

The Matter of Mimesis

*Studies of Mimesis and Materials
in Nature, Art and Science*

Edited by

Marjolijn Bol
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BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON



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The Fleshiness of Wax

Pietro Conte

This essay deals with hyperrealism and its materials from the perspective of aesthetics, meant both as the philosophy of perception and as the theory of art. It unfolds in four sections. First, I introduce the theoretical reasons lying behind the age-old banishment of hyperrealistic pictures from the realm of so-called “high” art. Adopting a phenomenological approach, I investigate why hyperrealism has been (and quite often still is) considered as *a priori* non-artistic. In the second part, I focus instead on Edgar Degas's *Little dancer aged fourteen* (1878–1881) in order to show how hyperrealism (or, more precisely, a certain kind of hyperrealism) could and should be regarded as a fully legitimate form of art. Finally, in the third and fourth sections, I provide two paradigmatic examples of the use of hyperrealistic sculptures in contemporary art, so as to address the question of why they have been granted access to museums and art galleries all over the world, whereas ordinary wax figures *à la* Madame Tussaud's – although materially indistinguishable from their much more appreciated counterparts – have not. The overarching goal of the essay is, therefore, twofold: to offer a historical-theoretical account of the equating, within the frame of traditional normative aesthetics, of hyperrealism with a merely passive, mechanical duplication of reality; and to provide a way to escape criticism of hyperrealism *qua* art form, by admitting the possibility of a seemingly paradoxical “original copy”.

1 The Phenomenologist at the Wax Museum

In his 1911 *History of portraiture in wax*, which should still be considered as the standard work on hyperrealism (that is, a kind of art which tends towards a perfect overlapping between images and reality), the Austrian art historian Julius von Schlosser (1866–1938) predicted that the invention of photography would rapidly extinguish ‘the last flickering pulse’ of the centuries-old tradition of ceroplastics. Schlosser's requiem was based on the conviction that the need for a ‘faithful,’ ‘living’ and ‘true’ picture of the subjects portrayed was satisfied better by photographs than by the old-fashioned, far more expensive,

and hard-to-accomplish wax sculptures.¹ However, Schlosser's assumption has proven historically wrong. In point of fact, not only are traditional cabinets of wax figures still very popular, but recent decades have also witnessed an ever-growing production and circulation of fine art hyperrealistic sculptures all over the world, from the United States to Europe, China, Japan and Australia. Artists such as Paul Thek, Bruce Nauman, and, more recently, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, Ron Mueck, John De Andrea, Duane Hanson, and Peng Yu have taken advantage of the physical properties of some particular materials (from traditional wax to the more "technological" silicone, fiberglass, and polyester resin) to create images which so closely resemble their models that they can easily be mistaken for the models themselves. Yet a crucial question remains as to whether (and how) hyperrealistic images can access the realm of art, and this is not a historical and empirical, but rather a theoretical question – one concerning the *principles* by which an object should be regarded and defined as a work of art.

This question was repeatedly addressed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In the very same period in which Schlosser was working on his masterpiece, the founder of the phenomenological movement delivered a series of academic lectures on hyperrealism and the possibility it held out of being deceived by pictures resembling real things or persons to the point that it becomes (almost) impossible to discern them from the originals. Although both scholars shared a common theme, their vantage points were quite different. Schlosser's purpose was to offer an *historical* survey of the evolution of hyperrealistic wax sculpture over the centuries, whereas Husserl's main interest lay in sketching out a *theoretical* model for understanding hyperrealism *tout court* from the perspective of philosophical aesthetics: his research focussed primarily on philosophy of perception, and only secondarily on art issues.

Husserl explored the case of wax figures as a classic example of the extremely problematic distinction between perception (*Wahrnehmung*) and pictorial consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*). He began by recalling a day at the end of the 1870s when, while still a student, he went to visit Castan's Panopticon, one of the most famous wax museums of the time: 'I remember the scene at the waxworks in Berlin: How startled I was when the all-too-amiable "lady" on the staircase beckoned to me. But how, after somewhat regaining my composure, I suddenly recognized that this was a mannequin calculated to deceive me'.²

This anecdote should not be underestimated, for it constantly recurs as a veritable *leitmotif* of Husserl's works, both published and unpublished.³ To summarise some salient points of Husserl's argument in brief, perception is

an act in which something objective appears as present (*gegenwärtig*) and is taken to be actual (*wirklich*): the perceived object appears 'so to say in person, as present in itself.'⁴ By contrast, in pictorial consciousness 'although the object itself appears, [...] it does not appear as present. It is only presentified (*vergegenwärtigt*): it is *as if* it were there, but only as if, for it appears not immediately in itself, but only indirectly through a medium, that is, through the mediation of an image. Husserl provides the following example: 'A photograph lies before us, representing a child. How does it do so? In the first instance, by sketching a picture that resembles the child overall, but that differs from it very markedly in respect of the child's apparent height, colouring and so on (Husserl 1904–1905, 18, 20).

