

## Without result

### Productive activity and producing activity

Through this intervention, I would like to interrogate the general impact of the notion of production regarding the particular case of the artistic activity that is to say the production of committed works by this activity.

Confronted with the contemporary artistic practices, this interrogation seems to me justifiable considering the importance, reminded by numerous artists or theorists, of the practices themselves, who often claim not to be neglected in the only profit of the works in which they end. Among multiple possible illustrations of this claiming, I shall quote for example the words of the artist Tadashi Kawamata: “I do not make it for the result (...) The initiative is more important”<sup>1</sup>, “my project is never finished, it goes on infinitely. It is pure action”<sup>2</sup>, as well as those of the theorist Stephen Wright: “The notion of work shows itself less descriptive than normative today, and (...) strangely unsuitable to think of the most contemporary artistic production more and more turned towards open processes. (...) To persist in identifying work and art, we condemn ourselves (...) to produce necessarily over-subtle descriptions of many contemporary artistic proposals - where the *work* often makes screen for the artistic *activity*”<sup>3</sup>. In both cases, the rehabilitation of the process as fundamental element of the creation implies almost the disqualification of the work which could correspond to it. This twist in the drama is not new and sends back to a well-known precedent. We shall indeed remember that this question was regularly taken back and thematized by Paul Valéry, for whom the question of the production, when it aims at the dynamics of the creative process and applies to what he calls the “works of the spirit” (*les « œuvres de l’esprit »*), occupies a main position. For him also the priority is reversed. For the french poet, any thought of the work is renewed to the seminal function of the “*faire*”<sup>4</sup> and any work, which we shall consider temporarily as result of this “*faire*”, is deprived of its interest, its value and its necessity. It is in any case what suggest some of the famous statements of the first course of poetics which he gave, in 1937, to the Collège de France. Concerning the “immediate power of production” and of “the exercise of his art” peculiar to the poet, he indicates that he is inclined to

« considérer avec plus de complaisance, et même avec plus de passion, *l’action qui fait*, que *la chose faite* »<sup>5</sup>, and adds: « *l’œuvre de l’esprit n’existe qu’en acte*. Hors de cet acte, ce qui demeure n’est qu’un objet qui n’offre avec l’esprit aucune relation particulière »<sup>6</sup>.

In 1929, in his *Cahiers*, he already wrote:

« Il faut introduire la notion d’activité ou agissement ou production — et l’égaliser à l’ancienne connaissance — laquelle se trouve dépréciée — Le faire. (...) Tout subordonné au faire »<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Le journal d’Évreux, du 23/05 au 29/05/2000, « Rencontre avec Tadashi Kawamata ».

<sup>2</sup> « Kawamata : le métabolisme du monde », interview par Guy Tortosa, in *Tadashi Kawamata, Three Huts*, éd. Kamek Mennour, Paris, 2010, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen WRIGHT in « Le dés-œuvrement de l’art », *Mouvements* n° 17, 2001, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> I have choosen not to translate the french verb *faire* because the choice between *make* and *do* is here precisely what raises the question.

<sup>5</sup> “consider with more indulgence, and even with more passion, *the action which makes/does [l’action qui fait]* than *the made/done thing [la chose faite]*”, Paul VALÉRY, « Leçon inaugurale du cours de poétique au Collège de France », in *Variété V*, Gallimard, coll. Folio Essais, Paris, 2010, p. 829. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>6</sup> “*the work of the spirit exists only in act*. Outside this act what remains is only an object which offers with the spirit no particular relation” Paul VALÉRY, « Leçon inaugurale... », *op. cit.*, p. 837. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>7</sup> “It is necessary to introduce the notion of activity or act or production – and to equal it to the old knowledge – which is depreciated – the doing/making [le faire]. (...) Subordinate everything to the doing/making [le faire]”, Paul VALÉRY, *Cahiers, t. II*, Gallimard, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1974, pp. 1026-1027.

This “old knowledge”, which is the object itself of the poetics which he professes during his inaugural Lesson, he describes it so:

« J’ai donc cru pouvoir le reprendre [sc. le mot « Poétique »] dans un sens qui regarde à l’étymologie, sans oser cependant le prononcer *Poïétique* (...). Mais c’est enfin la notion toute simple de *faire* que je voulais exprimer. Le faire, le *poïein*, dont je veux m’occuper, est celui qui s’achève en quelque œuvre et que je viendrai à restreindre bientôt à ce genre d’œuvres qu’on est convenu d’appeler *œuvres de l’esprit*. Ce sont celles que l’esprit veut se faire pour son propre usage, en employant à cette fin tous les moyens physiques qui lui peuvent servir »<sup>8</sup>.

