (the very beginning), his concern is above all with formal innovation, and he subjects himself to it systematically, even perversely so.

De 1950 à 1957, surpris par le courage des créateurs contemporains, je pris conscience et goût à la recherche du nouveau, et j'ai voulu jouer au jeu de la création. Je dessinaï des formes que je jetais si je retrouvais leur source d'influence.

(Between 1950 and 1957, taken aback by the courage of contemporary artists, I got interested in the search for the new and wanted to participate in the game of creation. I designed forms that I threw away if I found their original source.)³⁹

39 1962 statement, in Vautier, Ben, p. 34.

From Ben's perspective, the game of abstraction also seemed like a game of appropriating forms: Mondrian had the squares, Delauney had the circles, Soulages and Hartung had the cuts, etc. Ben was in other words searching systematically for forms that would be absolutely idiosyncratic, personal, singular. From this perspective it is interesting to look at what he did not throw away, what he considered at once "new" and "personal" enough. The series of works called *Recherche de formes* (*Investigations into Form*) show one common point. In these works painting has basically become a matter of tracing the outlines of shapes by means of single black lines on a white background. Starting, from a single line (*Ligne*, 1955) which divides the canvas in two (*figure 5*), his search for form seems at the outset to define form quite traditionally in terms of shape or outline. The shapes contained by these lines would or would not be new.

In 1957 Ben pronounced himself happy to have finally found a form that was not already taken: the form of the banana (*figure 6*). In a series of works, the banana is represented in terms of a very rudimentary black tracing on white ground of one or two thick curved shapes. Some of the bananas remain floating in this white space, others seem to be dutifully inscribed in the grid shapes that reference a kind of standardized modernism. Formulating the canvas as a grid signifies a thoroughly modernist stance: as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, it is through this radically new pictorial measure that painting will finally stop being a picture window and turn into a surface only. But Ben's use of the grid is as tongue in cheek as his "claim" to the banana-form. In his paintings the grid is at once so rudimentary, clumsy and explicit it that it seems like a hastily done notebook sketch rather than an expression of a profound devotion to the surface of the canvas.

The "new-ness" of the banana-form was in any case quickly shown to have been illusory. Ben quotes Yves Klein, who pointed out to him that the form had already been used: bananas were "*sous-Kandinsky*." He advised Ben to rather continue his attempt to write poems with ink on canvas, as this was

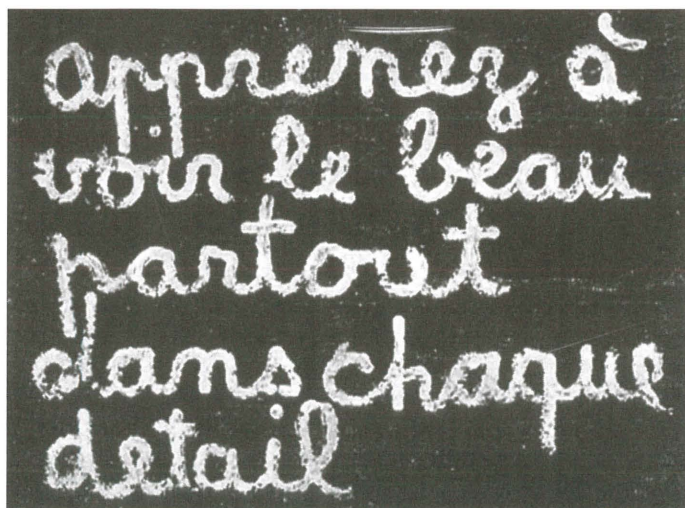
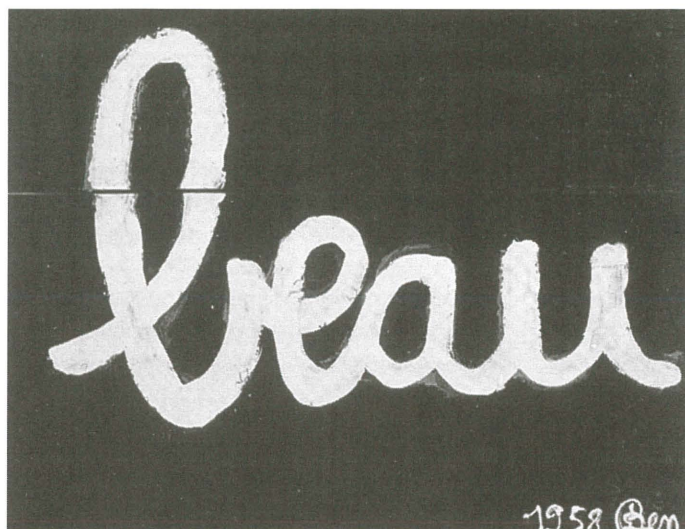