Pictorial consciousness – that is, the consciousness of being confronted with a picture – can only arise if we are able to distinguish between what Husserl (1904–1905, 22) calls the 'pictorial object' (the *representing* object: the depicted child) on the one side, and the 'picture subject' (the *represented* object: the child in flesh and blood) on the other side. The differences between the picture and its referent may certainly vary a great deal, but they must always be noticeable, however small they may be: 'an awareness of difference must exist [...] The object that appears does not stand in its own right, but as a representative of another object which is identical or similar to it'. It is a matter of similarity: pictorial consciousness involves representation by means of resemblance – it is a consciousness of resemblance, not of identity. This means that the picture has to be immediately perceived *as a picture*, that is to say, as a picture-of something else which, instead, is not a picture but a real thing or person. Husserl's position (1904–1904, 32) is unequivocal: 'If a conscious relationship with the depicted thing is not present in a picture, then it is not even a picture'. In this sentence, one must emphasise that '*conscious* relation': we must always be clearly aware that what is at stake is a relationship of similarity, not of identity.

Yet what happens if a picture does not allow the beholder to distinguish clearly between representing object and represented subject? In other words: what about hyperrealistic images? Back to the "lady" of Castan's Panopticon: when looking at a wax figure, it is hard to realise, at least at first glance, that it is not a real human being. Phenomenologically, as long as we take it for an individual in flesh and blood, we have a fully ordinary perception, furnished with normal belief, even if it subsequently proves to be mistaken. When we suddenly become aware of having been deceived, pictorial consciousness arises, and we look at the wax figure as what it ontologically is, namely, a puppet. Even then, however, pictorial consciousness does not succeed in lasting, for a wax figure so closely resembles the real human being that perceptual consciousness momentarily prevails again and again:

Wax figures [...] present perceptual appearances of people so well cloaked by representation that the instances of difference are unable to generate a clean and clear awareness of difference, that is, a secure pictorial consciousness. Pictorial consciousness, however, is the essential foundation for the possibility of aesthetic feeling in fine art. No picture, no fine art. And the picture must be *clearly* distinct from reality; that is, distinct in a purely intuitive way, without the aid of indirect thoughts. We are to be lifted up, away from empirical reality and into the equally intuitive world of representativeness (*Bildlichkeit*). Aesthetic semblance (*Schein*) is not the deception of the senses (*Sinnentrug*). [...] Aesthetic enjoyment is founded on a peaceful and clear awareness of representativeness. Aesthetic effects are not fairground effects.⁵

Here is where the phenomenological analysis of deception proves to be crucial for aesthetics not only as the theory of perception, but also as the theory of art. Husserl provides one of the clearest explanations ever given of the theoretical reasons underlying the long-established relegation of illusionistic likenesses (and their materials, too) outside the domain of “high” art, into the “lower” sphere of crafts and merely technical virtuosity. The course of argument seems faultless: on the most basic level, talking about art means talking about pictures; pictures must clearly exhibit their representational character; hyperrealistic pictures do not, so they are not, properly speaking, pictures, and therefore they cannot even be considered art. Any excessive similarity between the world of the image and the real world seems to obscure the ‘unreality’ of the image itself: as Husserl clearly states, in front of a wax figure ‘we indeed *know* that it is a semblance but we cannot help ourselves – we *see* a human being’.⁶

Husserl was far from being alone in regarding hyperrealism as incompatible with art. Trying to explain why extremely lifelike pictures violate any aesthetic requirements and cannot be considered genuine works of art, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) had already argued that they produce ‘the illusion of having before us the thing itself’:

Instead of having the true work of art that leads us away from what exists only once and never again, i.e. the individual, to what always exists an infinite number of times, in an infinite number of individuals, i.e. the mere form or Idea, we have the wax figure giving us apparently the individual himself and hence that which exists only once and never again, yet without that which lends value to such a fleeting existence, that is, without life. Therefore the wax figure causes us to shudder, since its effect is like that of a stiff corpse.⁷

Mutatis mutandis, this is the same position held by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his *Critique of Judgement*. After entitling the 45th paragraph ‘Fine art is an art, so far as it has at the same time the appearance of being nature’, he took care immediately to clarify this statement – which could be read as a defence (or even a praise) of hyperrealism – by pointing out that art must appear as nature *only to a certain point*: ‘Art can only be termed beautiful where we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature. We must be able to look upon fine art as nature, although we recognize it to be art’.⁸ Once again, the emphasis is on the fact that the beholders must be able to recognise the image *as an image*: they must be fully aware of the pictorial nature of what they are looking at.

