# Ring catching

The Magic Ring is a collection of artists' websites linked together in a circular structure which is totally decentered and transparent.
This format was first developed on the internet in the 1990s and was called a *Webring*. The term has since been brought out of obscurity and reworked with regard to its browse mode for a research project carried out in Fine Art schools in France (in Toulouse and Limoges) and abroad (in Yerevan).

During the creation of this project, artists, teachers and students have tried to find how to evoke works of art in the age of the internet. The following text bears witness to our weekly meetings and the concepts raised. Internet has become essential for understanding today's world. It is not that everyone has to be on the internet, but rather that taking what it represents into account allows us to understand where we are living and the contradictions that surround us. We examined a broad range of works, both digital and non-digital, in terms of their propensity to travel by the internet and networks.

To understand a work of art in the age of the internet, we started by talking about something other than art and technology, something that goes above and beyond these two fields. In reality, we talked of something much smaller and much more ancient: a simple ring. The figure of the ring attracted our attention for two reasons. Since the early days of the web, rings have been present on the internet in the shape of the Webring principle. The ring as the symbol of a link and community is echoed in the internet culture based on the hypertext link. Travelling through the representations of the ring from Ancient Greece to the present has made it possible to perceive many disturbing common points between the legends of rings and the history of networked works of art.

The ring circle
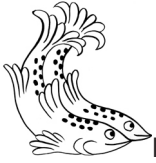
In many stories and legends, the ring is lost then found after many adventures. The ring seems to follow a circular trajectory that inevitably brings it back to its starting point. This is the ring cycle, as analyzed by Charles Delattre in his book of the same name (*Le cycle de l'anneau - de Minos à Tolkien*, Charles Delattre, éditions Belin, 2009). In the stories he cites, the ring bearer becomes vulnerable once he loses the ring, losing at the same time any recognition until its unforeseen return:

« As the temporary recipient of the ring, the character is caught up in a network of exchanges and relations which sometimes reject, sometimes spare him and even grant him favors depending on when the ring appears and disappears » (*ibid.*, p. 61)
A ring is an object that is small in size, and that is both personal and an outward sign. It functions as a mobile, and temporary, marker, capable of being attached, detached and fixed elsewhere before returning to its point of origin. The story of the ring of Polycrates as recounted by Herodotus in Ancient Greece illustrates this phenomenon:

After *a coup d'état*, the tyrant Polycrates ruled the island of Samos from 538 to 522 BC (in Greece). One day, his friend, the Pharaoh Amasis, told him that the gods were jealous of his prosperity. He thus enjoined him to rid himself of his most prized possession, and to do so as many times as necessary. Polycrates listened to this advice and set out to sea, where he threw his beloved ring, set with a precious stone. The loss upset him deeply and filled him with infinite sadness. A little later, a fisherman caught a fish in his nets and he served it to the King for his meal. To his amazement, Polycrates discovered the ring inside the fish. He was delighted and could not bring himself to rid himself once more of his most prized possession. He then continued to prosper until the day that Oroetes lured him into a trap, taking advantage of his greed to promise him half of his wealth in exchange for a service rendered. Polycrates suspected nothing and, despite warning from his daughter and his friends, he visited Oroetes, who took him prisoner and executed him in a horrible manner.

Unlikely adventures provoked by the disappearance and the reappearance of a ring also occur in the Indian story of Shakuntâlâ, adapted by Kâlidasa in the 5th century, in the African story Ngolo Diara, recounted in the 20th century by the griots in Mali, or *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R. Tolkein and Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* in Europe.

In each of the stories mentioned above, the circular form of the ring makes reference to the narrative cycle and the cycle of life and its unforeseen events. In the context of art, we talk of the cycle of works as these examples are the perfect illustration of the way in which works are built up as a result of interactions, additions and subtractions in a networked society in the age of globalization. Like the ring lost at sea, contemporary works are « caught up in a network of exchanges and relations which sometimes rejects, sometimes spares them and sometimes even grants them favors ». Today, all creation is subject to the diagram of the ring cycle. An individual makes a small gem on his own. He decides to share it on the internet, where news of it spreads quickly. Gradually, he starts to lose control because anyone can download it as much as they like. The loss brings him his share of problems, recognition, or both. And in all cases, the interactions follow on from each other and the cycle turns out to be inevitable.

