



René Magritte:
L'empire des lumières
(detail), 1954
Oil on canvas
146 × 114 cm

The Image as Miracle II

We continue our inquiry into artistic imagination in a further installment. It may be that artists open the vast reservoir of memories more consciously and rummage through it more thoroughly than the average person. Let us, therefore, take a closer look at the conscious, and perhaps also unconscious, construction of paintings and sculptures. They shift, displace, or condense something. On one hand, this concerns the core and aim of artistic work—to produce something magnificent, perhaps even a masterpiece, if only in response to competition. On the other hand, a very specific impulse within the realm of imagination is required, for art is not the same as searching for a cellphone I left in the car. As we discussed in the last newsletter, without a visually creative memory of the car, its location, and the way back to it, I would never find the cellphone again. **Let us take as an example of specifically artistic imagination the painter René Magritte (1898–1967), who has been of great commercial interest since 2024. His paintings—one of which recently fetched \$121.2 million at auction—are considered “surrealist.” Magritte himself always spoke clearly about what the surreal and thus his own achievement meant.** “The surreal must not be confused with the desire for an imaginary world,” he said in 1961. He was not thinking of fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, nor was he searching for “ideas and feelings” like a writer. His concern was with “visible thoughts,” with “figures of a visible world” that should be neither banal nor merely extraordinary. Magritte was seeking “a reality”—a statement he also made in radio conversations—“that is not separated from its mystery.” As examples from his rich oeuvre, he cited a plaster figure marked by a spreading bloodstain, as well as a female nude on canvas that took on the color of the sky behind her. Such results, such thoughts, he said, “elude any interpretation.” **Let us jump to one of today’s pioneering surrealists, Not Vital (*1948). In 1993, at the *Art Basel* fair, Vital presented a small bronze camel with a bowed head, standing on a more than four-meter-long, bright white ski. Astonishing, and from the outset beyond the grasp of imagination.** Here, too, we are confronted with a combination, a metamorphosis, and a subtle act of appropriation—the first and unique assemblage of a desert beast with a human tool for traveling in snow-covered mountains. Here, too, a kind of miracle was at work—again, beyond comprehension.

Whether we wrestle with the strangeness of such images, trying to get used to them, or whether perhaps we reject them outright, changes nothing about the new artistic fact—the work itself. It is suddenly and surprisingly there. It appears—in a museum, at a fair, in a gallery—as a call to attention. Attention to what? Is the artist insane? Or do artists play with mysteries? **Here, the broad channel between artistic autonomy and the *fait social*—the weight of social reality—opens up. Are artists seismographs when they combine elements in ways that first surprise and perhaps later enthrall us? Are they compelled, as if by some fiat, to reject the so-called mainstream with their imagination? Do they want to stand apart from other artists?** Is the true driving force an experiment, a quest for power, or even prestige? Is it, secretly, just about money? We cannot answer these questions in depth within the scope of a newsletter. We love high art of the highest quality and want to understand what needs to have happened before certain works completely overwhelm us. I am talking about results of the imagination that literally captivate me—not just something beautiful, superbly crafted, or an elegant ornament. Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, once characterized the sublime—not the beautiful—as a force capable of inducing psychological subjugation. I stand before a stormy ocean and take pleasure in it because I know the waves could kill me. By remaining where I am instead of exposing myself to the overwhelming forces of nature, I experience the threat as a profoundly affecting bond. **Today, we have AI, and with it the incessant question of who is truly creative—AI itself, or the people who, as they say, stand behind it? But when we digitally summon AI's creativity, no one is standing by our side. It is delivered to us as if by an unseen hand, drawn from an incalculable array of possibilities.** In art, one searches for an ideal leap forward. In the Renaissance, this was achieved through *Disegno*; since the advent of *Conceptual Art*, through clever ideas. The Swiss artist Dieter Roth (1930–1998), confronted with the difficulty of the task, cheekily declared that he wanted “to make all of art disappear into books. All that image stuff.” By describing his own art as “Kucken und Kacken”—looking and shitting—he arrived at a formula. Jérémy Koering, in his recent book *Iconophages. Ingesting Images*, explored the theme of ‘digestion’ in depth from a religious-historical perspective. **The artists of our day often take in visual memory deeply and then bring it forth again, transformed and renewed. This process is more intense than the use of AI. It is not always digestible. It can lead to constipation.** Or to the ceaseless production of repetitive works, which, without being too crude, could be likened to an all-too-effortless bowel movement. Dieter Roth had the sarcastic idea of stuffing Georg Wilhelm Hegel's collected works into sausages—“literature sausages.” And so, in 1974, twenty volumes of sold books from *Subrkamp Verlag*—seasoned with spices and onions—were reverently stuffed into sausage casings, tied with strings. Today, they hang, neatly strung, on a wooden rack in a museum. How beautiful! How awful!

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