To sum up: following Kant’s, Schopenhauer’s, and Husserl’s arguments, one might conclude that ‘hyperrealistic art’ is no more than an oxymoron, for hyperrealism and art simply do not mix. There is a ‘but’, however. Husserl visited Castan’s Panopticon at the end of the 1870s. Just a few years later, in 1881, Edgar Degas presented his famous *Little dancer aged fourteen* at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in Paris. Dressed in a real bodice, tutu, and ballet slippers, and fitted out with genuine hair, this hyperrealistic sculpture was fated to overturn the traditional idea of art.

2 ‘But for Heaven’s Sake – Not Inside a Museum of Art!’

While Degas created many sculptures during his lifetime, *Little dancer* was the only one he ever exhibited. It is universally regarded as one of the most complete manifestations of nineteenth-century theories of realism, which demanded that art should faithfully depict modern life in all its multifarious aspects, including those generally considered ugly, obscene, or simply unaesthetic. Yet far less attention has been paid to two facts.

First, *Little dancer* was made out of wax, the material of hyperrealism *par excellence*. Many bronze casts made from it are exhibited in different museums all around the world, but the original, which can still be admired at the Washington National Gallery, where it forms part of the Mellon collection, is indeed a wax figure. Making a sculpture out of stone, wood, or metal idealises the subject portrayed, leaving no doubt as to the iconic nature of the depiction. By contrast, making a sculpture out of wax is more disturbingly naturalistic, as it forces an encounter with an organic material strictly related to flesh and blood.⁹ In *Rhapsody, or additions to the Letter on sentiments* (1761), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) for instance explicitly maintained that ‘the

difference between the material of the imitation and the material of nature, the marble and the canvas are the most obvious sensed features which, without damaging the art, call the attention back from the illusion whenever necessary. Because of this, one also sees why the closer that painted statues come to nature, the more unpleasant they are. [...] Life-size and fully clothed wax figures leave an impression that is quite disgusting'.¹⁰

It is therefore hardly surprising that, when Degas first exhibited his sculpture, some critics argued that it reminded them, simply and vulgarly, of the uncanny practices of taxidermy: as Henri Trianon put it harshly, one should 'bring it into a museum of zoology, anthropology, or even physiology, but for Heaven's sake – not inside a museum of art!'¹¹ The reasons behind this and other similar polemical attacks can be traced back to the centuries-old connection between wax and the tradition of anatomical modelling.¹² In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – the golden age of wax medical anatomies – wax was mainly regarded as the quintessential stand-in for human flesh. From the famous, highly idealised 'Venuses' and *écorchés* to the far more individualised *moulages*, wax had become the material for a very specific genre of lifelikeness, aimed at mechanical fidelity to reality and 'noninterventionist objectivity' (Daston & Galison 2007, 123–187). Regardless of whether they were actually cast from life or not, hyperrealistic figures in general were immediately associated with mechanical processes that seem to invalidate *a priori* any aesthetic claim. The detractors of hyperrealism could ceaselessly refer, as a paradigmatic example, to the criticism formulated by Denis Diderot:

I have been told about a sculptors' trick. Do you know what they do? They take plaster moulds of a model's feet, hands, and shoulders. By filling these moulds, casts are made that they subsequently use in their compositions just as they are. This is an easy way to approach the truth of nature; yet it must no longer be regarded as the merit of a skilful sculptor, but rather of an ordinary smelter.¹³

However, despite all the above criticisms, the fact remains that Degas's *Little dancer* was shown in an *art* exhibition, and that it is still regarded as one of the most radical innovations in the whole history of sculpture. It opened a new way of looking at artistic practices, a way in which hyperrealism and art are not (or at least not necessarily) opposites. The second point one should focus on leads in the very same direction. The fact, which is definitely not as well known as it deserves to be, is that the story of the exhibition of *Little dancer* is quite an enigmatic one. The sculpture was already largely finished by the end

of March 1880, and Degas had announced it for the fifth Impressionist exhibition of that year. Yet the show opened without it. A glass case was placed in one of the museum halls, as if the sculpture's arrival were imminent; but then the show closed with that case still empty. A year later, in 1881, history seemed to be repeating itself. *Little dancer* was announced for the sixth Impressionist exhibition, the empty case was set up again, and again it remained empty, even if this time only for a while. Although it was not immediately exhibited, the wax sculpture did finally arrive to fill that showcase, but it only did so several days after the exhibition's opening.

