“Play it again, Sam”: Undoing and Redoing Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* in Contemporary Art

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Introduction: Nauman’s *Molloy* (1968), Krauss’s *Molloy* (1978)

*Molloy* (1951/1955), the first “installment” of Beckett’s “Trilogy,” has become a point of creative and discursive reference in contemporary art at least since the late 1950s. The two best known examples of the novel’s appropriation in the art field are undoubtedly, on the one hand, Bruce Nauman’s 1968 studio videos *Slow Angle Walk* (*Beckett Walk*) and *Reversing Upside Down*. About these two works the artist stated in an interview published in the catalog of his 1972 solo exhibition at LACMA:

My problem was to make tapes that go on and on, with no beginning or end. I wanted the tension of waiting for something to happen, and then you should just get drawn into the rhythm of the thing. There’s a passage in Beckett’s *Molloy* about transferring stones from one place to another, the pockets of an overcoat, without getting them mixed up. It’s elaborate without any point.

*Slow Angle Walk* has to do with a description by Beckett of travelling to someone’s house. The body movements are like exercises—bending, rotating, raising one leg, going on and on. It’s a tedious, complicated process to gain even a yard. (quoted in Livingston 1973, 26)

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1 Nauman’s description alludes not only to Molloy’s stones but also to Watt’s walk from the railway station to Mr. Knott’s house under the “watchful gaze” of Lady McCann, at the beginning of the novel (see Beckett 2006c, 191–92). Moreover two 1968–1969 diagrammatic drawings that the artist made in connection with his *Beckett Walk* should be
On the other hand, there is Rosalind Krauss’s 1978 article “LeWitt in Progress” which draws an extended analogy between the artist’s serial process in works such as Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes (1974) and, again, the stones passage in Molloy. Eleven extensive quotes from this narrative episode are interspersed throughout Krauss’s argument without an explanation. Only at the very end does the art critic suggest that the excerpt is an instance among many in Beckett which signify, just like LeWitt’s serialism, not the powers of logic and reason (as suggested by idealist ideational interpretations of Minimalism and positivist interpretations of artistic “progress”), but the “obsession” of solving a “false problem,”” the “routine” or “performance of ‘thinking’” and their “special emotional tenor, ...absolute detachment from a world of purpose and necessity, [and] the sense of being suspended before the immense spectacle of the irrational” (58–69).

Both these examples focus on the stones section of the novel and retain largely the same features: the pointlessness or purposelessness of Molloy’s elaborate “solution”; the performative character of his obsessive obstinacy to keep trying to find it, which draws him (and the reader) into the “routine” and the “rhythm of the think(in)g”; the a-temporality of this “suspended” performance which seems to “go on and on”; and finally its affective impact (“tension,” “emotion”). Although these features are used to define LeWitt’s creative process and Nauman’s intentions in comparable terms, by either the artists themselves or a third party, the resulting artworks are quite different as regards their medium (video versus sculpture), form (moving human figure versus abstract geometrical shapes), and modalities of audience reception (watching statically a television screen at eye level versus walking around the work and literally looking down on it). Usually regarded as major representatives of two different artistic “movements,” Minimalism and Post-Minimalism respectively, LeWitt and Nauman’s avowed or attributed relationships with Molloy blur the distinction between these categories suggesting post factum underlying affinities and genealogies.

Although both these artists’ engagement with Molloy (and Beckett’s work in general) requires further in depth consideration, especially in light of their own statements on the subject, in the following pages I want to call attention to three significant, yet lesser known appropriations of the novel in contemporary art. I shall discuss two discursive and one creative endeavour that cover a period of two decades, starting with the transformative late 1960s. The discussion will not only make evident the variety of readings that Molloy enjoys and purposes that it serves in the art field. Rather, it will also show the ability of the novel’s cross-disciplinary transpositions to reveal fundamental aspects of both Beckett’s text and the art enterprises that it occasions or supports.

