My black T-shirt from the Art Institute of Chicago carries the signatures of 69 dead Masters, from Rembrandt through a full squad of Impressionists to Chagall and Magritte. The format is that of the football or bat signed by the team, and this is part of the joke: this is the Institute’s team, and these are the team’s “real” signatures, in the sense that they faithfully reproduce the form of the holographs on the canvases that the Institute holds; the signatures bear witness, like a list of names on a testimonial, to the value of the collection. But since they are facsimiles, and since they have been first radically decontextualized and then reassembled in unlikely juxtaposition, they are mentions rather than uses, stripped of their function and performative force. They refer not to the person of the artist who made the work which they authenticate, but to the system of signatures which organizes both the aesthetic and the monetary value of works of art. In this chapter I examine some of the features of this system and contrast it with another, that of the brand name, by which it has to a certain extent been displaced; my argument is that there is now something of a convergence between, on the one hand, the commercial branding of aesthetic goods and, on the other, the aesthetic valorization of commercial goods. In order to analyze these overlapping and contrasting systems, however, I need to make a prior argument about the nature of information and the property rights which have come to subsist in it.

Information differs from material goods in two ways: it is not inherently scarce, and it is not consumed by use. Rather, it is inexhaustibly reproducible: if I tell you something I still “possess” it myself, and so
on indefinitely. Indeed, the value of information is in most cases enhanced by being shared: it grows, and it finds new uses (Davis and Stack, 1992). Its value is social, but it is inherently difficult to create economic value from it. This difficulty has been increased by the series of inventions of technologies of proliferation, from the printing press to the computer, which make possible, in principle, the infinite replication and dispersal, within an open system, of writing, of images, and of sounds.

The logic of capital accumulation, however, requires that information be transformed into a commodity which can be bought and sold for profit; its openness and indeterminacy must be contained by a private appropriation which will endow it with scarcity and restrict access. This can be effected in one of two ways: by making it secret, or by releasing it in a controlled way by means of the price mechanism. Secrecy is a political form of restriction of access, resting on the power to keep information hidden and counterproductive in its inability to put secret information to use. The price mechanism, by contrast, allows information to circulate, but it requires a complex legal assemblage to make possible the exaction of rent by containing the tendency of information to proliferate freely. This legal assemblage, which restricts access to and use of information without necessarily restricting authorized possession of it, is made up primarily of copyright, patent, and trademark law and works through the creation of a limited property right imputed to private or corporate persons; in the case of "cultural" texts its central category is that of the author, understood as the sole origin of the work and the point of limitation of unauthorized uses. Authorship constrains the potentially infinite iterability of writing, image, and sound, and regulates the power of all their technological multipliers.

Authors are persons exercising a certificatory function within a system of legal and cultural recognition of their rights and powers. In the author system that has prevailed in the West for about the last two centuries, the signature is the mode of expression of the author's contractual will. The social form expressed by the contract is that of a pact between strangers. If the Western juridical subject is defined as the one who has (always already) the right to sign their name in this way, this subject is at the same time constituted and empowered in the act of signature, the writing of the proper name. In non-reciprocal forms of signature (like the signing of a check) the contractual mutuality is
reduced to a unilateral action (which is nevertheless still latently two-sided). Here the signature functions as a guarantee, a declaration that I originate and authorize the document I have signed. It functions, that is to say, as a metonym for my person: the signature or the mark, uniquely mine like my fingerprints or my face, commit me in my entirety to legal liability, the extreme form of which would be the pledge of my life or my freedom in the vicarious form of this mark on paper.

Within the institutions of painting and the book, the signature is a guarantee of authenticity and its converse, the repudiation of forgery. In its most fully developed form in Abstract Expressionism (and perhaps also in performance art, where the body itself is on the line) the whole painting (which may be "unsigned") functions as a signature insofar as the brushstrokes or the drip marks are to be taken as fully expressive indices of the artist's personality; or the performance writes in pain the authenticity of the experience.