Why Degas decided to wait for so long before unveiling his work is still (and, presumably, will remain) a matter of debate, but one should assume that there were not so much *technical* as *theoretical* reasons. In fact, even if the sculpture, as is well known, was clearly inspired by the physical appearance of the young dancer Marie-Geneviève van Goethem, Degas's work cannot be regarded – and this is crucial – as a mere replica of its model. As many critics pointed out, Degas did not intend to create a copy of the real-life ballerina: on the contrary, he meant to transfigure her symbolically into what Paul Mantz called a 'flower of precocious depravity', with a face 'marked by the promise of every vice' and bearing the signs of alleged 'atavistic criminal tendencies'.¹⁴ At that time in Paris, dancers had a bad reputation, and their profession was all but risk-free: recruited from the humblest classes, those very young artists were often engaged as escorts prepared (or rather forced) to give themselves to wealthy clients as soon as the shows were over. It is thus no coincidence that Degas exhibited his *Little dancer* next to two pastels sharing the title *Criminal physiognomy* (*Physionomie de criminels*): the 'natural born prostitute' was the perfect complement to those 'natural born killers' who would shortly afterwards be at the core of Cesare Lombroso's notorious study of physiognomic attributes.¹⁵ In 1892 – just one year after the public exhibition of *Little dancer* – Lombroso (1835–1909) opened the Museum of Criminal Anthropology in Turin, where he collected, among other specimens, hyperrealistic wax replicas of the heads of 'madmen and criminals'. Lombroso's biological determinism was based on the presumption that criminality was an inherited trait, revealing itself in a person's visible features. By seeking to isolate the 'natural born criminal' as a deviant type of human being, the founder of the Italian school of anthropological and positivist criminology focussed on the face as a tell-tale mirror of the self, convinced as he was that the physical features could provide access to personality traits and, therefore, indicate whether an individual was prone to crime or madness. Through comparison of many facial characteristics, Lombroso meant to reveal the criminal types underlying them. Thus, the wax heads hosted in his museum are to be regarded as a hybrid form of anatomical modelling: on the one side, they strove (like *moulages*) for maximum

adherence to the strictly individual physiognomies, while on the other side they were supposed to be (like wax “Venuses”) representatives of general human categories. Paradoxically enough, in Lombroso’s museum individuals turned into types.

In addition to all this, it should be pointed out that *Little dancer* raised not only moral and social, but also and foremost *aesthetic* issues. Degas took advantage of hyperrealism to make the boundaries between reality and image blur dangerously, yet without prejudicing the artistic value of his “creature”. On the contrary, it was precisely that provocative blurring which ultimately gave *Little dancer* its artistic status. Under the (dis)guise of an extremely realistic work, Degas’s wax figure led to a deep resemanticisation of realism itself, thus confirming once more that, for art to be art, it must not aim at mere imitation, even if it seems to aspire to nothing more than the maximum degree of lifelikeness and mimetic adherence to reality.

When framed in this context – a context in which hyperrealism *can* indeed be considered as a legitimate form of art – even the empty showcase proves to be significant. Far from being just an expedient to create suspense, it marked an astonishing turning point in the history of art, a change which at that time remained essentially unappreciated, but was nevertheless fated to make history. For the very first time, that empty glass case suggested that whatever were put inside it – no matter *what kind* of object it turned out to be – was to be regarded as art, just because the artist chose to put it there. Duchamp and his *Fountain* were still a long way off, but what Degas did with the showcase of *Little dancer* can be interpreted, from this perspective, as a starting point for ontological discussions on the nature and definition of the work of art that would come to be at the core of readymade theories such as the one elaborated by Arthur Danto (1981).

Thus, among its many merits, Degas’s *Little dancer* had one in particular, namely that of legitimising hyperrealism as a form of art. Not hyperrealism *tout court*, though: not Madame Tussaud’s hyperrealism, but a kind of hyperrealism which does not aim at the trivial reproduction of reality. Since Degas, the fundamental question has no longer been whether or not there could be such a thing as hyperrealistic art, but rather how artistic hyperrealism is to be distinguished from non-artistic hyperrealism. Let’s take a couple of examples from contemporary art.