1. Molloy and When Attitudes Become Form (1969)

I shall start by tackling the seminal 1969 survey exhibition Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works—Concepts—Process—Situations—Information), curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland and circulating, in a somewhat different configuration of participating artists and displayed artworks, at The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, UK. The most immediate reason for

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The significance of this exhibition for later artistic and curatorial practice was such that it was restaged under the curatorship of Germano Celant in collaboration with artist Thomas Demand and architect Rem Koolhaas at Fondazione Prada’s Ca’ Corner della Regina in Venice, as a collateral event of the 55th Venice Biennial in 2013 (see “When Attitudes Become Form”). As regards participating artists in the 1969 show, the only difference between the Kunsthalle Bern and the ICA London was that Richard Long participated in the former while missing from the latter, and that Victor Burgin participated in the latter while missing from the former. As regards exhibited artworks, more artists were represented...
reviving this moment here is the exhibition catalog essay “Notes on the New” that its author, American artist and art critic Scott Burton, placed under the Molloy epigraph “Saying is inventing” (Beckett 2006d, 27). However, there is also another, less obvious yet methodologically more significant motivation for this revival. When Attitudes Become Form and Burton’s “Notes” demonstrate paradigmatically the range of possibilities and problematics open to contemporary art at the time, which have become determining points of reference (positive or negative) for later developments. In addition, the exhibition comprised works by many artists who had already responded or would later respond to Beckett, such as Robert Morris and Claes Oldenburg whose appropriations of Molloy I shall also deal with here. In other words, When Attitudes Become Form offers, through the specific instance of Burton’s epigraphic use of the novel, a point of entry to the investigation of the role that Beckett’s work played in the constitution of contemporary art’s expanded field.

What Szekman’s exhibition, the accompanying catalog, and Burton’s essay within it consistently aimed at was to take stock of the most recent artistic endeavours on both sides of the Atlantic. While analogous to late 1950s to mid 1960s “movements” such as Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme and Minimalism in their common rejection of modernism and its defining notions of medium specificity, autonomy, and self-expression, these latest creative activities at the same time departed from their immediate chronological antecedents in important, diverse, and idiosyncratic ways. The challenge posed by the circa one hundred and twenty artworks in the exhibition was to find ways of understanding a “complex phenomenon” which “appear[ed] to lack unity [and] look[ed] strangely complicated, like a compendium of stories told in the first person singular” (Szekman 1969). The majority of artists in When Attitudes Become Form were to become some of the most respected (and contested) figures in contemporary art throughout the following decades and major representatives of what had barely started to be designated by the names of Conceptual Art, Process Art, Land Art/Earthworks, Post-Minimalism, Arte Povera and so on. Acknowledging the multiplicity and internationalism of artistic perspectives present in the exhibition, Szekman nonetheless ventured to suggest in his curatorial statement that all participants shared a preoccupation with deriving artistic “forms not from pre-formed pictorial opinions, but from the experience of the artistic process itself” so as to “give ‘form’ to the ‘nature of art and artists,’ … the activity of the artist having become the dominant theme and content” (Szekman 1969). At stake then, in When Attitudes Become Form, was presumably no less than a thorough reconsideration of the defining coordinates and parameters of art.

It is in this context that Burton invokes Molloy’s dictum “Saying is inventing.” Like any epigraph, the short sentence is supposed

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3 Two slightly different exhibition catalogs were printed in Bern and London. However, both catalogs contain Burton’s “Notes on the New,” which was also published in a shortened and revised version in the September 1969 issue of Art and Artists.

4 Not only many artists from When Attitudes Become Form, but also Szekman himself returned much later to Beckett, including the 1966 filmic version of Cornedbe (realized by Beckett in collaboration with Marin Karmitz) in the Plateau of Humankind exhibition that he curated at the 49th Venice Biennial in 2001.

5 All references to When Attitudes Become Form in this essay are to the London catalogue. Since the catalogue is non-paginated and the essays herein are short, I shall not give page numbers.

