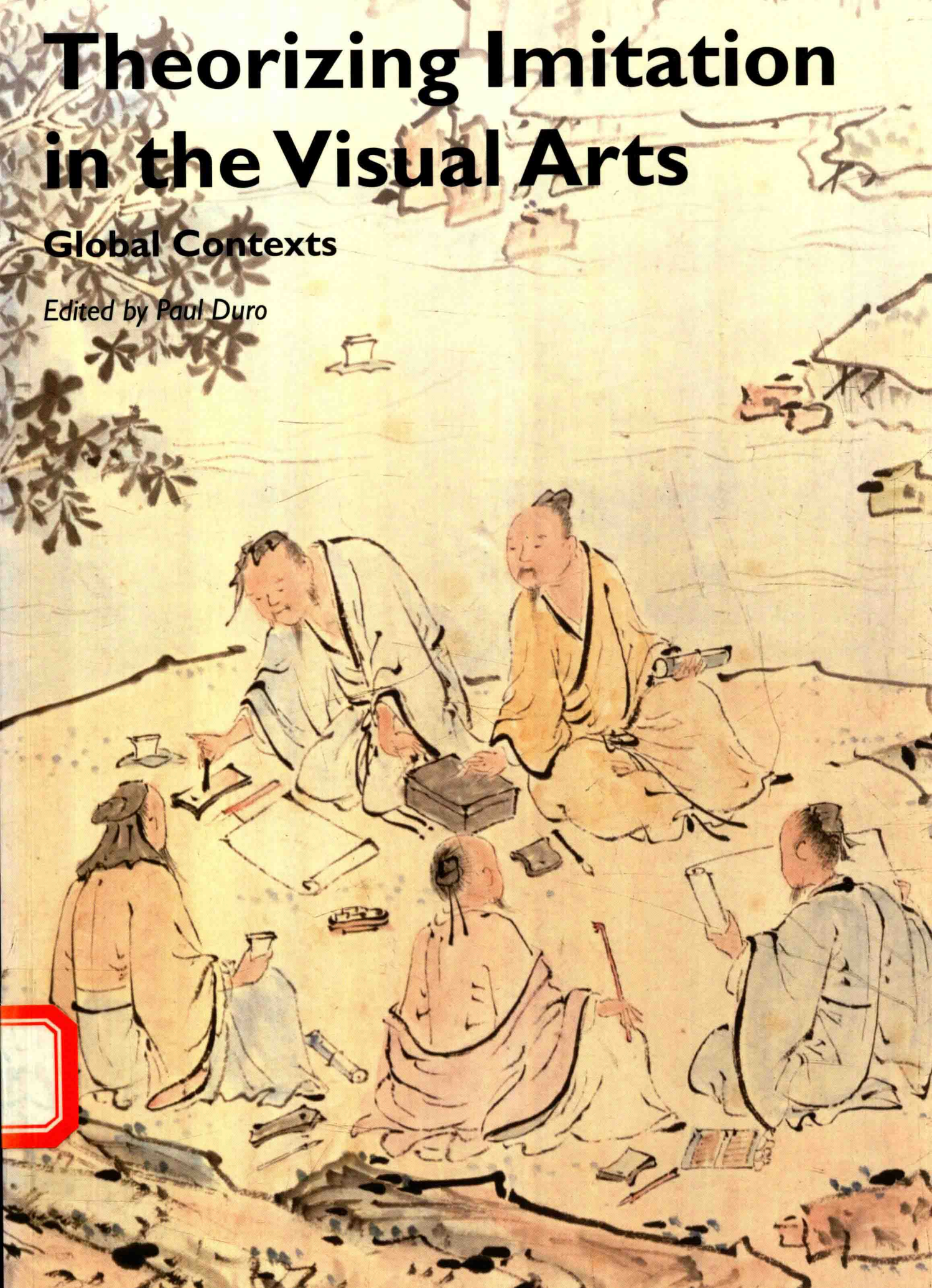
Theorizing Imitation in the Visual Arts

Global Contexts

Edited by Paul Duro



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AAH
