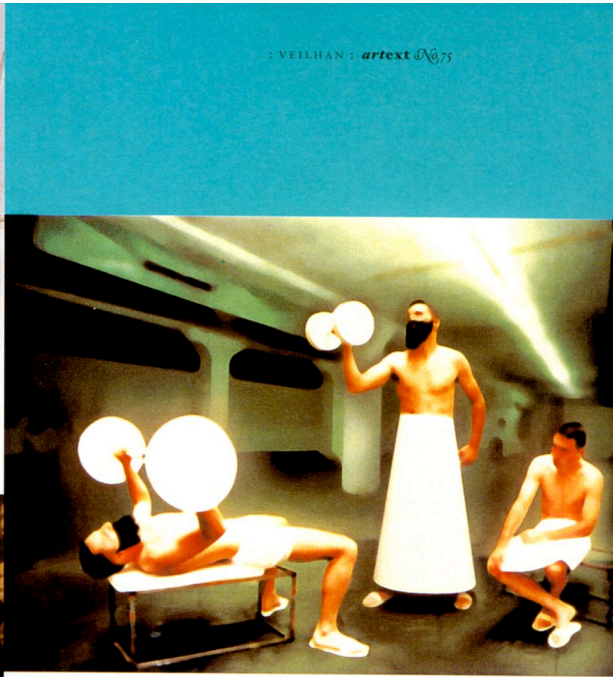


talking shop
XAVIER VEILHAN

BENNETT SIMPSON



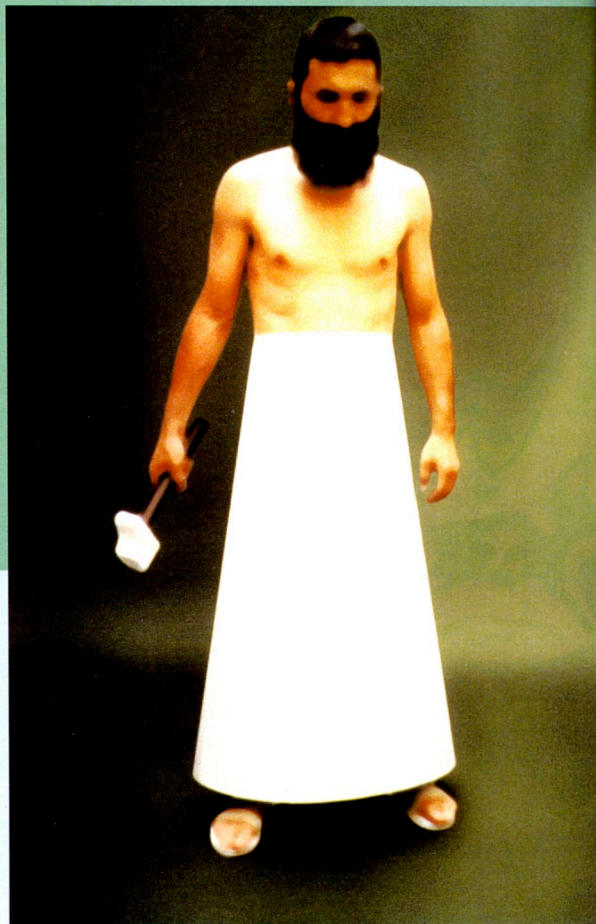
This hypertrophy of production discourse seems, itself, the product of art's rapid digestion of its own past, specifically that genealogy of practical technology



One hears a lot about "production" in contemporary art these days. We speak of an art work's "production value," whether high or low, professional or debased. Wielding the Matthew Barney or Vanessa Beecroft analogy, we speak of artists as "producers"—creative agents whose reach into the culture industry lends them new methodologies, disciplines, and agendas (or just business as usual). Borrowing the terminology of film and music, we now say that artists are "in production," or more conspicuously, "in post-production" when they are making their work, having it made by others (at "production studios"), or otherwise getting it ready for display. And such parlance isn't just the hot air of artists, critics, and curators. Market organization bears it out: the recent boom of funding agencies, art-oriented PR groups, public art alliances and corporation-museum partnerships has signaled a dramatic expansion of art's self-image as a "field of production."¹