6 In 1969 Burton was already familiar with Beckett’s work on which he had openly drawn in his previous art critical endeavors. His 1966 essay and 1967 lecture on American sculptor Tony Smith mention Happy Days (which provided the title for Smith’s 1962 sculpture Willy) and Waiting for Godot respectively (see Burton 2012, 39, 60). Beside this explicit “evidence” of Burton’s knowledge of Beckett, further elements support the idea that the “Saying is inventing” epigraph is not circumstantial but
to indicate the design of “Notes on the New,” which it does indeed in several respects and ways. Even when considered in epigraphic isolation, “Saying is inventing” is polysemous and hence ambiguous. Most immediately the sentence seems to mean that language is unable to accurately or even adequately convey anything, that, as Molloy will put it later, whatever one “say[s] [is] either too much or too little” (Beckett 2006d, 29) and thus always untruthful. In this reading “inventing” is more or less synonymous with “lying” and “Saying is inventing” expresses that purportedly major Beckett theme: the mistrust in the representation and communication capabilities of language. However, since Burton clearly indicates that the epigraph is excerpted from a work of literature (he gives both the title and the author’s name), “inventing” connotes the supplementary notion of “imagining,” “fictionalizing,” “conjuring up possible worlds” which do not conform, by definition, that is to say by their contrived and hypothetical rather than “real” ontological nature, to the truth standards of (most) non-literary usages of language and discourse. By necessity then, all literary “saying” is indeed “inventing” as Molloy’s proverbial statement suggests. There are already two meanings at play here, in the de-contextualized “Saying is inventing”: one negative that emphasizes the limits of language, the other positive or at least neutral that simply states the “untruthful truth of fiction.” Or maybe one should rather say that the sentence marks the shift, the gliding between these two meanings, the conceptual threshold where the limits of language become the condition of possibility of fiction.

“Notes on the New” structurally and rhetorically performs the double-meaning of “Saying is inventing.” The critic starts with an attempt at systematically accounting for the artworks in the exhibition that he proposes to group in five categories on the basis of “similarities [that are] less stylistic than intellectual”: “multiformal or non-rigid art,” “conceptual or ideational art,” “earthworks and organic-matter art,” “geometric abstraction” and “procedural or ‘process’ art” (Burton 1969). Yet these categories barely established, Burton not only acknowledges their arbitrariness (“Grouping artists by intentions or their choice of materials will create communities otherwise unrelated” [Burton 1969]), but spends much of the essay actually proving their shortcomings. The “negative,” untruth-related meaning of “Saying is inventing” is thus taken up and repeatedly instantiated. However, the manner in which this instantiation takes place leads to or rather is intrinsically bound up with the second, fiction-related meaning of the epigraph, and more precisely with the (simultaneously set up and inflicted) “two-in-one” or “one-in-two” configuration that characterizes the work of fiction Molloy on several levels.7

Burton chooses a pair of artists within a posited category—say, Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre who both use “geometrically regular designs”—but then highlights fundamental differences between their respective ways of artistically approaching their commonness (the inalterability of LeWitt’s geometrical wall drawings versus the alterability of Andre’s geometrical floor sculptures). Subsequently, the differential features opposing two artists from the same category are used as common features to establish temporary and partial relationships with artists and artworks from a different category (LeWitt’s invariable, wall-

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7 The most obvious levels on which this “two-in-one” / “one-in-two” configuration materializes in Molloy are structural, narrative and thematic, with the two parts of the novel featuring two narrators-characters involved in two failing quests that take place either simultaneously or consecutively.
fixed drawings are analogous to Richard Serra’s gallery-bound “procedural” or “process” art splash pieces, while Andre’s variable sculptures are comparable to the flexible works of a Morris, Oldenburg or Eva Hesse from the “multiformal or non-rigid art” category. These similarities are then differentiated in their turn, the ensuing differences matched with artworks from other categories and so on. The sameness in difference and difference in sameness principle, which grounds Burton’s argument and which proceeds from artist to artist and from category to category, erasing relationships between them as they are put in place and vice-versa, is also one of the major structuring principles of Molloy.8

Beyond local and fluctuating groupings, Burton also cautiously proposes several general features of the “new art”: its “modern obsession” with “push[ing] to their limits [the] relationships between art and idea, art and site, art and material, art and methodology”; its integral relationship to location; its emphasis on time, duration, memory, and performance; its life-like operating principles of “flux, change, chance, time [and] unpredictability” (Burton 1969a, 13) which result not only in the blurring or even the eradication of preset artistic categories, but also in the “mimesis of th[e] fading distinction between art and life” (Burton 1969a, 15); its mystification of the viewer especially by preventing the gathering of information and by presenting fragmented artworks “that [it] is impossible to perceive completely” so that “mere perception becomes a metaphor for cognition” and the viewer is made self-aware of him/herself as such (Burton 1969).

