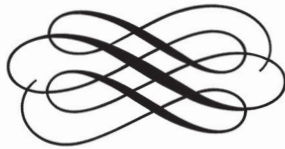


# WRITING OUT FAILURE

*Jenifer Papararo*



“Most cultural and intellectual creativity makes use of existing work in some way.”<sup>1</sup> This statement from *The Economist* is part of an article on copyright issues specific to Hollywood and the popular music industry’s fear of shareware and downloading technologies. It isn’t the overall intent of this statement that makes me go back to it. That ideas come from other ideas is an indisputable and commonplace notion and that it is posited as an argument against rigid copyright law seems viable. Yet the inclusion of the word “creativity” makes me question the sentiment. It seems out of place, implying a romanticism that is antithetical to the statement’s meaning. Giving weight to my skepticism, the same article, in economic terms, defines creative property as “non-rivalrous,” providing the example that if your car is stolen you are left with nothing, but if someone takes your idea you can still use it. The issue is usage. There is value in simply using existing ideas. Of course, creativity is still a factor; bringing together two elements can be deemed a creative act. But what makes the word stand out is that it implies originality and carries some claim to authorship.

The issue of authorship, especially within the last forty years, has been debated in critical theory and in art production and discourse. I am not about to delve into the intricacies of the successes and failures of that discussion so well articulated elsewhere. However, it is easy to see that possessive claims to ideas, thought processes and inspirations are still usually linked to self-worth and productivity. In the first few pages of his critically acclaimed novel *Atomized*, Michel Houellebecq posits two paradigmatic shifts in thinking: “Metaphysical mutations – that is to say radical, global transformations in the values to which the majority subscribe...”<sup>2</sup>

Acknowledging that these consummate deviations in thought “are rare in the history of humanity,” and that they can only be halted by the development of another meta-physical mutation, he cites Christianity as one possible example and modern science as another. For me, it is a third mutation, one that is revealed in the underlying thread of the story, that is informatively linked to the issue of authorship.

Nearing the end of his narrative Houellebecq accelerates time, envisioning a future where genetically engineered reproduction, a particular form of cloning, is the answer to the self-destructive tendencies of the ego. Inevitably, this practice becomes the cure for perpetual frustration, disappointment and conflict, eliminating the individual and unique genetic coding of which, “by some tragic perversity, we [are] so ridiculously proud, [and which is] precisely the source of so much human unhappiness.”<sup>3</sup> This method separates self-definition from the reproductive process, asserting that everything doesn’t need to come from the unique self, and in so doing, redirects the ego to appreciate what is outside the self.

Houellebecq makes this grand gesture, checking the ego so to speak, by clearly limiting the terms of production (controlling human reproduction) and effectively erasing the variables that cause human unhappiness. In a narrative full of failings – failed relationship after failed relationship – Houellebecq, in the end, writes out the possibility of failure. There is no place for renunciation in a utopian vision. In this scenario, eliminating the need or desire for originality is the basic solution to overcoming the frailty of the human condition.

In Houellebecq’s novel, originality is linked to weakness, and in an attempt to wipe out that weakness, he designs a fantastic, but somewhat plausible, method. Houellebecq tackles a psychological problem by devising a physical solution. On a less overarching scale, Canadian artist James Carl similarly aligns the attempt at originality with weakness, and as a result, through his work, he defers authorship as a way to avoid failure. Although my language is less definitive between my description of Carl and Houellebecq –avoid, and defer, replace, eliminate and overcome –both authorship and failure are still linked. For Carl, the difficulties associated with inserting identity rests more directly in the act of production and this brings us back to the issue of creativity.

The notion of authorship is a longstanding concern problematized by Carl through much of his visual work, which is continually culling, if not directly appropriating, the work of others. Carl reproduces common objects (home appliances, workshop tools, CD players, take-out containers) out of contrasting materials (cardboard, coroplast, jade, marble). His work relies on “the secure formal conventions of modernist industrial *good design*”: taking something that has been done well and commending it by replicating it and making it the body of his work – two door refrigerators intricately reproduced from their own cardboard boxes, stacks of tires shaped like origami from sheets of coroplast, styrofoam containers carved from fine marble.<sup>4</sup> Each of these works questions what is defined as the creative act. If the design of the object is already set, then what is left to be deemed creative: labour, selection, craft? One of Carl’s works in particular brings issues of authorship to the forefront.

At the Toronto Sculpture Garden, a small urban park in Toronto's downtown core, Carl installed *fountain* (1997), a sculpture built from nine rented Coca Cola vending machines. When thinking about producing a temporary public sculpture, Carl turned to an existing object – an object that by design already took into account the numerous problems that come with an unattended, interactive, outdoor sculpture. For Carl, vending machines are the ultimate in public sculpture. The machines themselves embody solutions to many of the problems that confronted him: they pass city by-laws in terms of public safety; they are built to withstand erratic weather conditions; aesthetically, they are meant to be seen; structurally, they are sound; they are resistant to vandalism and they are designed for easy usage.