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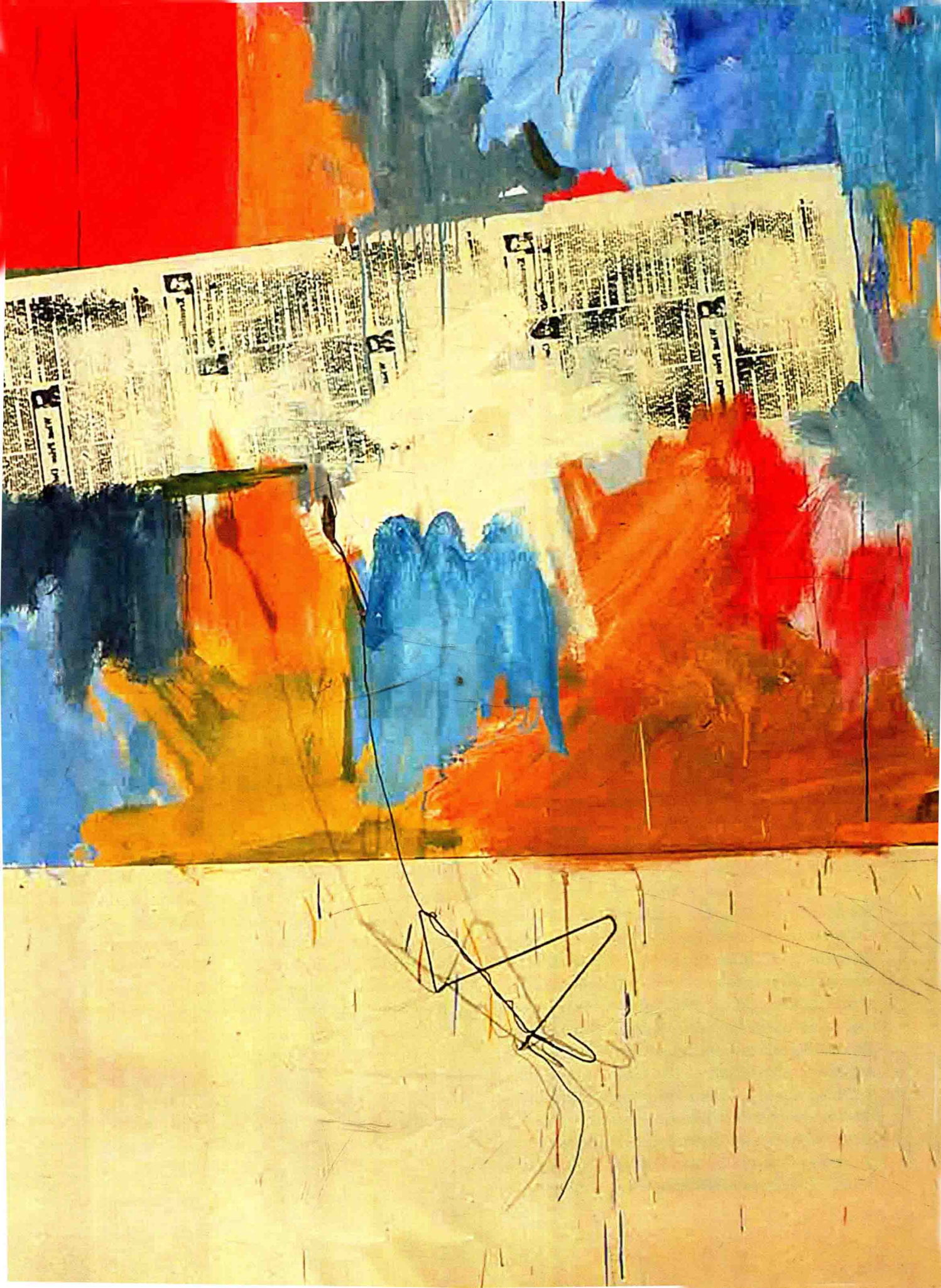


Chapter 1
Why Imitation, and Why Global?