Many if not all of these general features have already been shown to be relevant to both Molloy and the artists and/or art “movements” incubated in When Attitudes Become Form. Burton’s appropriation of Beckett’s novel in “Notes on the New” rests on the art critic’s insightful reading of Molloy, which has identified quite a few of its structural, thematic and po(l)etic “inventions” so as to put them to original discursive use.

2. “Aligned with Nazca”: Morris’s Molloy (1975)

Among the participants in When Attitudes Become Form who later engaged with Molloy is Robert Morris. His 1975 essay “Aligned with Nazca” is of interest not only because it has received little critical attention from students of Beckett, but also because it draws on the novel in a manner comparable to Burton’s. In the course of a discursive attempt at “throw[ing] our present art context into a helpful relief” (Morris 1975, 33), Morris discusses recent environmental art of the 1970s, highlighting the novel ways in which it conceives of and deals with space. However, if the “present art context” had somewhat changed in the half decade separating the two artists’ assessments, as will become clear in due course, both Burton and Morris partake in

8 The “sameness in difference” and “difference in sameness” principle takes many forms in Molloy. Critics have argued, for instance, for and against Molloy and Moran being different characters that resemble in some respects, or them being the same character depicted either at different times or in different circumstances. Furthermore, critics have noted the partial similarities between situations, scenes, character relationships and themes in the two parts of the novel, such as Molloy and Moran’s bicycle rides, for instance, their relationships with Sophie/Loy/Louise and Martha respectively or their violent encounters with strangers on their quests. The intertextuality that permeates the novel has also been discussed in terms of “similarity in difference” and “difference in similarity,” as the literary, philosophical and artistic works on which the two narrators and Beckett draw are not necessarily used in line with the source but for the borrower’s own, oftentimes diverging, purposes. Finally, the stylistic “similarities in difference” and “differences in similarity” between the two parts of the novel have been commented on as well, as has been the relationship between the French and English versions of Molloy that are generally assumed to be, but are of course not, the same text.

9 Morris’s creative and discursive appropriations of Beckett in “Aligned with Nazca” and elsewhere have received more critical attention in the art field (see, for instance, Berger 1994; Krauss 1994; and Taylor 1982) than among scholars writing on Beckett. To my knowledge, only Nicholas Zurbrugg (1987, 11) and Jerry L. Curtis (1994, 119) have signaled in passing Morris’s “Aligned with Nazca” when discussing Beckett.
that generation of artists that matured in the 1960s and for whom thinking and writing about art, both their own and their peers’, was and remained part and parcel of what it meant to be an artist. This new category of the artist-as-critic or artist-as-theorist that emerged and imposed itself in the mid to late 1960s oftentimes resorted to literary rather than art-historical or art-theoretical points of reference. “Notes on the New” and “Aligned with Nazca” show that Beckett’s work in general and *Molloy* in particular have participated in this discursive “emancipation” and “responsibilization” of the contemporary artist from the beginning.

Morris’s essay is divided in two parts, I and II, with part I being in its turn subdivided in two sections: a “Prologue—Diary” and a “Log.” Both part I and part II display a Beckett epigraph. Epigraph I is a rather short, fully quoted sentence taken from *Murphy*: “I am not of the big world, I am of the little world,” was an old refrain with Murphy, and a conviction, two convictions, the negative first” (Beckett 2006b, 107; Morris 1975, 26). Epigraph II is a long, incompletely quoted sentence taken from *Watt*, which describes Watt’s serial speculations about “what the artist had intended to represent” in the circle-and-point/dot painting in Erskine’s room:

And he wondered what the artist had intended to represent (Watt knew nothing about painting), a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of its centre and its circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time (Watt knew nothing about physics). (Beckett 2006c, 272–73; Morris 1975, 33)

A third time that Beckett is alluded to in “Aligned with Nazca” — and it is in this instance that *Molloy* is tacitly invoked, while *Murphy*, *Watt*, and *Malone Dies* are explicitly named—occurs roughly halfway through part II. This description of the structure of Morris’s essay already shows a twofold principle repeated at work, that Burton’s appropriation of *Molloy* had also recognized in the novel, but that “Notes on the New” and “Aligned with Nazca” actualize differently. When the content of Morris’s *Arfourney* article is taken into consideration, his way of dealing with what one could call, in the words of James Joyce, the “twosome twominds” (quoted in Beckett 2006a, 504) configuration of *Molloy* becomes more apparent.

