

Extract from Marcel Duchamp/ readymades

© Syntax Arts Society

Postscript

Brian Dyson - As a matter of fact, I always did want to write good fiction.

Q. Well I don't know, do you know what the answer is?

A. Well I don't know, do you know what the question is

Duchamp and the fallacy of the avant-garde

Duchamp realized that the critical acceptance or rejection of a work of art depended on how successfully that work of art followed the rules. New or revolutionary art was judged successful if it was able to bend or extend the rules within closely prescribed limits (very much like next year's model - on a purely cosmetic level). Thus an avantgarde movement was assured of success if the present limits on the extension of the rules were implicitly understood. This preserved the illusion of continuity and maintained a false historical perspective which locked everything into a linear continuum (basic consumer product marketing technique). An avantgarde movement which went too far off beam would be banished to a cultural no man's land until, at a later date, criticism itself invaded that no man's land and claimed it as its own, resurrecting its new found heroes from the dead. So the game continued, and so the game continues today.

Duchamp understood the strategy of the game and his own place in it. Realizing that all subjective artistic decisions are purely arbitrary and mechanical in origin, being no more than an automatic response to the external world, and understanding that artistic individuality was simply a question of neural programming, he had the system beat hands down. This is not to suggest that he was any the less programmed than anyone else, but that the nature of his programme, due entirely to an accident of birth', in time left him free of that particular game and gave him a clarity and an acknowledged wisdom which placed him, in the world of art, as a true individual.

Duchamp and the elimination of identification

Realizing that as his friend Dali expressed it, "my art is but one aspect of my total cosmogony" and no longer having a burning itch to make art, he could take it or leave it since for him nothing was any more or any less important than anything else. He was free to make things with the same equanimity with which he played chess or taught French. He was equally free from an attachment to objects, whether of his own making or not, and could concentrate on the materiality of his ideas by following his own unique system of logic, his life long interest in the pun being a result of his insight into duality. The objects produced became a focal point for his ideas or, as in the case of the Large Glass, the incidental means by which he used the downward spiral of creativity to maintain the upward spiral of his own evolution (as in the model of a DNA molecule). The Large Glass itself was merely a by-product, a fact little understood because most people insist on looking at it instead of seeing through it.

His Ready-mades were of such little consequence to him that most of them simply disappeared; they were produced on whim and discarded just as easily. Unlike Picasso's combination of bicycle seat and handlebars which is itself an expression of the duality of form (but still belongs to a particular hierarchy of forms, being essentially unrepeatable), Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel is infinitely repeatable since the form is subordinate to the impulse which produced it. But let us not forget that the Bicycle Wheel actually preceded the concept of the Ready-made by some two years, and that very few of the Ready-mades are actually true Ready-mades, nearly all of them displaying some aspect of artistic interference, even if nothing more than a verbal description, a fact which was of great significance to Duchamp.

Duchamp and the artist as poet

It was Duchamp's desire to place art "at the service of the mind", not just at the service of the emotions or the imagination. Art at the service of the mind, not the intellect alone, which is but one facet of an individual's mentation, but the mind, which has an emotional component as well as an intellectual component and which, depending on its degree of sensitivity, can (and should) be much closer to intuition. Intuition, being comparatively immediate since its impulse is emotional, reduces the intellect to the status of a tool in much the same way that the hand is used as a tool.

However, art at the service of the mind is one thing; but what we have today is an art at the surface of the mind, firmly rooted in the expression of taste. Taste and other middle class merchant values such as snobism and the neurotic pre-occupation with personal hygiene reduce art to a surface and reduce artists to personalities and people of so called social significance to the status of terminal charismatics.

Duchamp was interested in a science of poetics was subjective and conscious rather than subjective and unconscious; which was based on questioning and which, through subjectivity, could touch on areas of objective truth, where truth = fact (+), subjectivity being the plus factor since it is purely experiential. The qualitative value of this subjectivity is based in consciousness. For Duchamp the bridge between the three-dimensional world of art formalism and the world of speculation exemplified in his interest in the fourth dimension was his poetic sensibility.

