The Case is ‘this’
Metareference in Magritte and Ashbery

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The article explores the use and function of the deictic expression ‘this’ in metareferentially alert visual (Magritte) and verbal art (Ashbery). Pursuing the processual character of reference rather than its mere result, it argues that, in art, acts of self-reference induced by means of ‘this’ are ‘pseudo-autophoric’ in the sense that they make artefacts refer to themselves as something that they are not (yet) and that they thus performatively generate, rather than imitate, their (aesthetic) objects of reference.

To be and not to be, that is the question.

The magic word is ‘this’. It does not only designate, nor does it merely refer, it can also constitute and create and, in the end, erase itself.

In the following, I will first concentrate on a textual example putting the word ‘this’ to some conspicuous use; I will then try and systematize its referential potential; in a further step, I will discuss what happens to the word ‘this’ in Magritte’s (in)famous painting “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (‘This is not a Pipe’); lastly, I will explore the function and use of ‘this’ in John Ashbery’s poem “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”.

1.

One of the most frequent questions asked in the face of (predominantly modern/postmodern) art is, ‘what (on earth) is this?’, immediately to be followed by ‘what does this mean?’. Almost everyone will be able to recount anecdotes such as the “story told of a celebrated Russian dancer, who was asked by someone what she meant by a certain dance” and who “answered with some exasperation, ‘If I could say it in so many words, do you think I should take the very great trouble of
dancing it?"¹ Now since, as one will gratefully acknowledge, I cannot (and will not) take the trouble of dancing what I mean, I will, in all due modesty, try and say it in ‘so many words’, and I will begin with some observations drawn from a Shakespearean sonnet.

The German Shakespearian Werner Habicht has highly suggestively drawn attention to the curious use of the word ‘this’ in quite a number of the bard’s sonnets (see 1993). The couplet concluding “Sonnet 18” (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”), for example, uses the word, as is well known, even twice within its last line:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
(Shakespeare 1986: 85, ll. 13–14; my italics)

These lines can be read, as Habicht argues, as a concise and logical summary of what the speaker has brought forth in the preceding quatrains:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand’rest in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou growst. (Ibid., ll. 9–12)

In such a reading, the word ‘this’ refers back to the ‘eternal lines’ of ‘this’ poem, making for textual cohesion and guaranteeing a metareferential (and metapoetic) reading: ‘this poem will eternalize your beauty by communicating it to all future generations’. Considering, however, that more than half of the text indulges in arguing the evident impossibility – the Petrarchan adynaton – of expressing the very thing the couplet purports to have celebrated, this reading becomes more than implausible. The sonnet’s ending thus turns out to be more ambiguous than it seemed at first sight:

On the one hand it would seem to confirm retrospectively that the preceding expression “when in eternal lines...” does in fact refer primarily to “this” poem, claiming that the poem is capable of immortalizing life, beauty and love. On the other hand, the “this”-gesture, in merely purporting to sum up the poem becomes vague in that it detaches the finished text from the love-inspired poetic process by which it has been generated – that is, from what the poem has essentially been dealing with. (Habicht 1993: 117)

This brings us back to the question of ‘what all this is about’. Obviously, the word ‘this’ is here (pragmatically) designating something

¹ Richard Hughes in his introduction to Faulkner (1975: 7); Hughes in turn uses the anecdote to defend the allegedly bewildering aesthetic structure of Faulkner’s novel.