The purpose of Morris’s argument in “Aligned with Nazca” is not obvious at first. The piece’s title and the discussion in part I suggest that the pre-historical, manmade, kilometers-long lines that crisscross the Peruvian desert in the vicinity of the town of Nazca are the main topic under consideration. Morris indeed gives a personal account of his trip to the area, recounting in the “Prologue—Diary” his first failed attempt at noticing the lines as he drove by one evening: “Five p.m. six kilometres outside Nazca. No lines. Missed them completely in the fading light. Try tomorrow” (Morris 1975, 26). The following “Log” describes the physical properties of the lines (color, width, depth, length, orientation, relations, etc.); the most likely hypotheses about how they were made; and above all the best way of

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10 Morris’s prose in “Aligned with Nazca” echoes on several occasions that of *Molloy* and other works by Beckett. The “fading light” here recalls not only Molloy’s phrase “when already all was fading, waves and particles” (Beckett 2006d, 27) which occurs in the immediate context of Burton’s epigraph “Saying is inventing,” but also Burton’s own “*mimesis* of the *fading distinction between art and life*” (see above). Morris’s “The land was not absolutely flat but undulated out in all directions and rose slightly in elevation to the southwest” reminds one of Molloy’s “undulating land, which caused the road to be in waves, not high, but high enough, high enough” (Beckett 2006d, 5); and Morris’s “Try tomorrow” anticipates Beckett’s famous “Try again” in *Worocom Ho* (Beckett 2006e, 471).
observing them. The descriptions, which often show Morris perambulating and situating himself in the landscape, are still conveyed in the subjective perspective of the first person, which nonetheless gives way more and more to objective (third person) considerations. The already mentioned double structure of the “Prologue—Diary” and the “Log” operates simultaneously at several levels: typo-topographically; euphonically; temporally (two consecutive days are covered); and spatially (throughout part I the desert-cum-oasis lowlands of Nazca are distinguished from the surrounding highlands of the empire-building Inca). In essence, part I argues:

At close range the lines simply do not reveal themselves. It is only by positioning oneself within a line so that it stretches away to the horizon that they have any clarity. ... Greatest definition is obtained not only by the body’s positioning itself so that the line stretches out 90° to the horizon, but by focusing on the line at some distance. For this definition, one looks out, away, across, not close up or at. ... The lines inscribed on the plain become visible only by virtue of the extension of that plain literally from under one’s feet up to the level of one’s eyesight. The horizontal becomes vertical through extension. (Morris 1975, 30–31)

Morris maintains that one has to “align” oneself with and “within a line” if one is to perceive it, while at the same time looking not “at” but “down,” “out,” “away,” “across,” “through” it (Morris 1975, 33). This way of spatially and perceptually relating to the lines, on the ground,—and not from a commanding aerial perspective which “returns us to our expected viewpoint [according to which] the earth becomes a wall at 90° to our vision” (31)—results in the recognition of the continuum that links “the horizontal” with “the vertical” by extending it in depth. The conceptual division of coordinates which grounds our habitual understanding of space in terms of a room is thus remediated, bringing about an integrated way of thinking about space, but only thanks to a different manner of placing oneself in and perceiving it. Epigraph I from Murphy accords with the spatial concept proposed by Morris in as far as it foregrounds the changes effected in the “little world” of the mind by the changes taking place in the “little world” of the earthbound line. It is only by experiencing the “big world” as “little world” spatialities that one can begin to understand space differently.