Some will say of the internet and downloading that there is theft, suggesting that the

work is the exclusive property of its author and beneficiairies, swearing exclusively by the virtuous circle of trade in finished products. This is the principle that the highly controversial international Anti-Conterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) – which has been signed by many States - aims to apply in the fight against « the increase in international trade of counterfeits and pirated products under copyright ». In the absence of any democratic concertation and transparency, this agreement installs censorship by means of an obligation for internet service providers to divulge private information concerning their internet users. Instead of accompanying an inevitable social movement, the vision of the ACTA imposes capitalistic logic based on ownership. The cycle of works in the internet age is much more random and much more enriching in reality, offering, through its multiple reactions, a reflexive look at artistic practices.

The Robert Lang and Sarah Morris affair epitomizes the complexity that the internet has introduced into the creation of works today by means of cycles of interaction. Robert Lang trained as a scientist but now devotes his time exclusively to computer-assisted folding. He is a renowned origamist who creates complex, realistic folded sculptures using computer programs. His works are published on his internet site under copyright whilst his software can be downloaded on a freeware licence. A freeware licence is a licence that applies to software whose author renounces all or part of his royalties. There is undeniably a philanthropic aspect in Robert Lang's approach, which is the result of both an amateur, popular culture and science.

Sarah Morris has had an artistic career after first studying political philosophy. Since the mid-1990s, she has created paintings and videos inspired by the structure of cities and, in particular, their architecture. Her work is exhibited in a great number of contemporary art museums all over the world. A few years ago, Sarah Morris produced a series of painting using documents by Robert Lang found on his site, without informing him or citing him. In the face of the facts, and in the absence of any negotiations with Sarah Morris, Robert Lang took her to court. The outcome has still not been decided at the time of writing. This affair is the perfect illustration of the vicissitudes of the ring cycle. Robert Lang's work appears on the internet, disappears into the paintings by Sarah Morris, which, in turn, become public until Robert Lang notices, as stipulated by the ring cycle. In this story, Sarah Morris does not seem to understand the exchanges and collaboration that so enhance the internet. By privatizing Robert Lang's creations, she is acting like a Pop artist in a consumerist society caught with its hand in the cookie jar. But we are living in another world. Today, we are confronted by more interactions and interdependence than ever before, be it ecological, financial or cultural.

Generally speaking, the cycle gives people a rough ride and imposes itself before inevitably coming back to its starting point. We are all aware of the cycle of the seasons to which we must constantly adapt by dressing appropriately. Other cycles are more imperceptible and artificial. It is therefore necessary to understand the cycles that govern us so that we can interact with them.

It is, without doubt, computers and their algorithms that impose their cycles on today's world. They are so fast that they are almost imperceptible, yet they bring rhythm to our lives, as well as to part of the world's economy. On a computer, the cycle time corresponds to its calculation speed. The other cyclical element within a computer is the recursive algorithm. A recursive algorithm is a computer programme that consists in using itself to process information. This loop function is the basis for all software and operating systems. A computer that crashes often hides an endless loop from which neither the computer nor the user can escape…

The speed of these calculation cycles on the computer, coupled with the speed of transmission of the information, are at the very heart of the stock exchange process. *Algo-*