The crucial significance of this poetic sensibility which produces not an intellectual art based purely on knowledge and fact, but an intelligent art based on understanding and the desire for understanding, is that the pseudo-tautology that it creates is truly a closed system bearing no relationship whatever to other tautologies since it has no basis in scientific fact and has no possibility of practical application in the three-dimensional world (in the sense that mathematics or quantum physics does). And yet, being rooted firmly in our subjective experience of this three-dimensional world, it speculates to the point of absurdity and then returns to help us redefine our situation anew, thus increasing our understanding. As Duchamp himself said "I like this idea and even if it is not true, I accept it for the truth." Duchamp was a member of the College of Pataphysicians until his death.

Duchamp and art as the criticism of art

As Marcelin Pleyne pointed out some time ago (in ArtPress, No. 1, 1973), Duchamp's Ready-mades are symptomatic in that they are art about art. Their range of interpretation and speculation shows clearly that the Ready-made's significance is not rooted in formalism but in its critical and philosophical position. The Ready-made is critical of the value system on which twentieth century aesthetics is based. That is, a system based exclusively on formal structure which, although it has content and substance, is of such insignificance (the content of the painting is the structure; the substance of the painting is the paint) as to preclude anything more than the cursory interest of intelligent people.

The significance of the Ready made is that by placing it in the same context as an acknowledged work of art one either has to equate the Ready-made with a work of art by elevating it to the same level, or else one has to reduce the art object to the status of the common object - that is, to an object devoid of any substantial content in terms of specific meaning. Up to this point in time it has been acceptable (once the alternative was realized by those with the most to lose) to elevate the Ready-made to the level of art and thus protect the sanctity of, shall we say, broadly speaking, the twentieth century formalist 'dead skeleton' aesthetic of 'international-style' art movements.

It should be understood that Duchamp, by placing an everyday object within an art exhibition context, was not elevating the object to that higher level of existence that art objects are supposed to enjoy, nor was he attempting to expose directly (although he certainly did) the bankruptcy of contemporary art expression. He was simply trying to get recognition for the act of choice as a legitimate creative activity. That is choice not of colour, shape or texture which was the usually accepted limit on artistic expression, but an act of choice as an exercise in "the beauty of indifference."

Nevertheless, the Ready-made has revealed to a generation of artists that Ben Vautier calls post-Duchamp that art has become nothing more than a superficial piece of commodity merchandizing and at the same time it has destroyed the notion of work (see Vaccari) and again at the same time it has extended its definition.

Duchamp and the bankruptcy of art

Regardless of Duchamp's intention, (and the function of this exhibition is not to deify Marcel Duchamp but to investigate the impact of his Ready-mades and other ideas on certain aspects of contemporary art) the Ready-made brought into question a whole system of values; formal, idealistic, economic etc. and Art couldn't answer. It could only co-opt the Ready-made and attempt (quite successfully) to neutralize it, as powerful self-interest groups absorb and neutralize any social problematic, be it (in the case of art) Conceptualism or Punk Rock.

Again I am not saying that formalist aesthetics are meaningless but that, as Octavio Paz points out, even though form carries its own significance and still projects meaning, this meaning is nevertheless quite vacuous when seen in relation to our total situation, and seems completely irrelevant when we attempt to place it in terms of meaning and social and personal value. This is not to question formalism's right to its own expression but to suggest that this continual exchange between the vapid and the vacuous produces nothing more than a marketable product which ultimately becomes one more vehicle for greed, selfinterest and cultural colonialism, both for the artist and for the marketeer.

Duchamp held up to question this framework of art; of art as a closed system, a game theory (much like that of chess), which bears no relationship to the real world and its problems, but exists solely for its own gratification and regeneration. Admitted, systemic structures and game theory allow us to refine and test the integrity of such abstract intellectual models before giving them an appropriate application in the real world. But art, having its contemporary base in formalist aesthetics, has no basis in the real world other than as an exemplar of taste, and taste, good or bad, is simply a question of preference as Duchamp pointed out.