Consistent with the Watt epigraph, part II of “Aligned with Nazca” starts by speculating about the likely purposes of the lines. After listing several possibilities suggested by others, Morris offers his own view that the lines “were spiritual irrigation systems connecting certain places of power in the surrounding sierra to the lower plains” (Morris 1975, 33). This essentially relational, mediating function of the lines, which “connect” physical spaces, spatial perception and spatial conception at the same time, is indeed Morris’s major interest in them. Only at this point in the argument, that is to say well into part II, after having described the nature and suggested the purpose of the Nazca lines, does Morris reveal the purpose of his own essay: to use, to re-functionalize as it were, the pre-historical lines which are “morphologically related to certain arts we see today” as a background against which to assess the most up to date “present art context” (Ibid.). The temporal relationship between the immemorial past (of the lines) and the most recent present (of art), as well as the spatial relationship between South American ancient lines and North American contemporary art highlight once more, in “Aligned with Nazca,” the complex spatiotemporal workings of a Molloy-inspired twofold structure.

It is in his discussion of early 1970s environmental art, in the light of the Nazca lines, that Morris alludes to Molloy and other Beckett novels. The artist contends that it is only this kind of “nonobject” art, with its “strong relation to...site or place” and its concern “with creating allusive contexts which refer to the self” (Morris 1975, 33), that succeeds, just like the Nazca lines and unlike all previous creative attempts—including Minimalism—in fully and successfully mediating “between the notational knowledge of flat concerns (systems, the diagrammatic, the logically constructed and placed, the preconceived),” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, “the relativity of perception in depth [that] returns us to our consciousness of our own subjectivity,
which, like space itself, has no clear demarcation, no visible bounding limit” (Morris 1975, 38, 36).

Beckett must surely be seen as the first instance of the artist fashioning out space itself as an extension of the self...Previous explorations...assumed that self’s space as continuous with the world. The glooms Beckett hollowed out for himself in the post-World War II years are spaces discontinuous with the rest of the world. In those spaces a Murphy, a Malone, or a Watt endlessly and precisely permuted his limited store of ideas and meagre belongings. Here counting and farting inside a greatcoat stuffed with the Times Literary Supplement was a world in itself. But the spaces of and for the self now being built in the plastic arts have little to do with the dust, the grimmness, or even the humour of Beckett. For if these spaces imply loneliness they indicate none of the anxieties of isolation. An undaunted separateness and even a kind of self-confidence in the autistic permeates them. (Morris 1975, 35)

The “anxieties of isolation” aside, Morris finds in Beckett’s novels and in Molloy in particular (since he summarizes the “counting and farting” episode of the novel) the paradigmatic example to illustrate his central argument in “Aligned with Nazca”: the necessary mediation, constant interaction and mutual conditioning of spatial perception and conception, “the big world” and “the little world,” experience and notation, depth and flatness, subject-relatedness and objective (serial) systems.

By connecting “the notational abstraction” (Morris 1975, 39) of mathematics and counting with the “concrete existent” (Ibid.) of the farting body, Molloy as a (textual) subject carves out a new kind of space for himself inside his (literary) greatcoat. For Morris, this is the perfect structural analogy for the environmental artworks of the 1970s, the achievement and novelty of which consist in the very transformation of the concept of space beyond its understanding in opposing terms of depth and flatness: “Space itself has come to have another meaning” (Morris 1975, 39). This “other meaning” of space—which transforms a fixed binary opposition into a dynamic relationship—emerges only thanks to the acknowledgement of its dependence on the perceiving subject that “take[s] measure of certain aspects of its own physical existence” while at the same time being fully aware of the “limit[s] in examining, testing and ultimately shaping the interior space of the self” (Ibid.).

3. Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s Molloy: Bicyclette ensevelie (1990)

Another participant in When Attitudes Become Form who later himself responded to Molloy is the variously categorized—Pop, Performance, Happening or Installation—artist Claes Oldenburg. In the forefront of several artistic “movements” that transformed the art field in the 1960s and afterwards, Oldenburg is best known for his gallery and/or onsite environments which often doubled as performance/happening sets, such as The Store (1961); his perspectively distorted sculptural installations, such as Bedroom Ensemble (1963); and his giant soft sculptures, such as Giant Soft Fan (1966–67). In the late 1960s Oldenburg’s creative thinking and practice led to the development of large-scale, permanently installed public art projects which consist in oversized three-dimensional representations of familiar objects placed in out-of-doors sites. Since the late 1970s to early 1980s, the artist has carried out this component of his artistic endeavors in collaboration with art critic, curator, and wife Coosje van Bruggen.