trading (also referred to as *black box trading* and *robo-trading*) uses computers and algorithms to interact with the stock exchange's order book. High frequency transactions (HFT) consist in making high speed (microsecond) financial transactions. This frenetic rhythm is what was behind the *Flash Crash* in 2010, when 9% of the market disappeared in five minutes… Investigations have highlighted the involvement of high frequency transactions in this incident. The speed of stock transactions is a race against time and can be explained by relentless competition. In reality, these algorithms are played against each other without ever actually being pooled.
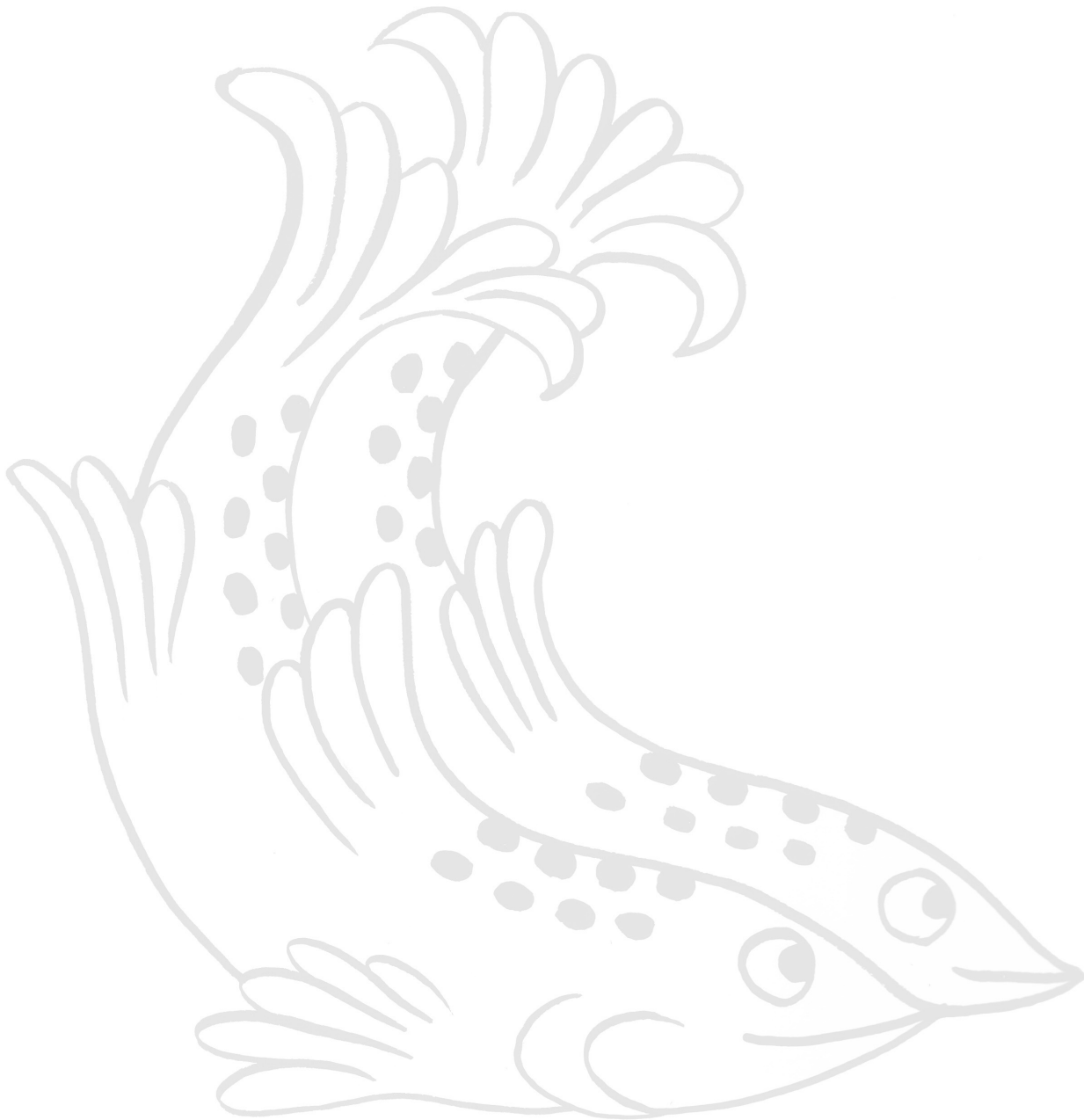
The chance of the ring
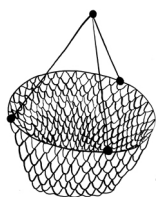
Two ancient stories (the life of Polycrates as recounted by Herodotus in Ancient Greece, and that of the elderly Florentius as recounted by St Augustine in Ancient Rome), and two contemporary tales (the films *Abyss* by James Cameron in 1989 and *Match Point* by Woody Allen in 2005) focus on characters and lives in which the appearance and disappearance of a ring will play a part in the chance behind their destiny. In turn lost and then found again in the wide, wide waters, the ring in these four tales turns out to be a bearer of either good or bad luck. For the elderly Florentius, we can say that luck was on his side.