3 Lynching in the City Centre

Milan, 6 May 2004. It is a nice breezy spring evening in Piazza XXIV maggio. The sun has already gone down, but one person is not yet asleep. A middle-aged

man armed with a ladder and a cutter draws near to the centuries-old oak that stands out in the middle of the urban landscape. He stops at the foot of the tree, glances up and sees them: three children, hanging, a slipknot around their necks, eyes wide open, and a fixed, empty gaze. Heedless of the guards watching over the horrific scene, he climbs up and calmly, methodically, begins to release those lifeless bodies by cutting the ropes that keep them hanging. Down comes the first child, down the second, but the third is out of reach, so that he needs to proceed cautiously. Suddenly the branch flexes, unexpectedly bends, and breaks; the man falls down and lies hurt upon the ground, surrounded by a curious crowd growing larger and larger until the ambulance rushes him to the emergency room (fig. 10.1).

This is the story of a bricklayer and an artwork by Maurizio Cattelan. Not real children, but simple dummies dressed in jeans and T-shirts, with bare and soiled feet. Cattelan's installation immediately raises a great clamour, eliciting contrasting reactions: to those thinking that it is just a provocative, grim marketing strategy, primarily conceived for maximum exposure, others immediately reply that art is art, and it neither can nor should be afraid of appearing unseemly, scandalous, or even degenerate. Asked for his own view, Cattelan declares that his purpose was to focus on childhood, and on the violence to which too many children are exposed worldwide. Indeed, the work stages a radical and extremely problematic reversal of the ordinary power relations between adults and children, making the kids, for once, look down on the adults, not only from a physical but also from a moral point of view:

They look like real children watching down on us, like three judges or prophets. There's something judgemental in their gaze. This is a condition which we have forced children to be in, and now, from that position, children look at us and tell us what we are doing to ourselves, to our future, to our vision of tomorrow. My artwork is about the way we are handling our dreams.¹⁶

Above and beyond any discussion of the different interpretations of the art installation offered by the artist, critics, or simple passersby, what truly stuns is that apparently trivial statement: 'They look like real children'. This is the key point from which one must start in order first to approach, and then to acclaim, contest, or just ignore Cattelan's artwork. This was perfectly understood by Franco De Benedetto himself, the "saviour" of the puppets, who after recovering declared: 'I did not expect all this clamour about my action, I definitely did not do it for glory. You haven't been there, under those children's gaze. It hurt you, it looked so real'.¹⁷ By making the beholder doubt the possibility of



FIGURE 10.1 Maurizio Cattelan, *Untitled* (2004). Resin, fiberglass, synthetic hair, clothing and rope
MILAN, PIAZZA XXIV MAGGIO
PHOTO: ATTILIO MARANZANO
COURTESY MAURIZIO CATTELAN'S ARCHIVE

finding any difference whatsoever between appearance and reality, Cattelan's hyperrealistic dummies undermined the idea of 'representation' itself, suggesting that those puppets were not "just puppets", that is to say mere objects: what was really at stake were the originals, the models themselves – the children of flesh and blood.

We are dealing here with the 'indecisive nature of the boundaries between the artistic and the living' discussed by José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955), and it is no coincidence that Stefano Civardi, the public attorney assigned to prosecute De Benedetto for aggravated damage, felt the urge to ask for an expert appraisal, so as to ascertain whether or not the three puppets could be numbered among the 'things of historic and artistic interest' protected by the Italian penal code.¹⁸ The outcome of the evaluation was fairly predictable: the experts declared that the installation, however disturbing, must be considered genuine art. In fact, a few months later, one of Cattelan's children reappeared – this time hanging from a flagpole – in Seville's Biennial of Contemporary Art, before eventually being sold by Christie's for £900,000.