FIGURE 9 *Beau*, Oil on canvas, 1958

FIGURE 10 *Apprenez à voir le beau partout dans chaque détail*, Oil on canvas, 1958

(he claimed) "more original."⁴⁰ However, Ben's outlines and tracings had for a long time seemed to take on a kind of writerly meandering. In the *Recherche de formes* paintings, and in the paintings on the walls of his room above the Nain Bleu bookshop in Nice, his lines at times do not so much outline form as wander off on their own, all over the place, as traces of a writing hand. What starts out as Mondrian-like grids continually deteriorate into soft loops and letter-like figures.

40 Vautier, Ben, p. 107.

This appears to be the beginning of writing in Ben's work. In one 1958 painting in particular the big rounded loops of the lines are very similar to the exaggerated loops of Ben's signature at the bottom right of the painting (figures 7 and 8). There are no other figures in this painting but these loops. The continuity between unique new form and the unique signature has in other words been made explicit in terms of its most crude consequence. In a series of other paintings the big rounded tracings turns into words: *Mais, Paix, Hier, Spirale* (with the figure of a spiral), *Beau, Laid* (figure 9). It is also the start of the long series of personal statements in Ben's work: *Je suis un menteur, Je pleure pour moi être immense*. (I am a liar. I cry so as to be great.) At the same time, this signature begs to be viewed in terms of its formal particularity: *Apprenez à voir le beau partout dans chaque détail* (Learn to see beauty everywhere, in every detail), one painting states with typical New Realist gusto (figure 10). But rather than pointing to the details of the "world," the statement draws the attention to the details of its own pastose paint-writing—uncannily similar to some kind of physical bodily trace or discharge. It would appear that Ben's search for new painterly form had finally fallen down on the most particular shape of all—notably the shape of his own handwriting. This, however, is not exactly the case. When asked, Ben asserts that the loopy rounded handwriting is "not even" his own. Had he been able to afford it, he might even have appointed a sign-painter—in other words, a close colleague of the *afficheur*.⁴¹ Pointing out the generic, artificial and fabricated nature of these handwritings, Ben draws attention to the way in which the trace of his hand—which is also identified with all kinds of bodily discharges—returns to the writing subject only by cutting into its own circulation around itself. The circle traced by the signature writing turns out to be a hole. By suggesting a formal continuity between this circulation and the huge loops of his own signature, Ben seems to make literal—at the level of a graphic, formal invention—the difficult question of the signature's closure.

41 Vautier, Ben, p. 57.

In addition, this loopy writing is loaded with a series of particular visual associations. As it turns out, the formal models for his handwriting mark out another typical case of the collapse between public and private. In one 1960 painting Ben gives an approximate rendition of the iconic Coca Cola signature (*Buvez Coca Cola frais*) with its flashy "handwritten" loops and circles: the signature Ben in the corner is of a piece with this writing. In a 1958 work, a

42 The both childish and elegant aspect of Ben's writing (as well as his tendency toward spelling mistakes) is in other words at one with Coca Cola's strategic appeal to the adolescent market. It must be noted, however, that Ben rejects the idea of a graphological interpretation of his writing, and for a good reason. A graphological focus would only lead to an easy psychologizing of Ben, the artist, in other words simply re-install all of the categories that Ben's signature operations reworks and reverses. For this reason it must be specified that, in pointing out the material traits of his writing, we are not searching out such a psychological truth about Ben "himself." Rather, we are searching to identify the forms of communication to which his particular writing attaches itself, in order that it might be able to convey (by the means of certain structural operations), what Ben calls "truth." In this sense we appreciate Ben's assertion that he is *non pas* Monsieur Graphologie (...) mais Monsieur Vérité. (Ben, p. 57) In line with this assertion we may suggest that the "wannabe"—style of an adolescent writing is able to work as the structural marker of just such a truth-function.