That genealogy of practical technology that includes Pop's objectification of style as image; Minimalism's turn toward industrial materials and techniques; Conceptualism's "aesthetics of administration"; and the percolation through art of new media like video, film, dance and performance, and, more recently, digital technology. Rarely, however, are tropes of production and technology raised in a self-conscious historical sense, with an understanding of a given technology's place in the culture at large or the culture of the past. Though there is no shortage of art that smacks illustratively of the current moment's enthralment with the digital—we can easily recognize a "technological look" in '90s art—Fredric Jameson's statement, as early as 1984, that "the technology of our own moment no longer possesses the same capacity for representation" as did the machine gun or automobile for the Futurists, has essentially been left uncountered.²

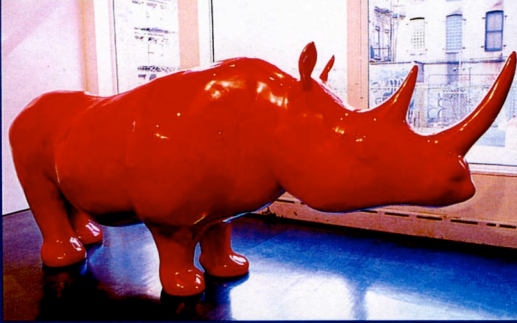
XAVIER VEILHAN,
(PREVIOUS LEFT)
Untitled (Demonstration), 1997, Nova jet print, plastified & mounted on PVC, 94.5 x 130 in.
(PREVIOUS MIDDLE)
Installation view, Sandra Gering Gallery, New York, 1997-98.
(PREVIOUS RIGHT)
Untitled (The Weightlifters), 1997, Nova jet print, plastified & mounted on PVC, 94.5 x 130 in.
Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery, New York.



Paris-based artist Xavier Veilhan has built up a body of work which might be said to allegorize this problem of technological representation in the "post-industrial," "postmodern," or digital era. Veilhan has exhibited frequently since 1984, both individually and in many early collaborations with the artists Pierre Bismuth and Pierre Huyghe. His practice, which includes work in all media, is complex and multifaceted, and presents a challenge to simple summary. In the United States, Veilhan may be best known for a series of photographic tableaux suggesting a reappraisal of nineteenth-century realism's efforts to catalogue or represent the new modern world. These photographs present odd, cult-like groups of men and women performing ritualized and quasi-scientific activities: taking measurements, hammering, surveying the landscape, lecturing in public squares, protesting on boulevards. Quite differently, Veilhan may be remembered as well from the Guggenheim's "Premises" survey of contemporary French art and architecture, where he showed *Le Feu* (1996), a highly stylized installation of a working, industrially fabricated fireplace. Dropped from the ceiling by a long chimney and enclosed by a hexagonal and *moderne* bench arrangement, the communal hearth could be a place of contemplation or chitchat for its audience.³

Because Veilhan's projects have been so diverse, I want to focus in this essay on a very select series of works which I feel to be representative of the artist's prolonged engagement with images of technological production. Veilhan isn't a digital artist, he isn't even clearly a "nineties artist," but the issue of technology and how we experience it in works of art at this moment is a central lens onto his project.

Not unsurprisingly, Veilhan has no real signature style or medium. It is clear, however, that style, as a tool or functional aspect, allows him to realize what might be specifically historical or contemporary within a given production.



XAVIER VEILHAN,

(OPPOSITE)

Untitled (Man with Hammer), 1997, Nova jet print, plastified & mounted on PVC, 82.75 x 49.25 in. (1010)

The Rhinoceros, 1999-2000, installation at Yves St. Laurent, New York, fiberglass, polyurethane foam, enamel, 177 x 181 x 47 in.

(BOTTOM)

The Model T Ford, 1999, lifesize reconstruction of a 1923 Model T Ford, metal chassis, wood bodywork, restored authentic engine, electrical dolly composed of ten 3 m. modules, 175 x 300 x 170 cm.

Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery, New York.