The signature as written trace of the artist's name appears as recently as the late Middle Ages, although the form "x pinxit" or "x pingebat" did occasionally occur earlier. Since that time it has fulfilled a variety of functions involving diverse forms of compositional specificity. Some of these have been codified by Claude Gandelman (1985): he talks of iconic signatures like the small winged dragon, the Drachen, that stands for Lucas Cranach in his Allegory of Salvation, and of various forms of rebus, like Holbein's picture of a hohl Bein, a hollow bone (an anamorphic skull) in The Ambassadors, or Klee's play with the French clef in the late painting Zerbrochene Schlüssel (cf. Lebensztejn, 1974: 55–6); he talks of various ways in which the signature can be a compositionally functional element, bearing color or line; and he discusses internal mimicry of the painting by the signature, or of the signature by the painting.

What I want to take from his work, however, is the notion of the signature, ambivalently placed within a pictorial space to which it does not fully belong, as a shifter, a débrayeur setting up a tension between the planes of representation and the represented (Gandelman, 1985: 105). I adapt this argument here to stress the disjunction that the signature introduces between the planes of drawing and writing, of image and verbal text. This disjunction is the index of an act of framing by which the signature leads out of the painting into a context which is
at once intertextual (that is, aesthetic) and institutional: a context of names and values which I designate, in shorthand, the art system.

Much of twentieth-century art has been taken up with the struggle to displace or contest the power of this system: to contest the aesthetics of the signature. Its exemplary moments, like Duchamp’s signing of a defaced Mona Lisa or his attaching of a false signature (“R. Mutt, 1917”) to the objet trouvé, the famous pissouière, but also the moments of automatic writing, of Pop, or of performance art involve a radical renunciation of originality. When Sherrie Levine photographs and exhibits as her own work well-known photographs by Walker Evans or Edward Weston she is at once reframing them so that they take on quite different meanings (like Pierre Menard’s rewriting in the twentieth century of Don Quixote, not as an imitation but as a new work) and thereby challenging the notion that the creative originality of the artist will result in a unique and unreproducible work. This appropriation is a kind of signature.

But is this signature a forgery, or not? Were Levine literally to sign these photographs, the mark she made would be, presumably, her “real” signature inscribing her “real” name, and it would correspond to a real claim of attribution based in real labor exercised in the production of the image: she has indeed taken and developed this photograph. It is, however, a rephotographing of an existing photograph or painting; copyright law might well see it as a simple repetition without any addition of personality or work that would deposit the trace of an original self. But were she to sign the photograph there would in fact be such a trace, the signature itself (and this signature need not be physically inscribed): the signature, this supplement, this mere gesture of certification, would make the creative difference.

What then is being parodied or challenged here? The act of attribution exercised by way of the signature? But such an act of attribution continues to operate here, both as parody and as a real defense against prosecution for breach of copyright, since Levine’s act of parody is perfectly defensible in law as an original creative act. Alternatively, we could say that what is being parodied in the case of the photographs is the very act of signing a photograph (or, less literally, of claiming it as a work of art). Photographs are normally unsigned (or they are signed on the reverse of the image), because, as well as designating a naming right, the signature designates the contention that the work has
been executed with the artist’s own hands: the signature is a *writing* of a word, a holograph, whereas a photograph is mechanically executed. Levine’s act of appropriation thus invokes and provokes a whole history of rivalry between the photograph and the painting, and a whole history in which the photograph has had to prove its entitlement to creative recognition (cf. Edelman, 1979); but again we must add that Levine’s act is as much complicit in maintaining the dichotomy between the handcrafted and singular work of art and the mechanical and infinitely reproducible photograph as it is effective in undermining it.

In all of these cases, and whether or not the act of signature is literal or implicit, we must recognize that we continue to have to do with signed forms, which posit an intentionality, a willed aesthetic integrity that guarantees even the authenticity of the inauthentic; the myth of singularity retains its power even in its renunciation.