43 1. J'ai signé « les TROUS » en 1960. 2. Le trou en soi est unique: Sequestre à quinze ans, deux jours dans une vitrine d'essence de blockhaus, il y avait un trou de trente centimètres à travers lequel je voyais le ciel. Suite à cette expérience, je conclus en 1961 que plus la surface de la paroi qui entoure le trou est étendue, plus le trou est beau. 1959: Trous circulaires dans des feuilles et des BOITES DE CONTREPLAQUE. 1960: J'ai fait des trous dans les murs des autres la nuit. 1961: Depuis mars 1961 je signe les trous que le hasard me présente. A: Trous de mur, B: Trous du cul, C: Trous d'égout (vus de dedans). PS: Je ne discute pas l'influence de Fontana mais je considère le domaine du trou beaucoup trop vaste pour un seul créateur. (in Ben Dieu—Revue d'art Total, 1962) Since Ben claims that the beauty of holes are determined by the extension of what surrounds it, it could be pointed out that the form of the gramophone record—the objects sold in Ben's shop—could be considered beautiful, since the gramophone record is essentially a big black shiny surface circling around a small hole. Ben makes this connection in a poster for his record shop. Beside the image of a black hole, the poster states: Ce trou vous est offert par la Bourse du Disque, qui est un Libre Self-Service du Disque à moitié prix...

part of a wall sign with similar flashy signature handwriting is framed and signed. This piece (figure 11) bears the incomplete letters "fense fficher"—a cutout of the message *Défense d'afficher*. (No bill posting permitted.) Through these works the graphic form and style of Ben's signature-writing is entirely identified with commercial and public forms of communication: publicity on the one hand and the public ban of putting up posters on the other. As we have seen, such acts of publicity are already central to Ben's work. But beyond this general point, the identification of Ben's signature writing with the style of these two particular examples of public communication has an added significance. Both the Coca-Cola logo and the *fense fficher* sign already imitate the genre of the personal signature: both are in other words already signatures in that they demarcate a collapse between private and public registers. Both choose the most private of forms (handwriting) for the most public of communications. Furthermore, it must be noted that the flashy holes and loops of these writings underscore the ambiguity of a writing whose "public" and "private" nature seems to collapse into one another. The Coca-Cola signature in particular can be read as an emblem of the abject character of the signature itself. Its well-known loops imitate the attempts at elegance of the one who practices his signature for public display—it is the signature of the ultimate wannabe or the eternal teenager (the target group of its publicity campaign). The highly exaggerated loops of the signature Ben similarly indicate the worked-at stylistics betraying lack of confidence or a desire of becoming. Attaching itself to the Coca Cola-logo, the graphic form of Ben's rounded writing is, in other words, the essential signature of the "not-yet"—the abject missing-out on oneself.⁴² The rounded graphic forms both encircle and undercut the totality of the self that it signs, as well as the signature action itself.

Totalities, holes and the possession of space

THROUGH THIS PURELY FORMAL DEMARCATION OF THE COLLAPSING OF THE borders between public and private, the loops and circles of Ben's signature takes on an added significance. Now, their circularity seems to trace the contours of a hole. There is an entire series of holes forming off—or caving in—the forms of Ben's writing. Starting with the tracing of the banana forms, it moves on to the loops and circles of Ben's over-elegant signature B and his rounded adolescent writing, to finally end up with the image of the asshole, as well as the images of numerous other holes.⁴³

As the cutout of the *Défense d'afficher* sign indicates, the hole is even at the core of the concept of putting up posters. One meaning of the word *ficher* that sounds forth from within the "fense fficher" is the practice of plugging in, or perforating, underscoring Ben's many demonstrations of how the advertising of one's affects perforates the subject—stabs it in the back, so to speak. At


FIGURE 12 *Partie du tout à Ben*. Photograph, 1962

FIGURE 11 *fense ficher*. Found object, 1958

the core of the signature, there is the hole. Ben's rounded writing is in other words simply circling around a hole, or the edges of the abyss. But the word *ficher*, which also means inscribing something in a filing cabinet or inventory, also points to the presence of a certain system and order. Ben is not simply delving into the hole and its excesses, he is equally obsessed with categories: boxes, files, lists and systems of all kinds. Ben's focus on holes goes alongside his equally persistent systematizing of wholes or totalities. If his rounded signature is a figure of perforation, then the *tout* or totality he takes over from Yves Klein might now appear to be a perforated totality, too. But here it is important to follow the *performance* of Ben's signature. Ben does not simply criticize Klein's appropriation of totality. By signing this totality *once more* he simply puts the notion of totality to *work*, following its implications to the end—and then beyond. If Ben's signing of totality shows totality to be hollowed out it is only because totality and hole (whole and hole) are two terms that work too perfectly alongside one another—so perfectly that they seem to continually change places, or to displace each other's finality.

