

Paolo Bottarelli

THE
CHESSCUBE
PROJECT

WHITE BEGINS, OR BOTTARELLI'S EXPERIMENTS

Media criticism, conceptual art, visual turn: for decades the sophisticated visual concepts in the realm of art have been struggling with gender issues and social inequalities. The white cube of the museum is blinded by the play of references, while in the blackened video space anything goes. In this moment of media excess, the fleeting performance of a game of chess can bring clarity and insight. In the later part of his life, Marcel Duchamp chose chess as his sole form of artistic expression. More so than other games, which owe their meaning and structure to chance, chess follows an ordering principle that demands both mental agility and a great capacity for abstraction. The beauty of a chess game is measured solely on the basis of the player's intellectual acuity. Even when played in the presence of an audience, or illustrated as drawings in magazines and books, a chess game seems hermetically sealed, isolated in a world that is determined by rules of its own, including only the chessboard and the players. As a result, the milieu of chess players remains limited. For many, this insularity makes the game seem like an intellectual realm of purity. "The milieu of chess players is far more sympathetic than that of artists," Marcel Duchamp once said. "These people are completely cloudy, wearing blinkers. Madmen of a certain quality, the way the artist is supposed to be, and isn't, in general."¹

The game has been an established reference in modern art ever since Dada and surrealism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Both art movements used playful elements or quite directly used party games to dissolve the limits of traditional art production and to integrate experimental components into their work. Yet a decisive aspect distinguishes art from the game in general. While the latter always consists in an action that begins in the same place, the former has the finished work as its goal. Even Duchamp, with the typical perfectionism of the spoilsport, was not satisfied with brilliant strategies. Alongside his chess playing, which he stylized demonstratively as merely a way of passing the time, he not only crafted several utensils for the game, like pocket chess sets and boards, but also made chess a central motif of his work.²

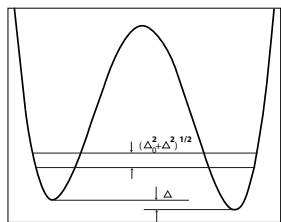
Like Duchamp, Paolo Bottarelli has established himself not only as an artist, but also as a rather good chess player. In fact, playing chess has come to encompass almost all realms of his life. *The ChessCube project*, which is materialized for the first time in the two Oslo cubes, is not the artist's only work related to chess. But with a total of 64 cubes planned, each the size of a room, it is by far the largest. It emerged as a game he played against himself as a challenge of the rational ego against the irrational. It is planned to have these three-dimensional extensions to

¹ Marcel Duchamp, in: Pierre Cabanne: *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York, 1970), p. 19.

² See *Portrait of a Chess Player* (1911), *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes* (1912) or, alluding to Lewis Carroll, *Through the Big End of The Opera Glass* (1943).

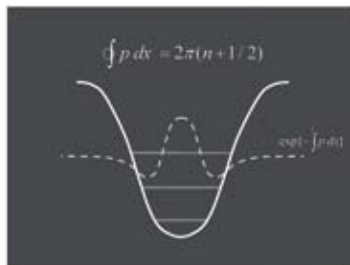
how the mind/body-dualism could solve the measurement problem of quantum mechanics by taking the Cartesian dualism very seriously. In Wigner's scenario, an observer (the friend!) finds himself together with Schrödinger's Cat² encapsulated in a box. A deadly mechanism, governed only by the laws of quantum mechanics, may eventually cause the death of the cat or not. As far as the theory tells us, without measurement, the cat has to be described as being in a superpositional state of being alive and dead at the same time, *for a second observer outside the box*. What should his friend inside tell him? As long as they do not communicate, the outside observer has to describe his friend as evenly being in a state of superposition, but it seems absurd that someone could live in an entangled state of mind! However, with information from the interior, the state of the system would 'collapse' to a definite state.

Maybe we simply have to drop the dualism of essence and appearance here. One might wonder whether Bottarelli's work could not be read as the inversion of Plato's allegory of the cave turned inside out. By no means is it possible to discern what these cubes *actually* do contain and whether the three outer images *refer* to their possible content or not. And maybe they just create their content in the mind of the beholder as invisible mental images. They are (to borrow an expression from Nelson Goodman) 'ways of worldmaking'. The interior of the cubes, then, not only reveals



a kind of metaphysical economy of art. Rather, the relation between the outer representations and the 'dark side' of the cubes goes the other way round as well: what one sees are the main forms of pictorial representation: painting, photography and video. They exhibit art as appearance, but as we know, there is no 'innocence of the eye' (Ruskin).