Given that colour theory can be as scientific as mathematics it still does not allow that some people are colour blind, that others insist on looking at everything through rose-tinted glasses or that others yet are irreversibly myopic, and perhaps it should not care. This situation is not of course unique to art. We could say that, in economic terms, $a + 2b = 4c$ in the sense that one apple and two pears have the same value as four oranges, but this does not take into account the fact that some people do not care for apples at all and would gladly forfeit four apples for one orange any day, regardless of economic value. This is not to imply that large agricultural cartels are imposing false collective values on individual sensibilities but I think that by using such facile examples you will begin to get my drift; a tautological structure does not take such a subjective quantity as taste into consideration. And yet, from a Duchampian perspective, formalism is based solely on questions of taste... and therefore it is a valueless system. But such is the power of art as a "habit-forming drug" as Duchamp described it, that neither Duchamp nor his influence has made much impression on it. Or at least, so the marketeers would argue...

The Ready-made moved out of context becomes meaningless, that is it becomes merely co-opted by powerful art interests. The Ready-mades are not objects to be appreciated. They were and still are (as ideas at least) strategies which reveal the bankruptcy of contemporary object fetishism. (How long is it since Newtonian physics became obsolete. Whether it was Duchamp's intention or not, the Ready-made demonstrates quite clearly the sterilization of meaning in art. It is generally impossible to find substantial meaning in art today, indeed most people cannot find substantial meaning in life, and art at best can only serve the expression of the search for meaning through questions raised or positions tentatively held (until again we change our minds).

There is a danger here, in the investigation of an art as problematic as Duchamp's, of substituting an object fetishism idea fetishism, a tendency which has manifest itself in such investigations as Art & Language and the nostalgic expression of Marxist theory and other ideological fictions. It is important that we not come to worship the idea as we have come to worship the object. Such pitfalls are everywhere. Even if in attempting to describe the function of the Ready-made I am projecting meaning onto it (as Jean-Paul Thenot points out). I am simply reinforcing my own position by imposing my own ideas on (the Ready-mades, from almost any point of view, are such empty signs that we can really do nothing else). To paraphrase Paz again, coopting the Ready-made into the realm of art objects desecrates the original gesture. If it preserves its neutrality, the gesture itself becomes the artwork.

Duchamp and the alchemical tradition

If Duchamp was so indifferent to art (he did not hold a romantic attachment to the idea of art nor to the notion of the artist) that his art became the art of the gesture (as Vautier would maintain), how many artists, admitting to Duchamp's influence, realize this? As Duchamp himself said "I am, after all, only an artist." In this world he functioned as an artist. The world would not let him be otherwise, in spite of himself. Did his beauty of indifference become an indifference to his artistic principles? (realizing that affirmation and denial are but opposite sides of the same coin). Are we to assume that Duchamp himself would subvert his own principles simply to avoid any chance of identifying with them, by sanctioning major retrospectives and commemorative editions of his Ready-mades? Perhaps; this is a typical alchemical strategy of non-identification, either with the world or with one's idea of it, and could be described as being both a gesture of culpability and humility as much as anything.

Much has been written in the past decade about the alchemical significance of Duchamp's work. A great deal of this writing has been somewhat like trying to pass a haystack through the eye of a needle. Such dedication to the explanation and justification of Duchamp's motivating impulses (whether conscious or unconscious) is not without value as a work of devotion and scholarship. (Schwarz's *The Alchemist Stripped Bare in the Bachelor*, Even is to my mind by far the most reasonable, and Burnham's excesses are by far the most amusing). However, because such references and parallels can be uncovered and persuasively argued, it does not automatically follow that Duchamp was in any way attempting to conceal alchemical doctrine or theory in his work. The more we take him seriously, the more he mocks us.

Duchamp was a very intelligent man. Spiritual alchemy is practiced in varying degrees by a number of individuals, quite openly and freely, without any of them having the faintest notion of the alchemical tradition that such an attitude reflects. Any individual who is motivated by the desire for understanding, or by an active conscience, or by both a self-critical attitude and a selfless interest in others, and at the same time is aware of the countless everyday fictions that are taken in error as acknowledged facts can be described as a follower of the alchemical path without ever having been initiated into the tradition. In fact, the true alchemical tradition is one of self-initiation.

As Duchamp said "If I have ever practiced alchemy, it was in the only way it can be done now, that is to say, without knowing it."