« In Hippo, there was a poor and holy old man named Florentius, who lived from his work as a tailor. Having lost his cloak, and being too poor to be able to pay for another, he ran to the tomb of the Twenty Martyrs, which is a very famous place for us, and prayed to them to clothe him. A few young people were there by chance and wanted to have a laugh and, hearing the old man's prayer, followed him when he left and started to taunt him, as if he had asked the Martyrs to give him fifty obols to pay for a new outfit. But the old man continued on his way without saying a word. He then saw a large fish flailing on the river bank. With the help of the young people he caught it and sold it for three hundred obols to a good Christian man and cook named Catosus, to whom he told the story of all that had happened. He was intending to buy wool, so that his wife could make him a new cloak as best she could. But the cook, having opened up the fish, found a golden ring inside. He was so touched by the compassion and piety of the old man that he took the ring to him, saying, « Here is how the Twenty Martyrs help to clothe you. » (The City of God – Book 22 – The Eternal Happiness of the Saints, Saint Augustine)

How can we not recognize ourselves in this miraculous catch by old Florentius, who finds by chance a golden ring in a fish, and thus wealth and respect within his community? What happens to poor Florentius, is it not what happens when we come across a real gem whilst running a search or just browsing, attracting the admiration of our entourage? The website *UbuWeb* (resources for the avant-garde) is often praised as being a small gem of a site by artists discovering it for the first time. The artist finds a certain amount of recognition in passing on information to other enlightened people. Generally speaking, the digitization of today's world is the ocean on to which we set sail blind and from which are thrown up unexpected treasures. Just like a ring, which is lost because it is small, each site is also infinitely small in relation to the overall scale of the internet. The web is the net into which we hope to bring our desires up to the surface, but the infinity of resources digitized, and the complexity of how they are networked, leave as much room to calculation as to chance. The « I'm feeling lucky » button on the search engine Google is well and truly the sign of the chance in which we decide to place our trust, or not.

Woody Allen's film *Match Point* tells the story of the social ascension of a young tennis coach (Chris Wilton) in London against a background of improbable pieces of luck. The film starts with a slow-motion shot of a tennis ball crossing over to the other side of the court, then hitting the top of the net before stopping in mid-air. An off-screen voice, with Gaetano Donizetti's *Elixir of Love* in the background, accompanies the scene with the following commentary:

« The man who said, « I'd rather be lucky than good » saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think so much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck, it goes forward and you win. Or maybe it doesn't, and you lose. »

The scene is replayed in an almost identical fashion at the end of the film. It takes place on the banks of the Thames and this time it is a ring whose movement is filmed in slow-motion. Caught up in the contradictions that endanger his climb up the social ladder, Chris Wilton must commit a double murder and hope to make it look like a robbery that went wrong. He quickly gets rid of the victim's jewels in the Thames. After going through the victim's pockets one last time, he pulls out a ring and throws it towards the river without looking back. The ring spins in the air like the tennis ball at the start of the film, bounces on the handrail and then falls on to the pavement. This piece of luck will save him because a drug addict walking past picks up the ring and will be found guilty instead of him.

We can see in this representation of chance and the ring a sign of the instability of human matters. We can also see a recurrent preoccupation for artists with the notion of chance throughout the 20th century, from Mallarmé's poem (*Un coup de dé jamais n'abolira le hasard*) to the Fluxus movement (Georges Brecht and John Cage), via Dadaism (whose name was chosen at random from a dictionary) and the surrealist movement. The collage of images found is one of the modalities (Kurt Schwitters Jan Arp, Robert Rauschenberg) that give rise for certain recent artists to the form of the artist's book (Hans-Peter Feldman).