This explicit, literal, historic and semantic appeal to the etymology, in this particular case to the Greek origin that Valéry assigns to the poetical “making”, authorizes us to stop one moment on the sense of this *poïein* by taking back the definition given by Aristotle.

According to Aristotle the activity divides in two categories. On the one hand the action which has no other end than itself and which *raison d’être* lies in its own exercise, and which Jules Tricot (french translator of Aristotle) calls the immanent action; so the action of seeing, acting according to the virtue, etc. where “the act is wholly in the agent and does not materialize in an object”<sup>9</sup>. This activity, by definition complete every time it spreads and at the same time never finished because it respreads continuously, belongs according to Aristotle to the *πρᾶξις* and it is it which really corresponds to the action. On the other hand the transitive action directed towards a determined end and conditioned by its effective realization, which is outside the agent which achieves it; it is for example the case of the architect whose activity of construction comes to an end when the building is finished. It is precisely this second category of action, producer of a work or a result that defines *ποίησις*, science of the production. Aristotle had marked this distinction from the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book I, 1, 1094a):

“Every art (*τέχνη*) and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good (...). But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better (*βελτίω*) than the activities.”<sup>10</sup>

to specify the modalities in the chapter 4 of book VI:

“In the variable [i.e. variable things, Aristotle marks here the difference with natural things] are included both things made (*ποιητὸν*) and things done (*πρακτόν*); making (*ποίησις*) and acting (*πρᾶξις*) are different. (...) They are not included one in the other; for neither is acting making nor is making acting.

All art is concerned with coming into being, i.e. with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made; for art is concerned neither with things that are, or come into being, by necessity, nor with things that do so in accordance with nature (since these have their origin in themselves). Making and acting being different, art must be a matter of making, not of acting”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> “I thus believed I could take it back [sc. the word “poetics”] in a sense which refers to the etymology without daring however to pronounce it *Poïétique* (...). But it is finally the notion quite simple of *doing/making* [*faire*] that I wanted to express. The doing/making [le faire], the *poïein*, of which I want to take care, is the one which ends in some work and that I shall come to restrain soon to this kind of works that we agreed to call *works of the spirit*. These are the ones that the spirit wants to be made for its own use, by using to this end all the physical means which can serve it”, Paul VALÉRY, « Leçon inaugurale... », *op. cit.*, p. 828. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>9</sup> ARISTOTE, *La Métaphysique*, t. 2, trad. fr. Jean Tricot, Vrin, Paris, 1981, p. 502, n. 1.

<sup>10</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W. D. Ross.

<sup>11</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by W. D. Ross.

Far from justifying or even enlightening the *Poïétique* promotion of the creative act, the inheritance called by Valéry raises on the contrary multiple contradictions and as many paradoxes.

We are straightaway surprised that Aristotle's verdict opposes directly to his: the works are teleologically "better than the activities", which are only a mean to reach it.

The distinction operated by Aristotle then is essentially based on the dialectic of the end and means whose statuses are homogeneous from one to another in the action, whereas they remain resolutely heterogeneous in the production. Yet this division of the roles, determining for the Greek philosopher, is apparently not for the French poet in the eyes of whom, on the contrary, the work of art or literature distinguishes itself exactly from any other human work by this double nature. Valéry advances for example, during his inaugural Lesson, that

« si l'on porte le regard sur les effets des œuvres faites, on découvre chez certaines une particularité qui les groupe et les oppose à toutes les autres. (...) L'œuvre nous offre dans chacune de ses parties à la fois *l'aliment* et *l'excitant*. Elle éveille continuellement en nous une soif et une source »<sup>12</sup>. He adds further: « chez l'artiste, il arrive en effet que le même mouvement interne de production lui donne à la fois et indistinctement l'impulsion, le but extérieur immédiat et les moyens ou les dispositifs techniques de l'action »<sup>13</sup>.