Rhinoceros (1999), a recent sculpture in a series of “animals” that the artist has produced for over a decade, is a case in point. Professionally cast in polyester resin and finished in high-gloss candy-red paint, the sculpture is stilted and generic in appearance—it looks made but unfinished, more shape than image. Lacking eyes, surface detailing, or any semblance of anthropomorphic expression, the sculpture’s signification is hardly attendant on its autistic realism. Rather, the piece seems to have been plopped down from the sky, a kind of Minimalist “specific object,” but different. If Judd introduced the “time” of industrial materials into the experience of his boxes and stacks—theater as historicity—Veilhan’s rhino seems to negate temporality just as dramatically. Gleaming, reflective, and hard, like the sun-baked hood of a new Mercedes, the object couches the moment of its production in the commodity language of timelessness.

This was most emphatically the case in the work’s New York staging. As part of their corporate arts agenda, Yves Saint-Laurent commissioned Veilhan to install *Rhinoceros* in the designer’s high-profile boutique in SoHo. Among YSL’s “classic” dresses and suits, icons in their own right, there was no getting beyond the “made-ness” of the object: how much labor, how many production studios, phone calls, specifications, computer mockups, how much finagling between artist, gallery, and boutique—how much diverse *work*—went into its fabrication? In this moment of recognition, however, production becomes intangible. Sensed but mystified. Obvious but hidden. *Rhinoceros*’s status as a thing of human endeavor was subsumed by its total reduction to style, so much so that the two became inseparable. Placing artificiality next to immanence, expenditure next to essence, this collapse of method into sign most clearly seems an instance of what Jameson has called “the technological sublime.”

In an era of “flexible” and “immaterial” labor, issues of material production have been abstracted almost to the point of novelty, even as the culture of work has never been more fetishized. This may also be true in contemporary art, where production is still routinely considered a technical aspect of the artist’s subjective vision (think of the return to studio craft in the new “L.A. sculpture”), if not simply a question of style or fashion. By contrast, Veilhan’s sculptures *The Potter’s Wheel* (1996) and *The Model T Ford* (1999) are neither technical innovation nor merely illustrative. *The Model T Ford* is the more discrete and “sculptural” of the two works. A non-functional simulation of Henry Ford’s famous Model T automobile, the piece is, like *Rhinoceros*, highly stylized and stripped down. Fabricated in collaboration with a group of engineering students, the car’s basic structure is properly boxy and black. Subsequent detail work was done at a production studio. Completing the analogy to Ford’s revolutionarily successful icon, Veilhan has most often displayed the piece on a kind of track system reminiscent of an assembly line.

Model T suggests a two-fold inversion in the history of art and industry. Ford’s original Model T was engineered so simply that, with the right tools and a modicum of knowledge, it could be disassembled, repaired, and put back together again by just about anybody. The mass production of the car signaled the decline of craft and artistry in an industry that had previously been dominated by specialists catering to the rich. As an art object, however, Veilhan’s version of the car signals another kind of decline: that of art making indebted to industrialism. Stretching from William Morris through Futurism and finding an apex with the steel and Plexiglas of Minimalism, the



XAVIER VEILHAN,
(LEFT BELOW)

The Potter's Wheel, 1996, installation detail, Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, circular wood top, metal structure and rotation axis, metal disk, scooter, plastic tubes, vacu-formed modules, potteries, white Plexiglas, stroboscopic light, dim. var.
(LEFT)

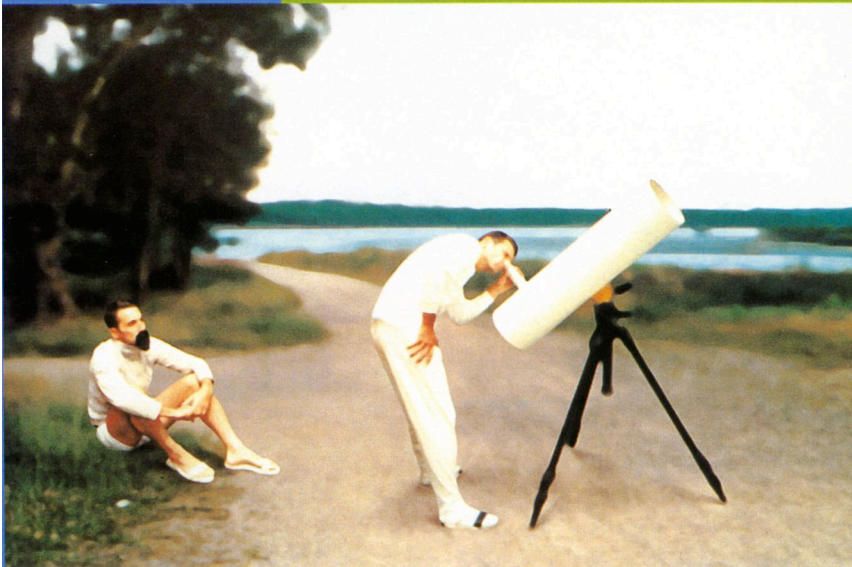
The Fire, 1996, installation view, "Traffic," Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, wool, metal, fabric, fire extinguisher, 1300 x 440 x 440 cm.
(OPPOSITE)