The arrival of the internet seems to give new breadth to this practice of collecting images found. The example of the site *4Chan* is worth examining. *4Chan* was created in 2003 and is an English-language forum devoted to sharing images found on the internet, grouped together in a network of galleries ("imageboards"). The Random forum remains the most popular since its creation. Maybe this is why the logo of *4Chan* is a four-leafed clover, the symbol that represents luck and chance. The particularity of the site is that no prior registration is required. Every contribution is signed *Anonymous*. This signature gave its name to the group of activists formed on *4Chan*, *Anonymous*. From collecting images found to a political project and writing a manifesto followed by actions in the field, *Anonymous* has every sign of being an artistic project based on a world of noise and chaos.
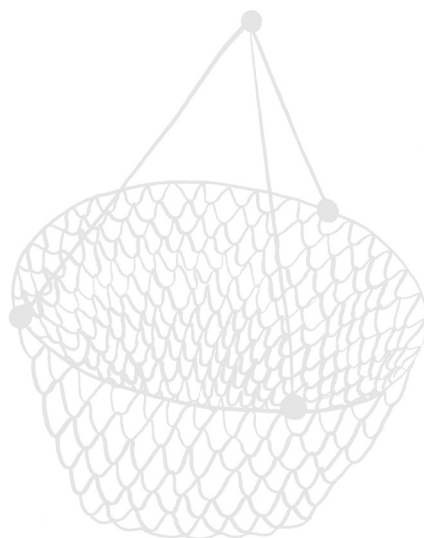
The community of the ring

Through the ages, rings have ritualized communities in a wide variety of forms and scales. The web, which is based on hypertext links, also sets up extremely variable communities that go beyond the borders of nation-States and disciplines in the context of globalization. The *Webring* merely reinforces this symbol of community by associating internet culture with the figure of the ring. Many artists on the internet, and the communities they form, bear witness to this search for a meaning to give to such globalization and pooling.

The smallest community is the couple, sealing their union with a ring that each spouse puts on the other's finger in the course of the marriage ritual. Under the French « universal community » regime, spouses put all their possessions together. In cinema, there are countless scenes in which the plot between the characters plays with this concept, which comes and goes in order to bring the characters together and tear them apart again.

In the 13th century, the support given by the Borromeo family to the Visconti and Sforza families is represented by the Borromean rings, which symbolize the Holy Trinity and the family. There are three rings intertwined in such a way that if one of the rings were to break, both of the others would automatically be released. Lacan used this trinity as the structure for a composition on the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

Rings also symbolize the communion of human beings with the elements. Also since the 13th century, the Sensa Festival in Venice celebrates the city's « marriage » to the sea following the conquest of Dalmatia on Ascension Day. The Doge of Venice is carried in a naval procession to the mouth of the Lido, from which the Adriatic Sea opens out. For this procession, the Doge throws a ring into the sea to seal the union with the waves and thus ensure that that the city's political prosperity continues. A few boats follow the procession and fishermen dive in the hope of finding the ring, thus receiving moral recognition from the Doge and the community as a whole. This episode is depicted in a painting by Paris Bordone.

The scale of the communities of the ring has also expanded to become global. From 1913, the Olympic Games are represented by 5 entwined rings, representing the five continents. In the 1950s, the trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* was published, in which J.R.R. Tolkein depicts several types of community, whose members are linked by a ring: the three rings of the Elves, the seven rings of the Dwarves and the nine rings of Men. They form the Rings of Power. The One Ring was forged in the flames of the Mountain of Destiny by Sauron, and he put all his powers in that ring, particularly the power of controlling all wearers of the rings.

The end of a bipolar world, resulting from the Cold War, the globalization of exchanges for which the internet is the undeniable motor, and the environmental crisis, all produce interdependence links at the planetary scale. In this context, many currents of thought raise questions concerning the common meaning to be given within this globalization. Illustrating this is the trend for political ecology, the altermondialist movement inspired by the theory of multitudes and Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zones. More recently, Peter Sloterdijk's three-volume treatise on spheres (*Bubbles*, *Globes*, *Foam*) describes

the totalization of the world through representations of spheres from Ancient Greece to the present day.