For this continual juxtaposition and confusion of whole and hole is obviously just another presentation of the duplicity of the signature, whose mobility Ben explores in his exhausting and mocking repetition of the megalomaniac terms of the avant-garde. One photograph in particular is used as a crude allegory of a signature signs wholes and holes in one single gesture. It is an image of a large wall with a small hole in it, against which a sign is propped (*figure 12*), claiming the whole structure as *Partie du Tout à Ben*. Holes



FIGURE 13 *Maman j'ai laissé les clefs au bar*. Graffiti, n.d. (ca. 1960)

and wholes become indistinguishable as each hole is listed or filed as part of Ben's totality. This perspective becomes even more apparent in the way in which Ben actually handles the notion of totality. The whole/hole dialectic seems to have been relegated to some sort of bureaucratic materialism—i.e., to an appeal to the “beauty of its every detail”—a marked contrast to Klein's lofty exchange of totality for the “immaterial.” Such details are found in the material traces of handwriting—in an attention to its various loops, dots and indentations. Totality disintegrates into an infinite inventory of details, for the moment he posits the totality of the signature Ben starts making lists and inventories of all of its particular parts.

The “wholeness” or “uniqueness” of such particularities are perforated precisely by the fact that they are forced to signify their part-ness, their “having a part of” totality. By simply fulfilling, to its most grueling conclusion, the avant-garde's aesthetics of the absolute, Ben cuts a hole in its appropriating totality. For this is what happens as his *signing* of all gets literal—i.e., when it turns out to become a continual and immense process of filing and making inventories. Holes may be “parts” of this totality—but so is a postcard picture of a Mediterranean port, a bundle of garlic, the notepad entry “2 steaks 1 salade téléphoner maman mesurer les abdomens,” the British Encyclopedia, the Larousse dictionary, the history of art, various medical products—and so on, endlessly. Each particular addition to the lists of Ben's totality seems to cut into Klein's “immaterial” totality like a hole. Having signed all, Ben shows that ownership is nothing unless it is continually postered-up, advertised. Precisely because

of his totalizing act of appropriation—greater and more megalomaniac than anything conceived of before (since totality is now finally at one with the signature)—Ben discovers the bureaucratic necessity of being specific. In order to own totality he has to *continue* to sign it, to continually repeat the signature to itself.

Ultimately then, the megalomania of the signature appears as a form of addiction (from Ben's point of view, the avant-garde is addicted to absolutes in the sense that there is apparently no end to its game of appropriation). Ben demonstrates that addiction must be understood not as an addiction to a substance but as an addiction to the addiction itself—a play with the purely *momentary* power of self-presence. Ben's act of continually signing the parts of totality resembles Anthony Wilden's example of the smoker who wants to quit, but who has to start smoking again in order to quit once more so as to be the master of his own quitting—again and again.⁴⁴ Every time, the momentarily empowering act of the decision only signs on to the experience of a void. In a similar way the power of Ben's signature continually underwrites a state of dispossession. In fact, this underwriting of dispossession writes off the territorial demarcations created by the avant-garde's all-powerful signature acts. Ben's obsessive focus on the material writing of this signature itself actually reverses its appropriating power. Once his signature appears in terms of an endless and abject material addition—as if he was filling up a hole—the very notion of territorial closure is reversed so that even the end of the world turns out to be perforated. In his enormous inventorizing of totality, the signature turns out to be a figure whose additive operations are excessive: there is always *more* to be added to Ben's totality. Its constant activity is exhausting, but never exhaustive. And it is precisely in this reversal that Ben imagines the possibility of the *new*. The *potential* of a “not-yet” is located in the exhaustion of the never-ending signature acts.

In fact, from his earliest work onward, Ben connects the signature to territorial dispossession. He does this in the most obvious way possible—that is, by presenting his writing as a form of graffiti. For Ben is the essential graffiti artist, someone who writes all over all available material surfaces, suspending his own signature across them. “My first writings were on walls in the street,” he claims.⁴⁵ If graffiti is both the mark of appropriation and dispossession (the writing of the one who is not the owner of the territory), this point is overdetermined in Ben's graffiti-signature. It permeates even the level of his messages—in contrast to the usual empowering accent of much other graffiti. One early wall writing in the streets of Nice leaves the message *maman j'ai laissé les clefs au bar* (Mom, I left the keys in the bar), another one simply spells out the word *maman* in big rounded letters (figure 13). Using, once more, the most public of mediums for the most private of statements, his territorial writing is now literally that of the ultimate abject wannabe.