The counter-movement against the aesthetics of the signature as well as its historical failure are bound up with the fact that the signature has become intrinsic both to aesthetic and to market value. As a metonym for the self-possessed, self-possessing person, it is the foundation for all intellectual property rights. Peter Jaszi speaks of two overlapping modes of legally controlling the proliferation of meaning. One of them, copyright, is commercial, giving the author the right to control copying of the work for a limited period of time. The other, that of moral rights, is non-commercial, protecting the author’s control of the circumstances of release of her work to the public, the right to withdraw the work from circulation, the right to claim attribution (“paternity right”), and the right to object to distortion or mutilation of the work (“integrity right”). The doctrine of moral rights is based in “the idea that the work of art is an extension of the artist’s personality, an expression of his innermost being. To mistreat the work of art is to mistreat the artist, to invade his area of privacy, to impair his personality” (Merryman and Elsen, 1987, cited in Jaszi, 1991: 497). Both copyright and moral rights, however, protect the source of market value: the artist’s unique personality, which establishes the singularity of the work of art *vis-à-vis* any series it might generate. As Lury (1993: 23) summarizes the movement of intellectual property law: “It was in terms derived from the functioning of the author in aesthetic discourse that individual works and movements entered the market as ‘property’; in short, it was through the author-function that cultural value became
a thing, a product and a possession caught in a circuit of property values.”

It is this problematic of authorization that determines the crucial role of the signature in the art market as emblem and medium of authentication, the guarantee of a value that isn’t simply aesthetic, and that entails unthinkable financial consequences when the signature of a “Master” is called into question (cf. Watson, 1992). The signature constitutes the rarity that is the source of market value. Note that what is rare is, in principle, the abstract form of the work: the “model” (Baudrillard, 1988) or “blueprint” or “mold” (Attali, 1985) or (in legal usage) the “work”; in the case of painting or sculpture, with their roots in craft production, the value of this model is entirely fused with that of its singular performance on canvas or in shaped matter; in the case of a musical score or a literary text the realization of the model more usually takes the form of a serial replication (“copies”) with only a derived value (books, printed scores), although there may be forms of singular performance (a manuscript, a first edition, the performance of a play or musical work) which acquire value in their own right.

The value-forming role of the signature (and other associated markers of originality) can perhaps most clearly be seen in the history of multiples, where a labor of singularization constructs aesthetic value from serial forms. Melot (1986) gives the example of the collection of engravings: although from the time of the earliest major collectors in seventeenth-century France a distinction had been made between original engravings and reproductions, engravers in both fields were recognized as fully creative artists. From about 1860 this recognition altered with the revalorization of the difference between “original” and “copy.” As prints entered the art galleries, the names of engravers, printers, and other intermediaries began to disappear from the margins in a politique des auteurs directly parallel to the cinematic auteurism of the 1950s. At the same time, engravers began to fight for authorial status in their own right: from 1850 they began to sign the different proof stages, and from 1880 to number them, producing a hierarchy of variation and value. One of the central strategies of rarefaction was the adoption of old artisanal techniques which, once abandoned by industry, guaranteed a limited production distinct from seriality. In taking up such obsolete techniques as lithography, engravers were disavowing the continuity between the domain of rare or unique artistic creation and
that of the industrial production of images. A century later, as photographic prints began to enter the art market proper, similar techniques (hand-processing and the signing and numbering of prints) were adopted as a means of producing the distinctive variation that signifies authenticity. In this context, Melot writes, it becomes possible to understand that such things as readymades and found objects, far from radically challenging the art system, in fact reinforce it in their use of the signature as a strategy for producing scarcity from abundant repetition. The rarefying work of the signature can be seen in an equally clear form in the case of limited edition prints, which fuse a signature-effect with a restricted serial production to produce an object that is at once authentic and multiple; and the same paradox operates in the limitation of Rodin castings to twelve casts of any plaster in order to maintain the authenticity of this limited set. Krauss (1988: 156) speaks of this as the deliberate construction (in this case by an act of parliament) of a “culture of originals.”