Bicyclette ensevelie (Buried Bicycle) is Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s “monumental” response to Molloy (see the artists’ official website for photographic reproductions of this work). It was commissioned in 1985 for the then emerging Parc de La Villette on the outskirts of Paris, and was installed there in the vicinity of the Allée du Cercle in 1990. The Bicycle is comprised of four unconnected parts which depict fragments of a wheel, a handlebar with a bell, a seat, and a pedal. These four components, some of which are as long as 16m and as high as 7m, are sited in an area of roughly 46m x 20m. Oldenburg and van Bruggen explained in 1995 the work’s connection to Molloy as follows:
On May 7, 1986, while browsing in the Gallimard bookshop on Boulevard Raspail in Paris, the cover of a book caught Coosje’s eye. The book was *Molloy* by Samuel Beckett, and the cover showed the anti-hero on a bicycle, which figures in the narrative. In an instant she recalled the “T” character lying in the ditch beside his bicycle, which was one of the few objects he kept about him, the single means by which to leave “forever this accursed place.” The bicycle disappears, Molloy searches for it, and finally finds it “half buried in a soft bush.” It occurred to Coosje that a bicycle could be the subject for a commission we had received. (Oldenburg and van Bruggen 1995, 460)

Van Bruggen’s recollections of the bicycle in *Molloy*, as described above, merge two episodes of the novel. In the first episode, Molloy, having left the police station (where he had been brought because of his presumably indecent way of resting on his bicycle) reaches the canal-bank and stretches overnight into a ditch beside his bicycle. The second episode shows Molloy at Louise’s house, the second day after his arrival, trying to leave but not being able to because his bicycle’s “wheels would not turn... as though the brakes were jammed, and heavens knows they were not, for my bicycle had no brakes” (Beckett 2006d, 42). Van Bruggen’s confused and confusing memory is all the more surprising since two faithful quotes are given (both from the Louise episode) and since a date (May 7, 1986) very precisely situates the temporal circumstances of her recollections.

Moreover, reminiscing again ten years later (in 2006) about the *Bicycle’s* genesis Oldenburg and van Bruggen mention distortedly the ditch episode—“Molloy... falls off his bicycle and finds himself lying in a ditch unable to recognize the object” (quoted in Gianelli and Becarria 2006, 118)—conflicting the passage again but only very obliquely with the accident that initiates the Louise episode, an episode which had been closely and doubly documented previously and which actually gives the artwork its title. If one adds that the ditch episode has a distinctly Proustian echo (via the “hawthorn” trace [Beckett 2006d, 22]) and that Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s 1989 large-scale sculpture

*From the Entropic Library,* which is contemporaneous with *Buried Bicycle,* uses quotations from both Beckett and Proust (see Celant, Koepplin, and Rosenthal 1995, 474, 483), the twofold workings of voluntary-involuntary memory suggested by the artists’ two accounts of how the *Bicycle* came into being do not seem accidental. In other words, although *Buried Bicycle* is essentially a spatial artwork, the artists’ discourse about it highlights a temporal dimension as well, which is thematically, structurally and intertextually consistent with *Molloy.*

This temporal dimension is in fact inherently related to the spatial configuration of the *Bicycle* which, although a monumental artwork, can go easily unnoticed (Sabourdin 2014, 8). However, once it is perceived, *Buried Bicycle* introduces an element of fiction in the promenade:

Only the parts that protruded above the ground needed to be realized: The rest of the large-scale bicycle was fictional. The visible elements would be distinct, independent sculptures whose individual positions were fixed in relation to their surroundings by their connection to the invisible whole. (Oldenburg and van Bruggen 1995, 460)