44 Wilden, Anthony. 1980. *System and Structure. Essays in Communication and Exchange*. London: Tavistock, pp. 62–87.

45 Vautier, Ben, p. 90.

To risk making sense

THIS SLIPPING AND SLIDING AROUND THE DOUBLE FIGURE OF APPROPRIATION/dispossession is perhaps the clearest example of how Ben's signature events open up a space beyond the historical determination of the avant-garde tradition. Something is placed at risk here. And what is risked is above all the sense of a legacy: what has been conquered or accumulated through the avant-garde's history. In fact, it is the very "sense" or "meaning" of the avant-garde that is put at risk. What is generally seen as the main conquest of the avant-garde is the right to a certain legacy of nonsense, of indeterminacy, of lack of certifiable "meaning" in the work of art. But Ben's writing places even the meaning of this legacy at risk.

Here his writing strategies are in some ways structurally parallel to the way in which Georges Bataille displaces Hegel's dialectic of master and slave precisely by following and repeating the terms of the master.⁴⁶ Like Ben's egomaniac signature, Bataille's repetition of the logic of mastery and its fundamental complicity with its own repressed connection to servility, seems to offer a glimpse of the excess, void and meaninglessness that Hegel's notion of mastery must separate itself off from. But this does not leave either Bataille or Ben in the more advanced or "poetic" position of someone who is able to face the "irrational" excess that a narrow-minded reason (or a by now systematized and ordered avant-garde tradition) cannot cope with. Bataille's strategy—like that of Ben's signature—consists in starting a process in which all of the terms involved (reason-unreason, signature-anonymity, appropriation-expropriation) starts to slide around.

In this sliding, however, one risks not only the obvious loss of meaning. More specifically one also *risks making sense*. This is Derrida's formulation—and in relation to Ben the ambiguity of its wording has some pertinence. To risk making sense is not only the risk of a destruction of knowledge. To the extent that avant-garde art may be inscribed within the system of art as this system's own disorder, it could also be seen to have become domesticated, conceptualized, ordered. From another position, which is the one Ben seems to identify with, one might equally well take the risk of making sense, of "agreeing to the reasonableness of reason." From the outset, Ben seems prepared to risk making sense. Against the purely formal search for the uniquely new in painting, he literalizes painterly innovation as a name and a written signature. Against the cut-up syllables and sounds of dadaist and concrete poetry, he writes words and sentences whose semantic meaning is squarely placed in the foreground. He is even emphatic on this account: *Dans mes écritures, la signification compte plus que le graphisme formel. L'important est la vérité véhiculée. (In my writings, the meaning counts more than the graphical style. The important thing is the truth conveyed).* What is "risked" by "making sense" is the specifically artistic or poetic position of non-sense which has become

46 "... rarely has a relation to Hegel been so little definable, a complicity without reserve accompanies Hegelian discourse, "takes it seriously" up to the end, without an objection in philosophical form, while, however, a certain burst of laughter exceeds it and destroys its sense, or signals, in any event, the extreme point of "experience" which makes Hegelian discourse displace itself; and this can be done only through close scrutiny and full knowledge of what one is laughing at. Bataille, thus, took Hegel seriously, and took absolute knowledge seriously. (Derrida, Jacques. 1990. *Writing and Difference*. Alan Bass, translator. London: Routledge p. 253.)

identified with the avant-garde. But to “risk making sense” within the terms of language or knowledge itself is also a strategy of repetition in which the *sense* of language doubles up, becomes simulacral. In Ben’s work, the dry and almost maniacally non-poetic reason may be seen as a ruse in which the sense of the avant-garde itself is at both reversed and put at risk.

ULTIMATELY, BEN’S EMPHASIS ON “TRUTH” MUST BE SPECIFIED HERE, since the statements in his signature writings should be seen as part of his strategic and performative operations, and not anchored in some transcendental principle that would aim to give us the final truth about avant-garde art. Still, truth’s operative connection to some notion of overreaching totality plays an important part here. Ben’s “truth” is perhaps best understood in terms of his dialectic of holes and wholes. As his work discloses how such cherished avant-garde notions as “openness” or “indeterminacy” is based on a systematic repression of all notions of selfhood, Ben’s truth has all the conceptual weight of a real critique. It makes sense, and risks taking part in the closure of meaning. At the same time, Ben’s truth perforates, since the signature performance through which this critique is stated also interrupts the signature of the avant-garde as it seems to close off around *one* sense of its own tradition. It is precisely this dialectic which sets the terms for any discussion of Fluxus after Fluxus. Ben’s performance mimes the continual positing of avant-garde traditions and inheritors despite all claims to the contrary, as well as the sheer force with which such functions are imposed. But, just as importantly, it also opens up an endless chasm under all such impositions. In this way he provides the minimal precondition for a continued production of events.

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