Paul Duro

For his 2010 exhibition, *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai Weiwei layered the floor of Tate Modern's vast Turbine Hall with 100 million seemingly identical, yet actually unique, tiny sculptures of sunflower seeds (*plate 1*).[1] The installation, presented in opposition to received norms of experiencing art (at first visitors were allowed to walk on the sculpture),[2] offers itself as a representational 'field' with no obvious boundary, positioning the spectator both inside and outside the work. The seeds were manufactured, over a period of several years, by ceramics workers in the city of Jingdezhen, the centre of Imperial Chinese porcelain production for over a millennium. Despite their number, the sculptures are the result of hundreds of skilled workers making each 'seed' one at a time. The use of a precious material – porcelain – and the labour-intensive production process is a poignant reminder of the conflict between the seriality of their production and the personal content brought to the installation by the artist.

Materially, the seeds reference a long tradition of ceramic production that was the envy of the West – as Europe's largely failed attempts to imitate Chinese hard-paste porcelain attest.[3] As a cultural phenomenon, sunflower seeds – a ubiquitous snack food in China – evoke the excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when millions of people, including Ai's father, the poet Ai Qing, were exiled to remote regions of China, denied individuality and identity at a time when Mao Zedong represented himself, in presumably unwitting emulation of Louis XIV, as the sun, toward whom innumerable sunflowers – the Chinese masses – turned their heads.[4] Equally the work poses challenging questions about the nature of repetition and what it means to be an individual in an increasingly global society. Do the variations between the ostensibly identical seeds matter? Do we see them as identical only when, in grotesque imitation of a totalitarian ideology, differences are suppressed in the interests of a supposed homogeneity? Produced in their millions, the seeds eloquently interrogate notions of uniqueness and originality foundational to the Western conception of art, while the variations between each seed suggest that labels such as repetition, replica and facsimile serve as much to obfuscate difference as they do to establish a putative similarity.[5]

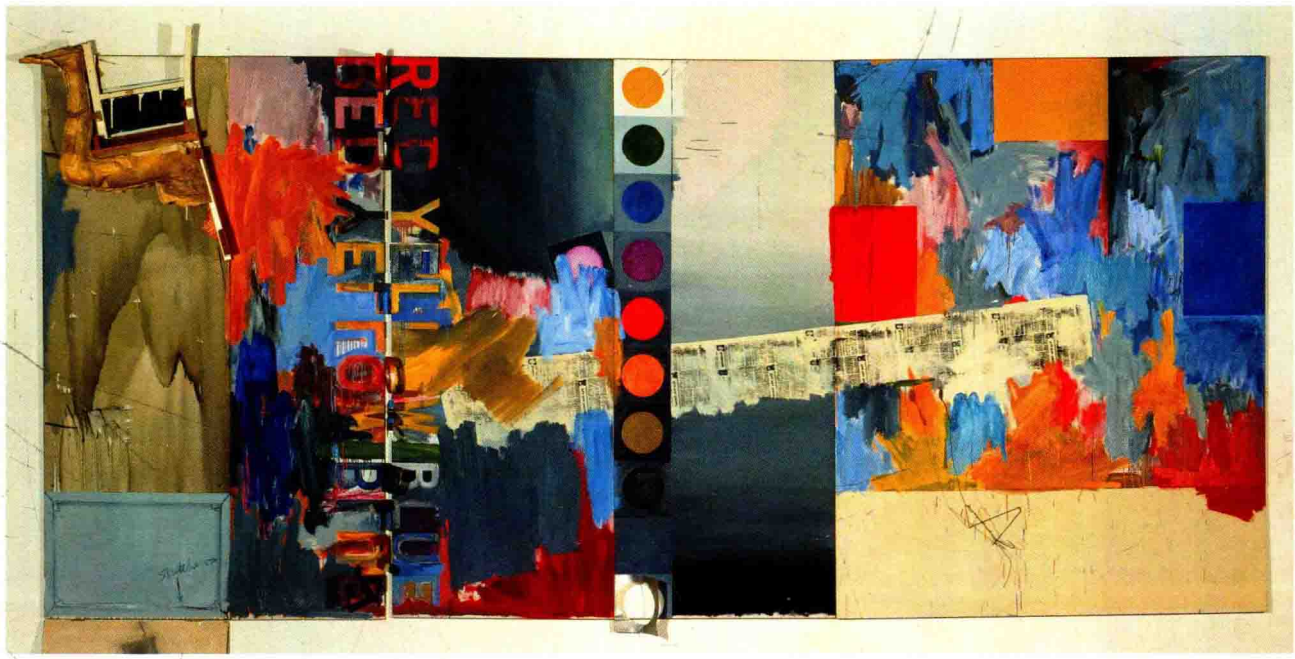
Ai Weiwei's art is yet more grounded in the practices of imitation, citation, and referentiality than might at first seem to be the case. Ai's high profile exhibition – 'According to What?' – is also the title of a 1964 painting, *According to What* (without a question mark), by Jasper Johns (*plate 2*).[6] Johns' vast canvas is made up of six panels that total more than two metres in height and almost five metres in length