Yet these pieces of evidence were not enough. Some continued to argue that provocativeness was not sufficient to turn simple objects into works of art. As Carla De Albertis, a member of the former Italian conservative party 'Alleanza Nazionale,' summed up during an intervention at the town council meeting of 10 May 2004, 'no clue was given about these puppets being virtual, so that you would think they were real people. There was no information about the purpose of the installation, not the least bit, and this is unfair and inappropriate'.¹⁹ Besides the ethical-axiological judgement about the alleged 'unfairness' and 'inappropriateness' of hanging those children in the city centre, the theoretical core of this kind of criticism once again concerns the lack of clearness about the artistic nature of Cattelan's work. If the artwork mingles with a real object, the risk of being unable to distinguish its fictional nature becomes too high. Of course, Duchamp's *Fountain* was nothing but a trivial daily object, but what made it unique was its decontextualisation: placing it inside a museum was an operation of physical as well as semantic transfer – a *trans-fert*, a metaphor. But it is quite a different matter with Cattelan's children: they were hanging in the middle of the street, forcing all passers-by (including real children) to an unavoidable and therefore violent exercise of voyeurism.

Here is one of the main arguments deployed by the critics of the installation, starting with De Benedetto himself: 'Instead of putting those puppets in a public square for everyone to see, Cattelan could have displayed them in a museum. There you pay to get inside, you *choose* to go'.²⁰ Equally important, however, was the artist's reply during an interview for the *Guardian*. After admitting that he was purposely trying to elicit strong responses, Cattelan

pointed out that 'it was very important that this work was exhibited outside. But that is why people found it so unbearable. Safely inside a museum, it would have been a huge success'.²¹ Only located in an incongruous place not specifically intended to host works of art could those hanging dummies accomplish their task:

I was aware that someone could be offended by my artwork. The audience is made of several stories, every single person carries his own. This morning I was listening to the passers-by's remarks: someone was arguing that the installation was 'a work against war,' someone else that it was made to symbolise the need 'to protect the trees.' There were also those who, outraged, shouted out: 'We support life, not death!' If I could gather these comments all together, I would say *they* are the artwork.²²

This is a crucial statement, for it clarifies that Cattelan's work consists not only of the installation itself, but also and foremost of the reactions elicited in the beholders – in *any* beholder, from connoisseur to unaware passer-by. Those children can affect or shock us, make us pensive or simply irritate us, but one thing holds certainly true: they question us, they concern us, they provoke us, thus demonstrating that images possess the power to make us act and react. Surfing the internet, one can find comments such as this:

Cattelan's work is definitively a successful experiment. That is what happens when children's terror comes right to your doorstep, instead of remaining confined to Uganda or Sudan, Iraq or Palestine. However, those children hanging from the tree were nothing but puppets. It is sad to think that, for so many real children living in the very same condition, there are so few people willing to climb on the tree and cut the rope.²³

Everything correct, everything embraceable, except for one small detail: those children *were* certainly 'nothing but puppets', but they were nevertheless *perceived* as if they were real human beings. And this mismatch between ontology and phenomenology, between 'being' and 'perception', changed the whole game.

Finally, what is the difference between this work and a figure in an ordinary wax museum? From a material and technical point of view, the answer is quite simple: nothing at all. *Nothing* differentiates them: the same ability to imitate, the same skill in rendering the details, the same power in recreating the flesh. On the contrary, if we look at the semantic level of hyperrealistic works of art, we have to admit that we are faced with something very different

from Madame Tussaud's wax figures. The statues in a wax museum aim only at imitating a real person, object, or scene as closely as possible: theirs is a *superficial* task. By contrast, in order to make art, technical ability is not enough. One could say that, among the many different meanings that could be attributed to the three hanging children, there was also an ironic, yet no less crucial, questioning of the relationship between Tussaud's realism on the one hand, and artistic realism on the other. Cattelan's work was first and foremost aimed at finding a way to make copies (even in the humblest sense of the word, as mechanical, almost automatic reproductions) original and artistic. His dummies challenged the beholder to find the difference between image and reality on the one hand, and between craft and "high" art on the other. In conclusion, one could say that Cattelan's artwork was transgressive in the most literal sense of the word: it aimed at *trans-gredi*, that is, at 'over-stepping' the traditionally well-established boundaries separating art from non-art, reality from image, illusion from perception. And it is precisely this transgression which makes his wax figures far more significant than those of Tussaud's.

4 Who Is He Really?

A second, paradigmatic example of how it is possible to take advantage of hyperrealism to produce genuine works of art has been provided by Gavin Turk's *Che*, a lifesize sculpture in multicolored wax, which makes lifelikeness its most flagrant feature (fig. 10.2). It is tempting to consider this sculpture, hardly distinguishable from an ordinary wax figure such as one might expect to find in a Panopticon, as the all-too-jaded repetition of Duchampian readymades. Should we really regard *Che* as a work of art simply because it has been placed on a pedestal inside a glass case inside a museum?