The post-Romantic aesthetics of the signature owes something of its intensity to its opposition to the aesthetics of repetition against which it defines itself: on the one hand the aesthetics of craft production, in which the model tends to work either by strict conformity to an ideal type or by a pattern of slight variations on a familiar schema (and where the model tends to be fused with a singular performance); on the other, that of mass cultural production, where the indeterminacy of uptake and the high cost of initial production in relation to the relatively low costs of replication require the generation of “a constant stream of unique (if often similar) products with severely limited life spans” (DiMaggio, 1987: 446), strict control of a formulaic product, and constant monitoring and regulation of demand. In the context of mass cultural production the authorial signature becomes less important as a creator of value than the construction of the author’s or artist’s or actor’s or performer’s name as the object of a brand recognition—a process closer to the trade mark than to copyright, and one in which the artist is effectively corporatized. Gandelman indeed argues that this process is a function of the art system itself. His argument follows from the difference between the indexical form of the signature (that is, its designation of the presence of the artist: not just “I did this” but “I was here”) and the taxonomic function of the proper name: far from being a pure singularity, as much semiotic theory has argued,
the "Name," when one abstracts it from the signature which indicates it and "contains" it, loses its "index" character and becomes a "trademark." Indeed, like the trademark, the name is of a symbolic order. Thus the name "Degas" abstracted from its index the signature is something like "Ford" or "Cadillac." It does not mean that the artist, Mr Degas, was there any more than the name Ford means that Mr Ford has taken part in the fabricating of the car which bears his name. What the signature-freed name Degas means is that what we have here is a *a Degas* in a symbolic system opposing Degas to Monet or Bouguereau (just as *a Ford* is meaningful within a context or system which opposes Ford to Dodge or Cadillac). (Gandelman, 1985: 76)

What I want to go on to argue is that there is now, in the words of Lash and Urry (1994: 123, 138), a growing tendency towards a symmetrical articulation between the systems of brand and signature. In this convergence, they write, "ordinary manufacturing industry is becoming more and more like the production of culture," and, conversely, "what all the culture industries produce becomes increasingly, not like commodities but advertisements" — for example, through the process by which a cultural text "advertises" and sells itself as a product within a brand-name structure of cultural marketing. The simplest way to start thinking about the difference between these two systems (in a first approximation which I shall later modify) is to say that the brand is a corporate rather than a personal signature: it is a *quasi-signature*, attached not to a singular object (as in the case of the signature appended to specialized designer one-offs that the French call a *griffé*) but to a product range distinguished from other product ranges. Brands are typically managed to ensure that products are consistent with brand image and that competitors do not encroach on it, and typically supported by controlled advertising campaigns which seek to construct and maintain the coherence and integrity of that image. Thus when a reviewer recently wrote of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* that its similarities to *The English Patient* "suggest some degree of brand management" (Tait, 2000: 39), he was indicating a tension between an aesthetic imperative to inventiveness and originality (the aesthetics of the signature) and a commercial imperative to product uniformity across a series (the aesthetics of the brand).

Originating in medieval guild practices of quality assurance and regulation of liability (sixteenth-century whisky producers, for
example, shipped their product in barrels branded with their name), the brand evolved towards the end of the nineteenth century into a corporate asset with a central role in the marketing of mass-produced packaged commodities (Aaker, 1991; Wilkins, 1994). Extended distribution chains in these new markets increased the distance between manufacturers and retailers, while economies of scale and scope generated the instabilities of high-volume output without control of sales. The new marketing and advertising cultures of the period were designed to regulate demand by means of the promotion of differentiated products of standardized quality in an extension of corporate planning through the sales process. More generally however, as Ohmann argues, advertisers and marketers were looking for “a nexus between high-speed, continuous-flow manufacturing and the reshaping of people’s habits and lives” (Ohmann, 1996: 91). The brand reshapes not only patterns of shopping but ways of using the household (as a center of leisure and consumption rather than of production) and the form and intensity of identification with manufactured goods.