The imagination of the community is very much present in today's artists. Internet reflects above all the globalization of their work. From iconographies taken from the internet, Iain Ball, Timur Si Qin, Anne de Vries, Jon Rafman, AIDS-3D, Ryan Tricartin or Harm Van Den Dorpel produce works on line, as well as objects and varied media as now, the internet, globalization and its effects have an impact on all sites and all layers of the population. For all these reasons, the figure of the ring, the circle or the sphere runs through their work as a *leitmotiv*.
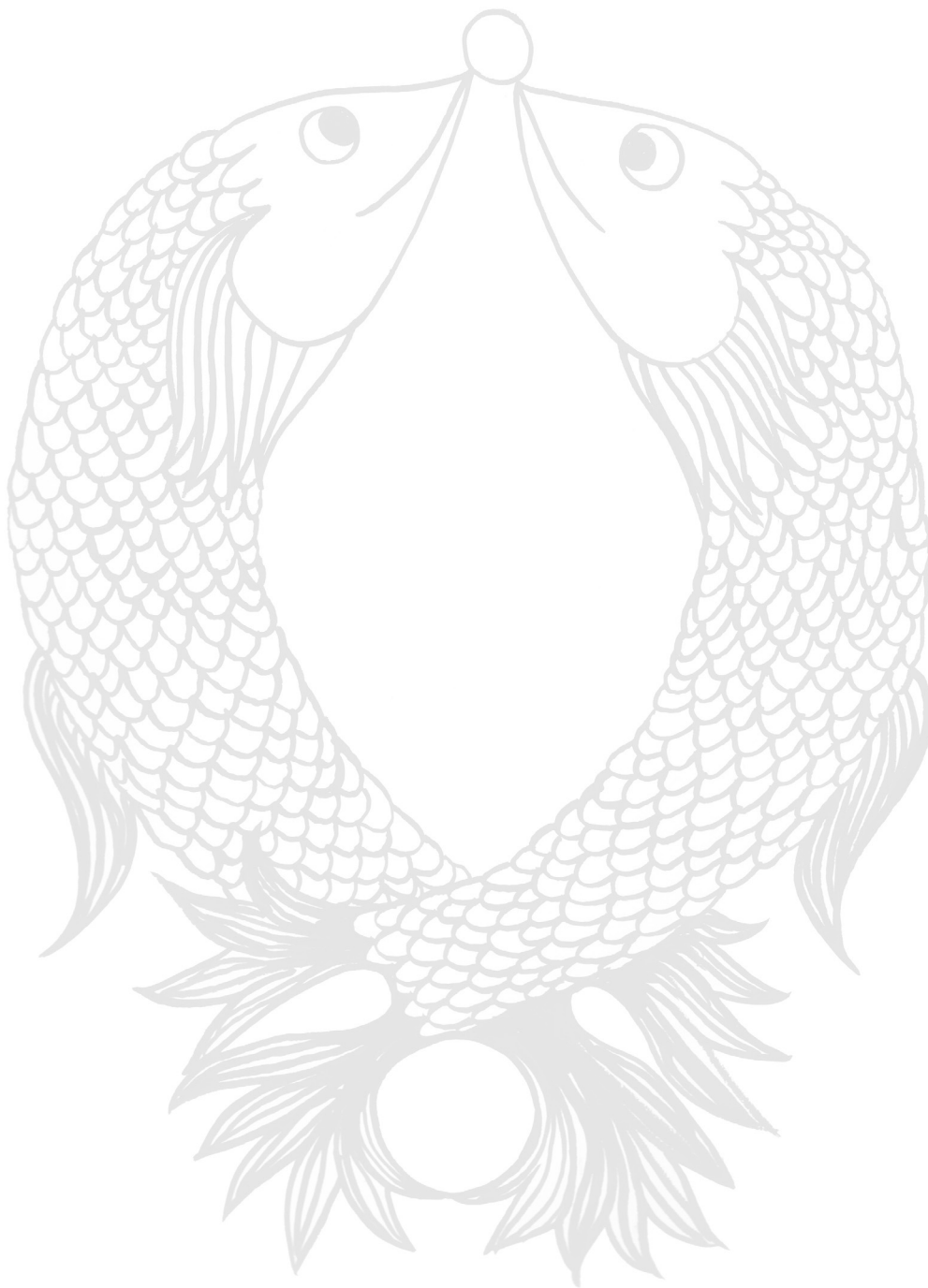
The ring and invisibility

The wearer of the ring seems to have the magic power of invisibility. The ring of Gyges the Lydian is a story told by Plato in his Republic and is evidence of this, as is the One Ring in Tolkein's Lord of the Rings, written several centuries later. But this power of invisibility is often accompanied by such a thirst for power that it brings out all the most base of instincts (conspiracy, murder) and plunges the bearer into solitude and madness.