Let us look more closely. At first glance, the face seems nothing more than a three-dimensional transposition of the well-known photograph taken by Alberto Korda in 1960, which went viral in the stylised version adapted in 1967 by Irish artist Jim Fitzpatrick, and shortly thereafter was celebrated in a 1968 painting attributed to Andy Warhol.²⁴ Upon closer inspection, however, we find a self-portrait of Turk himself. And what of that curious cowboy pose? This too seems familiar, as if we had already seen it countless times; and indeed, such is the case, for it explicitly calls to mind Elvis Presley starring in Don Siegel's movie *Flaming star*, which has been immortalised – once again – by Warhol's silkscreens (fig. 10.3). Quoting the quote of a quote, thus, or copying the copy of a copy.



FIGURE 10.2 Gavin Turk, *Che* (1999). Waxwork in vitrine, 115 × 279 × 115 cm
COURTESY: LIVE STOCK MARKET, GAVIN TURK

But there is more: the icon of revolutionary dreams and ideals of freedom and justice (Che Guevara) mingles with the rock icon (Elvis Presley) while hinting at the same time at the American artist (Warhol) who transformed both of those icons into ambiguous simulacra. The uniqueness, and even the identity,



FIGURE 10.3 Andy Warhol, *Triple Elvis* (1963)

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LICENSED BY DACS, LONDON

of the figures involved is jeopardised by the potentially infinite reproducibility of their images. Beyond these three, however, Turk's work has a fourth protagonist, that is, Turk himself: by borrowing and reproducing again, for the umpteenth time, those two twentieth-century icons, the artist radicalises Warhol's artistic strategy in a twofold sense. Firstly: who is the *subject* portrayed? Che Guevara, Elvis Presley, Andy Warhol, or Gavin Turk? Or maybe it is all four? Or none of them? Secondly: who is the *author* of the work? Who holds copyright? Korda, Siegel, Warhol, or Turk? It is impossible to say. Therefore, what is questioned is not only the status of art in the age of its technical reproducibility, but also that of the artist and, more generally, of individuality itself: at stake is the ambiguous relationship between being and appearing, between a real body and its substitute, between personal identity and mythical identification.²⁵

Here, once again, is the difference with Tussaud's hyperrealism. Despite any apparent similarity between Turk's *Che* and ordinary wax figures, the differences cannot be overlooked. Madame Tussaud's statues only aim at perfectly (and superficially) mimicking their models in the flesh, whereas Turk's work makes its originality out of mimicry, quotation, borrowing, and even plagiarism – and it is precisely this paradox of an *original copy* that makes it a work of art. From this perspective, the choice of material is also explained: wax has always been used to guarantee the immediate recognisability of the subjects portrayed, but it is here employed to certify the (postmodern) impossibility of any identification, while its innate vocation of reproducing surfaces and appearances is now exploited to stress the need to look beyond the façade.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has a twofold purpose. First, it has aimed to shed light on the *theoretical* reasons behind criticisms of hyperrealism as a possible art form. This objective was met through an analysis of the long-established assimilation of hyperrealism to merely mechanical (hence, in principle, non-artistic) reproduction. By taking a phenomenological approach, I showed that the age-old exclusion of hyperrealism from the realm of so-called “high” art was primarily due to the almost automatic equating of wax sculpture with the objective, ‘noninterventionist’ duplication of reality. The reasoning can be syllogistically summed up as follows: if fine art is traditionally defined as the art of genius; if genius presupposes originality, that is, a more or less radical *deviation* from actual reality; then hyperrealism, aimed as it is at faithfully adhering to reality, cannot properly be regarded as a genuine art form. The whole argument

is based on the assumption that hyperrealism *necessarily* goes hand in hand with the mechanical copy, fake, forgery, and hence with an absolute lack of originality.

The second objective of this chapter was to prove that this assumption is both historically and theoretically wrong. Many artistic practices have showed that hyperrealism does not (necessarily) have to be reduced to the counterfeiting of actual reality. On the contrary, it can best be employed to create artefacts which, at first, may perhaps appear to be nothing but duplicates of reality, but on closer inspection turn out instead to be highly original – and this not *despite*, but rather *thanks to* their (apparent) adherence to physical reality. The seemingly paradoxical concept of an ‘original copy’ is thus achieved, and, with it, an explanation of the difference between artistic and non-artistic hyperrealism.