The brand is thus something like a set of meanings and values attached to a standardized product and generating desire – perhaps a historically quite new kind of desire, extending the love of luxury objects to the world of serially produced goods. But to think of the brand as being “attached” to products is misleading; the brand is in principle reducible neither to a product nor to a corporation. Although at a certain stage in its life the brand name may function as a “strict form of designation,” it is only when it loses this function that it becomes a brand “in the full sense of the word” (Kapferer, 1992: 115). Starting as a descriptor or a nonsense word, the brand acquires a semantic autonomy and a force of memory which transform it into a self-signifying proper name: the word “Kleenex” loses its reference to cleanliness and becomes “a personal name, denoting nothing specific but charged with associations” (ibid: 72–3); the nonsense word “Kodak” becomes a semantic matrix, not the name of a range of products but the aural source of their meaning and identity. At this level of extension “it is now the product which demonstrates the brand, in the sense that it exhibits the exterior signs of an interior imprint”: the Swatch mark moves from naming only watches to being able to sign sunglasses “as long as they look ‘swatchy’”; and at a final level of abstraction, “similarity of value is the only source of identity for products of a widely differing nature” (ibid: 116–17). The brand thus acquires a
phantasmatic life of its own, floating free of the products it subsumes; in Lury's words (Franklin, Lury, and Stacey, 2000), the brand makes available for appropriation aspects of the experience of product use as if they were effects of the brand. In the creation of a logo, an image, a sign, or an emblem which condenses the memory of a whole history of advertisements, packaging, and promotion, the object is anticipated, brought into focus in relation to the logo; its properties reconstituted as the effects of the brand's repetition.

Grassl is thus wrong to argue for an ontological realism of the brand, by which he means its dependence on the "affordances," the functional properties and possibilities of the products it subsumes (Grassl, 1999: 331); it is precisely the divisibility of brand and product which makes possible the transfer of brand loyalty "from one generation of product to another or from one product category to another," as well as the licensing and franchising of brands (Haigh, 1998: 7–8).

What work does a brand do? The usual answer in the marketing literature is that brands differentiate products and provide an assurance of quality. But an examination of the legal doctrine associated with brands makes it clear that this answer glosses over something much more fundamental.

The key feature of the brand, writes Haigh, is "its clear and simple mark, with concrete and legally defensible attributes"; it is "a specifically defensible piece of legal property to which an incremental revenue stream is attached" by virtue of the "non-rational hold over the buying behavior of the consumer" which it establishes (ibid: 7, 12). As Schmitt and Simonson (1997: 216) revealingly put it, "Brand and corporate identities help companies create barriers to competition. To some degree, a company or brand can obtain a legally sanctioned monopoly over certain aspects of the identity so as to create these barriers." Although the brand itself is no more than "a complex compound of legal rights," including "copyright, design right, registered design right, trade marks, common law rights (passing off) and trading standards legislation" (Haigh, 1998: 14), its central core is the trade mark. Trade mark doctrine has evolved in a simple and transparent way over the last century, moving steadily from the prevention of deceit (the passing off of one product as another) to the protection of an intangible property right in a word or emblem. In the United States, which
sets the pattern for intellectual property doctrine elsewhere by virtue of its influence over the international regulatory bodies, there has been a growing but incomplete judicial acceptance of more expansive trade mark rights, a trend characterized by movement away from the traditional “confusion” definition of infringement, which forbids only those unauthorized uses of a mark that are likely to confuse consumers as to a product’s origin or sponsorship, toward a broader “dilution” test, which precludes all unauthorized uses that would lessen the mark’s “distinctiveness.” (Shaughnessy, 1987: 264)