The story of Gyges' ring is described by Glaucon in Book II of Plato's Republic and is a parable to support the idea according to which justice is feared rather than respected. If a citizen obeys laws, it is because he is forced to do so and not because he appreciates the underlying principles. Gyges was a shepherd for the King of Lydia (now Turkey). During a violent storm over his pastures, Gyges sees the earth open up before him. At the bottom of the crevice lies a bronze horse with an open side. Gyges goes in and discovers on the inside a larger-than-life corpse wearing a ring, which he takes. Some time later, Gyges attends a meeting with other shepherds in which the monthly report of the state of the herds was to be concluded. But, as he turned the gemstone of his ring toward the palm of his hand, the shepherds around him started to talk as if he were no longer there. He soon discovers that the ring allows him to become invisible. Knowing this, he makes sure to become one of the King's messengers and infiltrates the kingdom. Gyges takes advantage of his power to seduce the Queen, become the leader of a conspiracy, kill the King and take over the throne…

In 1938, Tolkien introduced into his first novel the One Ring which gave the bearer invisibility (see *The Hobbit)*. This magical object became central to the rest of the story (see *The Lord of the Rings*). The One Ring was forged in the flames of the Mountain of Destiny by Sauron, the Lord of Darkness. He put all his power into it, that of dominating Men. But once he had lost the ring during a battle, the ring passed from hand to hand, giving each successive wearer a power that blinds them and consumes them. Ultimately, in both cases, invisibility seems to be a means of hiding from others, from one's responsibilities and from justice in order to dominate humans. H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* tells the same story. The scientist, Griffin, finds a formula that makes people invisible and uses it above all to flee his creditors and then to commit murders before finally going mad.

For Plato, as for H.G. Wells and J.R.R. Tolkien, both in the past and today, invisibility is power, and this power is dangerous. Not being seen is looked on badly. So how should we interpret the invisibility strategies that have been visible since the 1970s in conceptual artists and, later, on the internet in an information society?

Since 1968, Ian Wilson has been interested in language and, more particularly, in discussion as the only form of his work. According to his recommendations, no recordings are made of the discussions he organizes. His work is thus totally invisible but, before disappearing, the last physical works by Ian Wilson were circles drawn in charcoal on the ground or on the wall (*Circle on the Floor* and *Circle on the Wall*). Once he had produced these works, he observed that he could talk, or even just think about the circle and that it was not necessary to draw it to be able to transmit the idea that he was exploring. Ian Wilson seems to have perfectly anticipated the changes in our society and its current economy.

In a post-Fordist economy such as ours, communication and language have entered into the sphere of production. The job now is to communicate. Most of the time, this work is unpaid. The more comments you post on Facebook or about a book that you have just bought off Amazon, the more the value of Facebook and Amazon increases. Artists and creators in general are at the center of this process because they produce symbolic, immaterial value. Not exhibiting directly, not communicating at all cost, remaining invisible in a temporary or permanent manner has nothing of a disadvantage in this context. It is a form of power, as told in the various ring stories. This power that the artist takes on organizes the context of the appearance of his research, and thus his action.

This question directly concerns the Magic Ring community, which is invisible at several levels. As the magic ring has no center, this makes it difficult to localize as each participant hosts his own site. The works are not collected together in a single exhibition space but remain naturally spread out over the web. There is a balance between the community as a whole and the independence of its members. By definition, the internet has no center either. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why a culture of invisibility has accompanied the development of the internet within communities such as hackers. There is a superficial web surface composed of the sites that everyone knows (Google, Facebook, etc.) and there is the deep web that the search engines do not register in their data bases either because they are sites with little traffic or that are dubious in nature, or because they have voluntarily withdrawn from the indexation robots. Like *chiaroscuro*, most of the internet is to be found in a dark, undistinguishable zone, under cover of free associations, small groups or secret societies with variable intentions. Access to them is restricted in one way or another (a hidden door, password, ritual, cooptation, etc.). The taste for all that is secret is not limited to these inaccessible zones of the internet. Many hidden functions are implemented in the most widely-used software and video games (Photoshop or Microsoft Office) without the user having the slightest idea about it. For the most part, they are inserted by the programmers themselves, who call them Easter Eggs in IT jargon.

Similarly, the interface that makes it possible to navigate from one work to another within the ring remains totally transparent. There is nothing allowing you to know whether or not a site is part of the community of the magic ring or not. In the same way, there is nothing that allows you to know if you have moved out of the community. A single gesture makes it possible to identify one of its members, a gesture in the form of a ring ↺

The magic ring