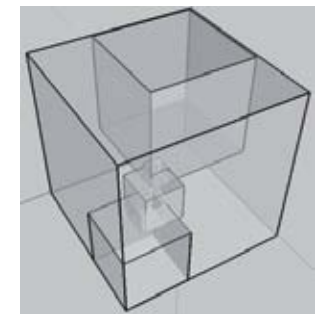
When the question of self-conscious representations is metaphysically highlighted, one should have in mind their first philosophical elaboration in Leibniz's *Monadology*, his treatise on the system of 'spirited-atoms'. According to this, the *monad* is a self-containing metaphysical point 'without a window', since it is conceptually designed as having no causal contact with any one other *monad*, but con-



stituted by inner representations of all other *monads*, such that it can only be identified by its inner qualities (and other intrinsic properties). The capacity of a *monad* to have inconsistent 'phenomenological' content makes it a 'center of change' and thereby a basis to form what Leibniz called 'possible worlds'. It was 'one of Leibniz's favorite metaphors' (Nicholas Rescher) to say that these substances of a possible world "'mirror" one another their mutual accommodation': Communication without communication.³ Putting Ruskin's formula into question on a higher level, Bottarelli's project can be conceived as forming a tradition with Magritte's *La reproduction interdite* and Marc Tansley's *The Innocent Eye Test*, which could be termed modal realism, a term associated with the analytic philosopher David Lewis, who (also inspired by Leibniz) defended the idea that all possible worlds are indeed actual in the same way our world is, but aren't something (according to Saul Kripke's laconic remark) 'that we can view through a telescope'. The perception of possible worlds requires different faculties.

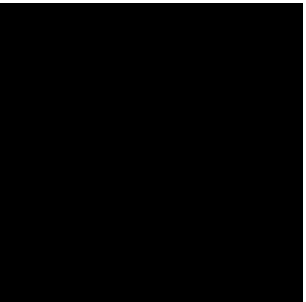
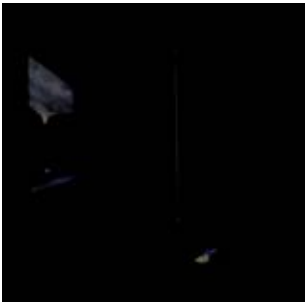
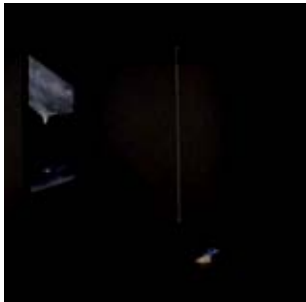
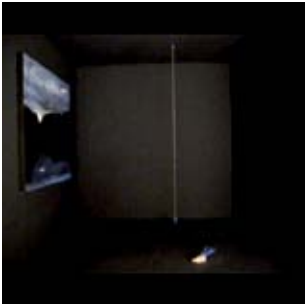
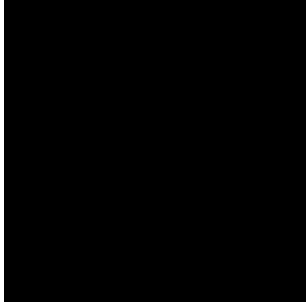
In Bottarelli's monadic metainstallation, the 'outer museum' of the cube's interior is part of the exposition itself, and the eccentric position of the beholder as a *homo spectator* then reflects its proper paradoxical condition. He might, then, be in good company with other possible visitors, such as Musil's *Man without Qualities*, with his sense of possibility, or Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, who (more likely a whole observatory than a Kripkean telescope) is confronted with the following question (in a chapter entitled 'The World Watches the World'):

But how can you look at something and set your own ego aside? Whose eyes are doing the looking? As a rule, you think of the ego as one who is peering out of your own eyes as if leaning on a windowsill, looking at the world stretching out before him in all its immensity. So, then: a window looks out on the world. The world is out there; and in here, what do we have? The world still – what else could there be?



BLACK
CUBE





WHITE
CUBE



CAPTIONS

BLACK CUBE

Images in order of appearance:

Cube, 2011
maquette, wood
33 x 33 x 33 cm

Black memory #1, 2011
framed c-print
114 x 114 cm

Black memory #2, 2011
oil on canvas
116 x 116 cm

Black memory #3, 2011
video stills

Cube, 2011
installation view of the black cube from the inside:
one elk's skeleton, 22 x 4 x 6 cm;
one lead pendulum, h. 118 cm;
oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm

Cube, 2011
installation view (detail)

The event horizon, 2011
oil on canvas
130 x 130 cm

Cube, 2011
installation view (detail)

CAPTIONS

WHITE CUBE

Images in order of appearance:

Cube, 2011
maquette, wood
33 x 33 x 33 cm

White memory #1, 2011
framed c-print
114 x 114 cm

White memory #2, 2011
oil on canvas
116 x 116 cm

White memory #3, 2011
video stills

Cube, 2011
installation view of the white cube from inside:
two framed mirrors, 33 x 33 cm (each);
oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm;
two hourglasses on sponges, 30 x 30 cm (each)

Cube, 2011
installation view (detail)

Cube, 2011
installation view (detail)

White on White, 2011
oil on canvas
110 x 110 cm