The logic of this shift is that the mark or emblem is not just the designation of a valuable product, but is a valuable product in its own right (Voortman, 1991: 359); when McDonald’s attempts to restrict the prefix “Mc” even in instances not related to food, when George Lucas attempted to exclude public interest groups from using the phrase “Star Wars,” when the United States Olympic Committee managed to have a gay-rights group enjoined from using the generic term “Olympics” (Dreyfuss, 1991), the “value of investment” doctrine encroaches on the commons in language by undermining the fundamental principle that “a title or name composed of ordinary words cannot acquire the status of property” and that “all words of our language are in the public domain” (Ball v. United Artists Corporation, 1961: 224); it also tends to prohibit virtually all trade mark parody, the purpose of which is precisely to “dilute” the range of meanings of the mark. The trade mark, the core of any brand, is a semiotic surplus value which is “legally defensible” and which increasingly shows up in accounting practice as an asset in its own right.

The brand, then, is a semiotic assemblage which brings together a cause and an effect: on the one hand a “non-rational hold” over consumer behavior, on the other the “incremental revenue stream” which flows from it. But how is that “hold” to be explained, and what kind of “identity” is it that can help “create barriers to competition”?

In 1995 the American telecommunications corporation AT&T split into three companies and began the quest for a new “identity” for its equipment spin-off. The market-research firm Landor Associates, anxious to avoid a merely descriptive name, undertook extensive interviewing of managers, staff, and end-users to generate a list of desired associations for the new company. After evaluating some seven hundred
possible names, they produced a short-list of twelve, which they then reduced to three; at the same time they selected a short-list of entries from a competition to design a company logo. The names and the logo designs were then tested in thirteen different countries and across a range of language groups, and the final choice was made: the company was to be called Lucent Technologies, and the logo to be a rough hand-drawn red circle. The name was said to mean “glowing with light” and “marked by clarity,” and to suggest “clear thought, brightness, and energy”; the circle connoted at once “movement and completeness.” Name and image were then combined with a slogan – “We make the things that make communications work” – in a $50 million advertising campaign, and the company came into being in the form of its brand (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997: 26–31).

Such a process of generation of names and images around a desired theme has now become the norm in the launching of new brands, or the revitalization of old ones (many of the utilities privatized since the 1980s have undergone a similar reformulation of their brand identity). Typically it involves the use of specialist firms, the computer generation of names, and their screening for connotational problems in different language contexts and for trade mark registrability (Hart, 1998: 38–9; Fogg, 1998: 74, notes that “the trade mark registers are becoming increasingly crowded, making it more and more difficult to find attractive and appropriate trade marks which are legally available”). Either by the choice of “poetic” signifiers (“lucent,” “dawn,” “mist,” “apple”) or by that process of semantic autonomization by which the semiotic work of advertising transforms descriptive or nonsense words into connotationally rich and referentially poor proper names, the brand name is so structured as to designate a rich singularity, coherent, simple, and integral, which evokes a world of beauty, harmony, energy, clarity, desire, freedom, precision . . . anything except a world of profit calculations and revenue streams. Brand identity – the complex of name, image, and slogan – forms a semantic matrix which is to a large degree autonomous both of the products it subsumes and of the corporation which owns and controls it. Its “imaginary significance” (Kapferer, 1992: 79) can thus be advertised independently of particular products: Kapferer cites the example of Nashua, whose advertising in Europe makes almost no reference to photocopiers, focusing instead on the imaginary qualities associated with its Native American name and image; banks similarly tend to prefer non-referential brand
campaigns because "as service companies, they have nothing to show. They can only point to their values and identity in symbolic terms" (ibid: 81).