Carl aligns himself with an existing circuit, giving his work over to something that already accomplishes his intentions. As part of the piece, Carl purchased and reproduced a stock photograph of a panoramic view of Niagara Falls – a generic tourist image that is synonymous with all other popular images of the Falls. He divided the image into nine equally proportioned parts, placing the consecutive segments on the front panels of each of the vending machines. Following an existing concave wall in the garden, he aligned the individual machines symmetrically into an arch that reflected the shape of the Falls and unified the successive segments into a single image of the natural landmark. He created a spectacle – a hyperbolic sales pitch – as a means of distributing his product.

For Carl, the product inside the machine is as important as the aesthetics and the functionality of the vending machines

themselves; the sculpture is a host that not only, in Carl's eyes, is the ideal of public sculpture, but is also a model way to display and distribute the product. As the machines respond to the public aspect of the garden, so must the product they vend. According to the artist's research, all gardens need a water component: "Nothing brings a garden to life as effectively as water, whether still or moving."<sup>5</sup> Carl sold varying brands of bottled water: Perrier, Montclair and James Carl. He created his own brand as easily as he claimed the vending machines as his own sculpture, removing the label from an existing brand and replacing it with his personal tag.

Regardless of whether or not the James Carl brand is a viable product (bottled water is a common consumer item and in the first six weeks his brand outsold all the others), the artwork still bears the mark of failure. Why would the artist insert his signature so blatantly after taking such intentional measures to remove himself from the act of production? Unlike Houellebecq, Carl doesn't exclude the possibility of failure, he insists on its presence. Marketing his own water is a feeble gesture designed to acknowledge the artist's inability to defer authorship and resist the desire to inscribe his identity into the act of production. It alludes to the degree of his compliance, creating a circular logic that aligns his work with consumer culture, and in so doing, it venerates its methods and devices. Compliance is a word that the artist uses in relation to *fountain*.<sup>6</sup> There is complicity that comes with co-opting the means of an existing system. In a way, Carl's aesthetic intervention just supercharges the system. The vending machine provides a shared convenience for both the merchant and consumer; they each get what they want –

sales or goods – independent of each other. As conveniently as buying a bottle of water, Carl utilizes the mechanisms of retail, incorporating them into his work. Playing with the language of sales, Carl uses the existing circuit to solve his problem of building a public sculpture and to avoid forming his own mistakes. He tries to make as few decisions as possible. Why take the risk of failing when all the problems have already been solved for you?

The title for Carl's public sculpture is a direct reference to one of Duchamp's earliest ready-mades, *fountain* (1917). If naming the work after the paradigmatic ready-made isn't hint enough to determine the reference, Carl, in his artist statement for the Toronto Sculpture Garden, calls his fountain a mutt: "hybrid as mutt."<sup>7</sup> The weight of the earlier piece historically institutes a discussion about context and its relation to meaning, bringing the often overlooked into view, scrutinizing art production and the way creativity is detected and defined. Carl is obviously referring to this history, but he doesn't just appropriate an object or system, removing it from its original context, reifying its meaning through its displacement. He uses it as it is meant to be used: aesthetically enhancing it and creating a small spectacle. Ultimately, he situates the vending machines in a customary location (a public garden), a convenient place to quench one's thirst during a bagged lunch or while passing through. In Carl's words, "the resulting 'sculpture' is an embodiment of observance, a monument to civil and civic obedience; and it is through its compliance and submission that it attaches itself to the world."<sup>8</sup>

Both author and artist attempt to avoid the pitfalls of creativity. Further to Houellebecq, sharing a genetic code will not override individuality: after all, identical twins have different experiences and thus are distinct from one another.<sup>9</sup> Carl makes an honest attempt to make nothing new, to be observant to the system he uses, but the accumulation of non-decisions culminates in distinct decisions. He is also working independently of that system – illegally and openly selling someone else's water as his own.<sup>10</sup> His is a confident usage of cultural resources (like using software). No longer so tied to the psychology of context, Carl's *fountain* is the result of a ready-made formula used to solve a problem, like Houellebecq's effort to eliminate failure. While there may be a limiting of the creative in each of these efforts, the problems of originality persists.

- 1 *The Economist*, "Rights in Intellectual Property", (12 Apr 2001).
- 2 Michel Houellebecq, *Atomized*, translated by Frank Wynne, London, UK: Vintage (2001), 4. Published in North America under the title: *Elementary Particles*.
- 3 *Ibid*, 375.
- 4 Robin Peck discussing Carl's representational sculpture: how Carl embraces and mimics good design, in "Rock, Paper, Scissors: The Sculpture of James Carl," *Plot: James Carl*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2003, 9.
- 5 Robin Williams, *Reader's Digest Guide to Garden Design*, London: Frances Lincoln, 1995, 146.
- 6 James Carl, "fountain", *Toronto Sculpture Garden*, edited by Rina Greer, Toronto: Toronto Sculpture Garden, 1998, 118.
- 7 *Ibid*, 118. Mutt refers to the pseudonym R. Mutt, signed on the original urinal, and the term hybrid naming gardens as hybridized amalgamations of things from nature.
- 8 James Carl, unpublished.
- 9 Houellebecq, 375.
- 10 For the second installation of *fountain* in Seattle, Washington, USA, with litigious threats, Coca Cola refused to allow Carl to sell his own brand of water in their machines.