Untitled (The Astronomers), 1997, Nova jet print, plastified & mounted on PVC, 94.5 x 130 in.
Courtesy Sandra Gering Gallery, New York.

repetition, collectivity, and transparency of modern industrialism in art are rendered here as an allegory of obsolescence, symbols of an era that has passed.

Veilhan's installation *The Potter's Wheel* performs, literally, some of the ambiguous transformations overtaking artistic production. Harnessing the spinning rear wheel of a moped to a modified potter's wheel, the artist attempted to handcraft clay pots from the energy of a machine more inclined to zip between taxis on a busy Parisian avenue. The agile and sleek vehicle, a perfect symbol of technology's current speed and mobility, could not be a more incongruous production mechanism for the blobby, wet clay—the most primordial of sculptural signifiers. *The Potter's Wheel*, to quote John Miller, "forces a moral and ideological confrontation between hand and machine"—and in so doing, seems a statement piece about the fate of the artistic gesture after Minimalism.¹ Neither the hand of the craftsman-genius whiling away in expressive solitude nor the technocratic optimism and transparency that replaced it in the form of the machine are seen as viable options in a work such as this. The clay pots produced by such a confabulation of technologies came out stillborn and awkward. The moped had to be rigged with a special exhaust tube in order to rid the gallery of noxious emissions. The *faux-moderne* white plastic platforms on which the "finished" pots were displayed did not recall Judd so much as IKEA or, natch, Pottery Barn. Ultimately, the artistic remainder of *The Potter's Wheel* becomes just one more decorative and inscrutable aspect in an historical moment emblemized not by a mode but by a field of production, the contours of which are both opaque and changing.

The question of audience and context is crucial to the understanding of the three works described above. Like all allegory, the realism of which is always hypothetical, Veilhan's representations of historical production depend upon the viewer's sympathetic recognition of their constituent parts. To quote Jameson again, "the power [of the technological sublime] is documented by



the success of such works in evoking a whole new production space around us.⁶ For him, postmodernism's overlapping or texturing of historical representation was most apparent in architecture—in the famous instance of the Bonaventure Hotel or in the reflective and opaque faces of corporate skyscrapers. Veilhan, perhaps, finds a corollary to architecture in “public” icons of production like the Model T and the pottery studio (he has, elsewhere, stated a preference for the word “statuary” over “sculpture”). His projects are indebted to a visual language of production whose signification owes to its “pastness” or historical register. Unlike so much recent art that seeks to “create” social experience by emblemizing the available leitmotifs of spectacle culture, Veilhan looks backwards to find the present—dialectics over disco.

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NOTES

1. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); for a more topical and speculative analysis of the expansion of art's service industry, see Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, “Culture Clubs,” archived at <www.metamute.com>.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 37.
3. *Le Feu* was originally produced for Nicolas Bourriaud's quintessentially '90s “Traffic” exhibition in Bordeaux. The work, perhaps more than any other in Veilhan's oeuvre, manifests aspects of Bourriaud's “relational aesthetics” theory of contemporary art, which claims interactivity, relationality, and convivial experience to be hallmarks of contemporary art production. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 1998).
4. For an outstanding reading of Veilhan's work in relationship to historical models of production, see John Miller, “Something From Nothing,” in Xavier Veilhan, catalogue essay, eds. Yves Aupetitallot and Lionel Bovier (Grenoble: Le Magazin/Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 2000), 53–55.
5. Miller, 53.
6. Jameson, 37.