A final remark needs to be made concerning the perspective from which I have tackled the issue of (purported) excessive similarity in this essay. Wax is the material of hyperrealism *par excellence*, and it also plays a prominent role in the history of philosophical reflection, being frequently evoked by authors and in contexts that may at first seem to have little to do with each other, but that are in fact unpredictably interwoven. My choice to focus on such a particular material has therefore been determined by the fact that, over the centuries, waxworks have come to represent a veritable ‘cultural obsession’ (Bloom 2003) permeating both philosophical and artistic reflection from antiquity to the present day.

To be sure, this focus on wax only covers one single aspect of the far broader thematic spectrum of hyperrealism; yet it is, indeed, a *paradigmatic* aspect. This means that theoretical reflection on the many issues raised by wax figures can be applied successfully not only to other different *materials* (such as, for instance, silicone, fiberglass, and polyester resin, which are ever more frequently used in contemporary art), but also to other different scientific *fields*. Indeed, even outside the arts, it seems as if we are living in the age of hyperrealism: think of computer graphics, image metrics techniques, or the stunning evolution of immersive and interactive environments, virtual and augmented reality, or robotics and android science. In all these domains, as in the artistic field, hyperrealism is used to blur the threshold between the world of the image and the real world drastically. And this was precisely the overarching objective of this essay: to provide a starting point for an in-deep analysis of the multifarious strategies for producing pictures that elicit in the observer (or rather the *experiencer*) an unprecedented ‘reality effect’ – a topic that has become more of a priority than ever before.

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Endnotes

- 1 Schlosser 1911, 287.
- 2 Husserl 1912, 497.
- 3 See for instance Husserl 1900–1901, vol. 2, 137–138; 1904–1905, 42–44; 1918–1926, 72–79; 1939, 92.
- 4 Husserl 1904–1905, 18.
- 5 Husserl 1904–1905, 44.
- 6 Husserl 1904–1905, 43–44. On the phenomenological concept of ‘unreality’ see Fink 1930.
- 7 Schopenhauer 1851, 421–422.
- 8 Kant 1790, 135.
- 9 In *Art and illusion* (1960, 60), Ernst H. Gombrich emphasised the different effects elicited by a marble or a bronze bust in comparison with a wax head. On the use of different materials in relation to resemblance especially meant as lifelikeness, see this volume, in particular the essays of Kinney and Sarnecka. More specifically on wax, cf. Panzanelli 2008 and Conte 2014.
- 10 Mendelssohn 1761, 139.
- 11 Trianon 1881, in Berson 1996, 368.
- 12 There is a vast literature discussing the diverse aspects and the multifarious functions of anatomical modelling. In relation to some of the main issues considered in this chapter, see Lemire 1990; Didi-Huberman 1999; Ullrich 2003; Schnalke 2004; Ballestriero 2010; Märker 2011 and her chapter in this volume.
- 13 Diderot 1763, vol. 1, 247–248.
- 14 Mantz 1881, in Berson 1996, 1, 358; Onuki 1999, 69.
- 15 On the emergence and rise of French criminology in these years, see, among others: Nye 1984; Pick 1989; Borlandi *et al.* 2000; Hagins 2013; Regener 2003.
- 16 Cattelan & Cirillo 2004. On the same occasion, the artist describes his artwork this way: ‘The way the artwork is sculpted, the fact that the knot is loose around the necks, and the children’s facial expression, almost one of angelic resignation: those bodies seem to rise and to levitate from the ground more than hang. It is an almost angelic image.’
- 17 De Benedetto *et al.* 2004.
- 18 Ortega y Gasset 1921, 188; Berizzi & Fazzo 2004, Guastalla 2006.
- 19 The official report is still available on the website: web http://www.dealbertis.it/Inter-venti/10-5-04_bambini.pdf.
- 20 De Benedetto *et al.* 2004.
- 21 Cattelan & Arie 2004. Similar statements can be found in the recently released autobiographical interview with Catherine Grenier, in which Cattelan reiterates how people remained shocked because the work ‘was not protected within the boundaries of a museum or a gallery, being exhibited in a public space, in the middle of the street, where nobody expected to find it’ (Cattelan & Grenier 2011, 76).
- 22 Cattelan & Cirillo 2004 (author’s emphasis).
- 23 Oddone 2004.
- 24 The work was later revealed as a forgery created by Warhol’s assistant Gerard Malanga, who sold it to a gallery in Rome. When Warhol learned of the fake, he chose to “authenticate” it as if it actually were one of his paintings, provided that all the money from its sale was redirected to himself.
- 25 For more on similar issues, see also Henning’s chapter in this book.