In his speech *De l'enseignement de la poétique au Collège de France*, he reminds the same etymology, but describes the work of art as

« tout ce qui a trait à la création ou à la composition d'ouvrages dont le langage est à la fois la substance et le moyen »<sup>14</sup>.

In *L'Infini esthétique*, he writes:

« tandis que dans l'ordre que j'ai appelé *pratique*, le but atteint fait évanouir toutes les conditions sensibles de l'acte, (...) il en est tout autrement dans l'*ordre esthétique*. Dans cet "univers de sensibilité", la sensation et son attente sont en quelque manière réciproques, et se recherchent, l'une l'autre indéfiniment »<sup>15</sup>.

In *Notion générale de l'art*:

« nous la connaissons elle-même [*sc.* l'œuvre d'art] à ce caractère qu'aucune "idée" qu'elle puisse éveiller en nous, aucun acte qu'elle nous suggère, ne la termine ni ne l'épuise »<sup>16</sup>.

With regard to the contingency within the work of the *ποίησις* which is, according to Aristotle, "capable of either being or not being" the position of Valéry brands once again a

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<sup>12</sup> "if we are looking at the effects of the made works [œuvres faites], we discover for some a peculiarity which groups them and opposes them to all the others. (...) The work offers us in each of its parts at the same time *the food* and *the stimulant*. It awakes constantly in us a thirst and a source", Paul VALÉRY, « Leçon inaugurale... », *op. cit.*, p. 845. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>13</sup> "for the artist, it indeed happens that the same internal movement of production gives to him at the same time and unclearly the impulse, the immediate outside purpose and the means or the technical devices of the action", Paul VALÉRY, « Leçon inaugurale... », *op. cit.*, p. 848. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>14</sup> "all which concerned the creation or the composition of works which language is at the same time the substance and the means", Paul VALÉRY, « De l'enseignement de la poétique au Collège de France », *Variété V*, *op. cit.*, p. 819. I emphasize.

<sup>15</sup> "Whereas in the order which I called practical, the achieved purpose makes all the sensitive conditions of the act disappear, (...) it is there quite otherwise in the esthetic order. In this 'universe of sensibility', the sensation and its expectation are mutual in a certain way, and look for each other indefinitely" « L'Infini esthétique », in *Œuvres I*, Gallimard, bibl. de la Pléiade, 1957, p. 1343, Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>16</sup> "we know it itself [*sc.* the work of art] by this character that no 'idea' that it could awaken in us, no act that it suggests us, does not end it nor does not exhaust it", « Notion générale de l'art », in *Œuvres II*, Gallimard, bibl. de la Pléiade, 1960, p. 1409.

major difference. In his *Discours sur l'esthétique* he does not hesitate to describe the process of a work as

un « phénomène [qui] nous oblige à ces expressions scandaleuses : *la nécessité de l'arbitraire ; la nécessité par l'arbitraire* »<sup>17</sup>.

Further, he mentions a “contradictory feeling that exists as highest degree in the artist,” and which is “a condition of any work”, that is to say the presence of

« deux sensations qui accompagnent le même phénomène : ce qui nous semble *avoir pu ne pas être* s'impose à nous avec la même puissance *de ce qui ne pouvait pas ne pas être, et qui devait être ce qu'il est* »<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, the evidence of *necessity* of the work does not contradict its initial contingency: it comes from the latter, even though it eventually replaces it. As if the work, once “brought into existence” reveals its own necessity, which was inconceivable before its birth. In these circumstances the outstanding status granted by Valéry to the accident and its powers in the creative activity is understandable. Unexpected by definition, it cannot arise if not on the occasion of the creation, where it became, so to say, an essential attribute, so at the opposite of its meaning in Aristotle .

According to Aristotle, the work of art is distinct from the work of nature and, as such, it belongs to the things “whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made”. We can see here one of the four causes that Aristotle enumerates in his *Physics*, where “the one who produces is the cause of what is produced” (τὸ ποιῶν τοῦ ποιουμένου, Book II, chap. III, § 4), and that it is customary to call efficient cause. While it is difficult to say that without the artist, the work would come to light, the nature of their relationship is however never reduced by Valéry to a mere principle of efficient causality, which might be unilaterally oriented. The artist or poet as hypothetical points of origin would be in his conception marginalized in favor of a pre-existing cause. he warned in his *Leçon inaugurale*:

« les œuvres de l'esprit, poèmes ou autres, ne se rapportent qu'à *ce qui fait naître ce qui les fit naître elles-mêmes*, et absolument à rien d'autre »<sup>19</sup>.