Two further aspects of brand identity are relevant here. The first is that many commentators think of brands as having or forming a "personality." Morgan (1986: 11) writes that in the years between the world wars "the commercial symbols became the public faces or personalities of the products and companies they represented"; for Casson (1994: 50), "the most important motivation for branding . . . is that it imbues products with cultural characteristics. Giving the product a name makes it possible to think of a 'personality' that goes with that name"; and for Haigh (1998: 8), "brands have personalities in their own right, whereas commodities do not." This personalization of the brand may be reinforced by the use of brand "characters" (Johnny Walker, Ronald McDonald) or by celebrity endorsement. The second aspect is that brands and brand advertising seek, by means of the specular circularity of applied market research, to invoke a recognition-effect in consumers: in Kapferer's words (1992: 2), whereas "a product's price measures its monetary value . . . its brand identifies the product and reveals the facets of its differences: functional value, pleasure value, and symbolic value as a reflection of the buyer's self-image" (my italics). This matrix of values thus forms an Imaginary, in the sense that it projects an identity which, reflecting neither the product nor the parent corporation, is modeled on the effect of unity of a person, and provokes a mirroring identification with the brand on the part of the consumers of the brand image. Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods wear the Nike insignia in an act of embodied identification with the brand; kids throughout the world wear the insignia in an identification with that embodied identification. In Laplanche and Pontalis's (1973: 210) precise definition, the brand Imaginary "is characterized by the prevalence of the relation to the image of the counterpart (le semblable)"; it is that process of imaginary identification which is the source of the brand's "non-rational hold over the buying behavior of the consumer."

If Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan are components of the Nike brand, however, they are also brands in their own right: image properties which are carefully managed to control the consistency and integrity of the mark which they have become. This process of branding is constitutive both of the living and of the dead celebrity: image and emblematics are typically managed by an agent or marketing
corporation and by licensing and franchising agreements, and the integrity of the mark is defended by legal action and by evolving legal doctrines such as the right of publicity which in the United States protects the marketable persona of the public celebrity (Gaines, 1991). One of the most powerful dead-celebrity brands, the “Diana, Princess of Wales” brand, despite being refused trade mark registration has developed brand extensions and distribution outlets (supermarkets for Flora margarine, the Post Office for stamps and lottery scratch cards) with greater reach than the memorabilia shops which are the usual outlets for such brands, making it imperative, as White and Lomax (1999) write, to defend the brand against the ever-present risk of contamination or dilution.

The star and celebrity systems set a pattern (one that ultimately derives, however, from the signature system) for the culture industry as a whole, increasingly organized, as Lury (1993: 62) argues, “in terms of a regime of rights characterized by branding, in which the manipulation of innovation as novelty is subsumed within the more general phenomenon of the simulation of innovation.” The process analyzed by Gaines (1991: 143–74) in which Hollywood stars began in the postwar period to take control of the marketing and exploitation of their own image is now widely practiced by the celebrity figures of high culture. In the world of publishing this process of personalcorporatization is marked in particular by the enhanced power of the literary agent in brokering multiple-book contracts which specify such features as length and target audience, as well as in negotiating secondary rights for film adaptation, translation, and so on. Books by the small number of established or emergent celebrity authors are the subject of intensive advertising and promotional campaigns which centrally involve the marketing of the persona of the author in chat and talkback shows, book-signings, festival appearances, and literary lunches; their effect in creating “barriers to competition” is manifested in the ability of branded authors to gain prominent bookshop display space and space in the extended apparatus of literary publicity which now, as in the star system, stretches the author’s name across different media (which may be owned by the same conglomerate; cf. Moran, 2000: 38–9). The phenomenon of branding is particularly evident in the case of dead canonical authors, where the integration of received texts into the aesthetic horizon of the present transforms them, as Jauss (1982: 25–6) observes, into kitsch: that is, into precisely the state of continuous
quality assurance that defines the successful brand. Similarly in the art world, the gallery and auction systems by which reputations are fostered, managed, and marketed have helped develop that “taxonomic” status of the proper name that transforms it from a certification of originality into a guarantee of the consistency, quality, and market value of an oeuvre and a distinctive “style.” The fact of reproducibility now comes to function, not as a threat to the auratic value of the singular work of art, but precisely as its guarantee: the museum or gallery shop, with its posters, postcards, T-shirts, scarves, and facsimiles testifies in repetition to the power of the solitary masterpiece.