Strictly speaking then, *Buried Bicycle* is neither a “real” bicycle nor is it a complete artistic representation of one. In order for it to “work,” that is to say to be successful as an artwork and have an effect on the audience, the *Bicycle* fundamentally depends on the viewer’s/walker’s perception and his/her (pre)conception of a whole bicycle. Only against this background do the four elements that are “really,” materially there take on a cohesive meaning. The *Bicycle* is indeed “buried,” but not literally. It is metaphorically “buried” in the

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11 Van Bruggen’s 1986 recollections of *Molloy* may also owe something to the interviews with Bruce Nauman that she was conducting at the time in view of her monograph on the artist, and during which *Molloy* and other works by Beckett were mentioned (see van Bruggen 1988, 18, 115–16, and 120).
knowledge, memory, and imagination of each and every viewer. *Buried Bicycle* deliberately uses scale and spatial relationships in such a way as to “set up the scene” for a piecing together, time-dependent, perceptual-cum-conceptual process. *Molloy* and much of Beckett’s oeuvre “work” in the same way. They put into place narrative, textual and/or theatrical configurations in which blanks, gaps, empty spaces and unsolvable ambiguities play an essential role. These devices not only oblige the readers/viewers to apply themselves to make meaning of a Beckett work, but also prompt readers/viewers to become highly aware of their own arduous meaning-making activity. Beyond simply selecting a represented object from the novel and making it visible, Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s transposition of *Molloy*, just like Burton and Morris’s for that matter, operate at levels where the problematics and parameters of artistic representation, signification and meaning-making—in all their breadth and depth—are at issue.

Finally, even if the original impetus for *Buried Bicycle* is Beckett’s *Molloy*, the artists draw attention to a constellation of reasons which made the bicycle not the “right” word, but the “right” object/figure for La Villette: its consistency with the purpose of the park where people do indeed oftentimes ride “real” bicycles; the history of the bicycle as a French patented invention; the bicycle as a French cultural symbol from the Tour de France to the popular filmic comedies of Jacques Tati; the bicycle as an iconographic motif supporting different kinds of artistic enterprises, from Duchamp’s 1913 readymade *Bicycle Wheel* to Picasso’s 1943 bicycle seat and handlebars turned into a *Bull’s Head*; Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s own bicycle-related, yet previously unrealized artistic projects; and personal/autobiographical associations (see Oldenburg and van Bruggen 1995, 460; Gianelli and Beccaria 2006, 118). In other words, the network of contexts within which *Buried Bicycle* can be inscribed to give it simultaneously not one, but several possible meanings made the bicycle the “right” choice. Devising configurations able to generate a multiplicity of meanings by economical means is a fundamental operating principle in *Molloy* and Beckett’s other works.

4. Final remarks

The three transpositions of Beckett’s *Molloy* in contemporary art discussed above show that Burton, Morris, and Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s readings of the novel focus on its configurative principles rather than only on its “story” or thematic developments. They recognize, preserve, and exploit, for their own specific and largely different purposes, *Molloy*’s distinct twofold structure; the ambiguous and hence multiple, uncertain and even contradictory, yet at the same time mutually illuminating relationships that can be drawn between the two fragmentary “terms of the novel’s statement” (Beckett 1993, 138) in the spatiotemporal “intervals” that separate them; the essentially fictional character of the novel as novel, that is to say as a work of literary “invention”; and basic problematics concerning artistic representation and signification, among which the forming of material and the interactions between the art object and the subjects experiencing it are vital.

Be it critical discourse or artwork, the medium in which the transposition takes place is not taken for granted but submitted to operations guided by principles comparable to those that guide Beckett’s own poly(getic) strategies in *Molloy*. This work of (trans)forming the medium—which the artists-as-critics appropriating Beckett’s *Molloy* share with their point of reference—either records or “mimics” its own traces as produced by a discursive subject (Burton and Morris), or else presupposes a subject that will engage in a creative reception process (Oldenburg and van Bruggen). In either case, the relationship between medium, subject and process is foregrounded so that what becomes apparent is a “dissatisfaction with the status of the art work as a particular object in a finite state and a rejection of the notion of form as a specific and other identity to be imposed upon material” (Harrison 1969).

In the end, what Burton, Morris, Oldenburg and van Bruggen’s responses to *Molloy* suggest is that essential and original features of Beckett’s text supported the emergence of novel developments in contemporary art.
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