Which means that which gives birth to the poet or the artist. Valéry presents here a paradoxical rationality of a temporality which reverses the causal logic inherited from Aristotle. He writes, for example in 1929 in « Petite lettre sur les mythes » :

« un mot venu au hasard se fait un sort infini, pousse des organes de phrase, et *la phrase en exige une autre, qui eût été avant elle ; elle veut un passé qu'elle enfante pour naître... après qu'elle a paru !* »<sup>20</sup>.

Even more explicit, this statement made ten years earlier and that describes in *Note et digression* not a figure of the author independent of his work, but the man at work, even the man *of* the work:

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<sup>17</sup> “a phenomenon [ that ] forces us to the following outrageous expressions : *the necessity of arbitrary; the necessity by arbitrary*”, PAUL VALÉRY, « Discours prononcé au deuxième congrès international d'esthétique et de science de l'art », in *Variété IV*, Gallimard, coll. Folio Essais, Paris, 2010, p. 529. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>18</sup> “two sensations that accompany the same phenomenon: that which *could not be*, comes to us with the same power *of that which could not not be, and that had to be what it is*”, *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>19</sup> “works of the spirit, poems or other things, relate only to *what gives birth to what gave birth to themselves*, and absolutely to nothing else”, « *Leçon inaugurale...* », *op. cit.*, p. 838. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>20</sup> “a word that came at random opens toward numberless fates, pushes the sentence, and *the sentence requires another one, which would have been before it. It claims a past it gives birth to in order to come to life... after it was born!*”, PAUL VALÉRY, « Petite lettre sur les mythes » (1929), in *Œuvres I, op. cit.*, p.963. I emphasize.

« toute la critique est dominée par ce principe suranné : l'homme est *cause* de l'œuvre, — comme le criminel aux yeux de la loi est cause du crime. Il en sont bien plutôt l'effet ! »<sup>21</sup>.

How should we understand such contradictions? How to explain that Valéry bases his project on an original definition of “*faire*”, the contents of which he subsequently rejects? I will suggest the following reading: although it results from the transitive action of the ποιεῖν, the productive activity that the poet chooses to promote cannot be reduced to this activity without implying that it be understood *also* as πράττειν, which can be translated as “*faire*” as well<sup>22</sup>. This is why Valéry, when restoring to the benefit of the “works of the spirit” the etymology of “*faire*” understood as ποιεῖν, clarifies that these works of the spirit are “those which the spirit wants to unfold for its own usage”. Thus, in a certain way, the definition by Valéry corresponds to what Aristotle reserves a non-external finality. In other words, if we consider (1°) the relation of completion that arranges it according to the subject, (2°) the reciprocal finality between the work and the activity that produces it, (3°) the convergence of determined ends towards a horizon each time redefined, etc... the ποιεῖν that Valéry wants to use is a particular kind of ποιεῖν, which equals neither to a transitive action, nor to an immanent action, but to both at once; or rather, so to speak, to the virtues immanent to the transitive action. From this point of view, it becomes clear that the Aristotelian model is fundamentally inadequate to think the creative activity (or, at least, the one which Valéry wants to think). Concerning this Aristotelian model we can make here two remarks.

First of all, with regard to the activity it is meant to define, the notion of transitivity is only intelligible externally and posteriorly. In this logic, every process of production is characterised from the start by the necessity of being oriented towards the end its operations are meant to strive for, and to which they are, consequently, subordinated. Being determined beforehand, this end is entirely determining with regard to an ensemble of media that are attuned to it by the intermediary of a rule (the “true course of reasoning”) that ensures its predictable and controlled development. Established departing from its result, this diachrony, in its turn, falls within a global and necessarily retrospective position, or a planning position (which comes down to the same), which alone is able to distinguish these operations and to arrange them amongst each other. It is this model of an observing externality that defines the transitivity of the ποιεῖν, and it cannot but define it *a posteriori*, that is to say, precisely outside of the action that it explains. Thus, it is the logic of the result that imposes the transitivity to the action, interrupting it, distinguishing the agent from the object, and not the opposite. The cause is efficient only under the supervision of a final cause.