At the same time, as I suggested earlier, there has been a convergence in recent years between the mass-marketing of high-cultural rarity and the aestheticization (rarefication) of certain forms of popular or commercial culture. The signature is now an established part of the fashion industry and of many areas of industrial design – of cars, of perfumes and cosmetics, of sporting equipment, even of food. Car designers work within the “styling canons” of the marque (I found this term on the Alfa Romeo website); Ralph Lauren “signs” both his upmarket Polo range and his downmarket Chaps range. The designer’s name moves in a continuous flow between the one-off griffe and the signature brand: Yves Saint Laurent, says Kapferer (1992: 30), “is a griffe when he signs his haute couture dresses; his name becomes a brand when applied to lipstick, ready-to-wear clothing, or perfume.” Marks & Spencer’s design shop, selling clothing in strictly limited production runs, was called Autograph, but the “autograph” was that of the design shop itself: a signature without a person attached to it, the idea of signature rather than its actuality. Celebrity chefs, released from the kitchen to the television program, the celebrity endorsement, the cooking school, have become artists displaying a “dedication to the integrity of their art” and producing “signature recipes” (Zahler, 1996: xi). And advertising has come to think of itself as an avant-garde, its “creatives” empowered by an aesthetic of “disruption” of conventions and norms (Dru, 1996).

What does this convergence between the signature and the brand mean, and what can it tell us about the nature of contemporary cultural production? Both the aesthetics of the signature and the aesthetics of the brand are ideologies; they are regimes of marketing and authorization which draw in rather similar ways on an imaginary of the unique person or of personality; brands have a “personality” because
they make use of strategies of personalization (the use of characters, celebrities, direct address) to create something like a signature-effect; signatures stand as metonyms of an originating author or artist, even though the making of any work of art involves an extended number of participants (editors, publishers, proofreaders, printers, paintmakers, curators . . .) and a complex commercial apparatus. Where the brand most significantly differs from the signature is in its more intensive management of the integrity of the brand, and in its use of the intensive semiotic work of advertising and publicity to regulate market demand. This is to say that branding represents a more advanced stage of the rationalized vertical organization of the culture industry, attempting to subject every aspect of production and distribution to calculation and quality control. The deployment of a signature-effect for commercial goods represents a qualification or an addition to the strategy of market saturation which has typically characterized the distribution of mass-produced commodities; post-Fordist marketing concentrates on the development of niche markets, and the use of signature-effects is no more than a way of targeting those niche consumers whose wealth is already indexed in their consumption of "high" art. At the same time – and this is the point of convergence – high art has become entirely a component of large-scale industrial production; no longer a craft, it finds its place as a niche market amongst others in the world of mass production (for a more extended discussion, cf. Frow, 1995). To say this is not to say anything one way or the other about the quality or value of work produced at this point of convergence; it is only to say that it is no longer possible in good faith to oppose an "authentic" aesthetics of the signature to a "commercialized" aesthetics of the brand.

Signature and brand name are shifters, markers of the edge between the aesthetic space of an image or text and the institutional space of a regime of value which frames and organizes aesthetic space. Both are structured by the paradox that Derrida (1988) defines as the iterability of the mark: signature and proper name at once designate a singularity (the uniqueness of the writing of my name, the difference of the brand and its products from all others in the field) and yet can function, can be recognized, only insofar as they can be repeated; seriality is the condition of existence of the singular mark. These two disjunct planes – of aesthetic and institutional space, and of singularity and iteration – converge in a further paradox elaborated in intellectual
property law: that “the romantic idea of originality and singularity is
the very foothold for the concept of property” (Gaines, 1991: 222).
The dual economies of value that underpin all cultural production
(Smith, 1988) may exist in tension, and their disjunction is the ratio-
nale for the privileged status of “high” art in its self-understanding
as a disinterested culture unaffected by market pressure. But the his-
torical logic of the brand was always already implicit in the aesthetics
of the signature.

Note

I have drawn here in part, and with permission, on an earlier essay, “The Signature: Three Arguments About the Commodity Form,” in Grace (1996: 151–200).

References


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