Detail from Jasper Johns, *According to What*, 1964 (*plate 2*).

which incorporates, in its turn, a distorted copy of Marcel Duchamp's *Self-Portrait in Profile* of 1957, concealed inside a hinged canvas in the lower left corner.[7] In 1983, Ai referenced the same Duchamp self-portrait by shaping a wire coat hanger into Duchamp's profile (a wire coat hanger protrudes from the canvas of Johns' *According to What*). Ai then photographed the coat hanger, lying on a sheet of construction plywood, having partially filled the profile with . . . sunflower seeds.

The 'circle of reference' that Ai engages in, arcing back to Duchamp via Johns while anticipating, with the sunflower seeds, his monumental installation in Tate Modern, problematizes the concept of imitation and denies any easy solution to the question of referentiality. Not only issues of replication, repetition and copy are involved, but also those of originality and innovation. What might be meant by these terms gives rise to a further series of questions that have application in many

1 ***Ai Weiwei holding*** **Sunflower Seeds, 2010. London: Tate Modern (The Unilever Series). Photo: © Tate.**



2 Jasper Johns, *According to What*, 1964. Mixed media on canvas, 192 × 88 inches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Edwin Janss Collection. © VAGA, NY. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

of the essays that follow. How do different cultures approach the issue of citation? How far might the transformation of the model be considered to be necessary to the practice of imitation? What is a copy? To what extent are notions of authenticity tied to the concept of originality? How is imitation to be understood in different cultural contexts and traditions? How is technology, including digital technology, changing the way we think about the practices of repetition? What is the connection, if any, between imitation and copy? What is an adaptation? In what ways may imitation across cultures be understood as a form of appropriation? How has imitation been historically understood, and how might it be understood now?[8]

These questions serve to introduce a principle adopted by the authors of the following essays – that no one definition of imitation may be discovered, and that no one term, be it imitation, repetition, citation, copy, quotation or some other supposed cognate, may stand without inflexion from another term in the word group. It is for this reason that the authors of this collection have paid special attention to terminology, not with the impossible aim in mind of establishing impermeable conceptual distinctions or firm terminological categories, but to acknowledge the differences *between* terms that may appear closely related yet carry specific and potentially divergent meanings when employed in different contexts. Only then will the works discussed in these pages escape the denigrating appellation of copy, borrowing, or replica, to reveal their importance within an ongoing history, and histories, of visual representation both within and across historical and geographical borders.

The Practice of Imitation

When Aristotle wrote that 'there is man's natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity',[9] when J.-A.-D. Ingres admonished his students to 'study antiquity and the old masters' in order to 'imbibe the sap of the plant',[10] or when Nicolas Poussin wrote that 'novelty in painting does not consist primarily in the subject that has never been seen, but in good and novel arrangement and expression',[11] they were commenting on a practice that the vast