Then we must remark that the paradigm of the transitive action only allows for a comprehension of the artistic or poetic activity starting from a unifying and generic model, that is the productive activity in general, which forbids in turn to consider, for the work, another model of examination, access or intelligibility. Put differently, the Aristotelian ποιεῖν applied to “things made” doesn't in any way differentiate between the works of art and other things: the work of art doesn't dispose of any kind of particular status, because the definition of the productive activity precedes it and fixes its essence. This is entirely natural, moreover, since the Greek artist is not an artist but a craftsman, who has nothing in common with the one which we refer to today. Now, although it belongs to produced things, the “work of the

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<sup>21</sup> “All criticism is dominated by this outdated principle: that man is the *cause* of the work - such as the criminal in front of the law is cause of the crime. It is rather the effect!” PAUL VALÉRY, « Note et digression » (1919), in *Œuvres I*, Gallimard, bibl. de la Pléiade, 1957, pp. 1230- 1231. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Anatole BAILLY, *Abrégé du dictionnaire Grec Français*, Hachette, 1901, p. 728. In his article entitled « Épistémè et tekhnè : un difficile partage », in Jean-Yves Chateau (dir.) *La Vérité pratique. Aristote. Éthique à Nicomaque, Livre VI*, Vrin, coll. Tradition de la pensée classique, Paris, 1997, p. 67, Alain Petit translates for instance ποιητόν into « productible » and πρακτόν into « faisable ».

spirit” stands out for Valéry precisely by an essential difference. An this difference has to do not with any kind of determination proper to production understood as formerly noted, but which concerns what he calls act and, as he says, “outside this act what remains is only an object which offers with the spirit no particular relation”; then, he adds,

« nous regardons alors une œuvre comme un *objet*, purement objet, c’est-à-dire sans rien y mettre de nous-mêmes que ce qui se peut appliquer indistinctement à tous les objets »<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, I believe, it becomes necessary to pose and maintain a double conception of activity understood as production. On the one hand the *productive* activity, conform to the notion of production in its common sense and to its logic (means being subordinated to a pre-given end, activity producing a predictable and repeatable result) and whose sense is illustrated perfectly by industrial production. On the other hand, the *producing* activity, which the former can not entirely encompass, since it only applies to the present, outside of all retrospective exteriority, and which consequently is able to produce itself its own conditions of development.

If the one and the other put into play a *making ποιεῖν*, they do so according to two resolutely heterogeneous modalities, as their respective confrontation to chance and accident shows. In the first case, for example, the sudden burst of an accident or of a difficulty opposes itself to the flux of production, slows it down or interrupts it, because it endangers its productivity by disrupting the relations that organise it: the uncovering of an archeological site stops the realisation of a motorway. In the second case, it's generally the opposite: when Tadashi Kawamata realises in 1997 north of Amsterdam *Working Progress*, title of an assembly of plates forming a walkway that stretches out along the polders around a building, and when an owner refuses that it went through his land, it gladly bypasses it; this unpredicted accident feeds the work itself and integrates itself into it naturally because, as Catherine Grout writes, “the simple mode of construction adapts itself to the terrain and to circumstances, every obstacle becomes an accepted element, the conception including chance and constraints.”<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, and despite certain declarations of Valéry that give rise to confusion (“the results in general – and thus also the *works* – interest me much less than the energy of the worker”<sup>25</sup>), the assimilation of the creative activity to ποιεῖν, far from excluding or trivializing the work itself, paradoxically results in re-establishing its identity beyond a simple product, whose determination “can be applied indistinctly to all objects.”

The question why, for Valéry as for others, the work of art ends by becoming one of these objects again, is another story. But that the work of art disappears when the object appears is without any doubt the most certain indication of its identity.

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<sup>23</sup> “we watch a work as an object, purely *object*, that is to say without adding to it something of ourselves unless that which may apply indistinctly to all objects”, Paul VALÉRY, *Leçon inaugurale... op. cit.*, pp. 835-836. Valéry emphasizes.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine GROUT, « L'œuvre comme événement pré-politique », in *Espaces Temps* n° 78-79, 2002, p. 90, n. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Paul VALÉRY, preface to *Monsieur Teste*, Gallimard, coll. Idées, Paris, 1969, p. 8. Valéry emphasizes.