The parallels are there, as they should be in the work of a man of Duchamp's understanding and disinterestedness. However, the importance of the Glass in its alchemical context, whether accepted as unconscious (as in Schwarz) or conscious (as in Calvesi) is that the bachelors represent personality and the bride represents essence. The personality, being multifaceted and active/aggressive is represented by nine masculine forms. Esoterically nine is the largest number contained within the third dimension. It is referred to as the number of man (corresponding to the nine months of embryonic life). It is the number of the spheres through which the consciousness passes on its way to birth. The essence, being passive, embryonic, unfertilized yet unified, is singular, feminine and virginal.

Paradoxically, while it is the aim of the psychology of alchemy to develop and mature the individual essence at the expense of personality, that is, to reverse active and passive and thus place personality under the active influence of essence, this is only possible through the agency of the personality itself. This is all we need to know and accept of the Large Glass if we are to benefit from it personally by applying such to ourselves rather than engaging in the fruitless exteriorization of our own brilliance, which is in actual fact, merely a reflection of something else.

This is also all we need to know and accept of the Large Glass in terms of understanding its meaning, whether intended by Duchamp or simply interpreted by the spectator. All references to alchemy in Duchamp's work, however detailed and thorough, are quite superficial and are presented from a purely secular point of view.

Duchamp and the Infra-thin

There is one idea in Duchamp's work of which we know almost nothing. This idea, he admitted in 1945, "has occupied me a great deal over the last ten years." This one idea justifies Duchamp's parallel with alchemy's psychological method far more than all the potential volumes of speculation on and interpretation of the alchemical symbolism that has been or might be traced through his work, and this is his idea of infra-thin.

The infra-thin is that state of suspended judgement between two opposites where one identifies with neither, seeing them as opposite manifestations of the same thing, since the one cannot exist without the other.

Duchamp said himself "For me there is something else in addition to yes, no, or indifferent and that is, for instance - the absence of investigations of that type."

On another occasion Duchamp stated that "art is the gap." That is the gap between "the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed." A non-significant Ready-made confronts the insignificant art object and makes the illusion of art transparently clear. Duchamp's "beauty of indifference" makes perfect sense because the Ready-made is not set up to challenge but to denude. In this respect, the Ready-mades make perfectly good bachelors.

Duchamp, through Rose Selavy, acknowledged the positive/negative, male/female posturing that is the result of a dualistic concept of reality. More than this, he acknowledged (as a man) the existence of the female principle within himself. We accept this dualistic concept as being absolute, at least emotionally if not intellectually, and the emotions, acting at such great speed, always win. In comparison to emotion intellect is merely historical justification. To quote Robert Cumming (in Centerford Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 12);

"We take the notion of a dualistic universe as being absolute, and whilst I'm certainly not a supporter of Positivism, a so-called dialectic approach to life's problems isn't going to lead anywhere either. At least not unless we can grasp both extremes, one in each hand, instead of just orbiting one particular pole in opposition ... because if something radically new is created as a result of this opposition it will be outside of both these poles and so will be outside of ourselves. But the only change of any value is internal; a change of self. This is only possible if we acknowledge the existence of both polarities within ourselves ... I think we should be able to find a way to say yes no rather than yes or no. Then maybe being violent and being violated (for example) would be the same ... That is, there would be a correspondence of suffering."

The function of life seems to be the breakdown of surface in order to reveal essence. Formalism, being preoccupied with surface (with personality) resists this while claiming the opposite. Such are the mechanics of laziness, imitation, obsolescence etc. (one can see why Duchamp aligned himself with the Surrealists and the Dadaists and yet still identified with neither).

For myself, (and I do refer to this piece of writing as fiction), to live in the infra-thin means that one denies personality the right to expression. (By personality I mean our automatic, mechanical response to the external world, learned through imitation and habit). This is a difficult process. It smacks of self-censorship, which is exactly what it must not be. To live in the infra-thin it is necessary first of all to allow the personality its full range of expression in order that we might observe its manifestations. Some of these manifestations will have value, both for ourselves and for society; others will be completely negative and destructive. (This does not mean that we do not have the right to be angry; to criticise; to be outraged by the many forms of psychological violence that we are subjected to in the name of 'good government', 'participatory democracy', 'cultural fascism' or whatever). By living in the infra-thin (once we know ourselves well enough) we allow essence to develop, which allows us to become more conscious.

Becoming more conscious, we not only become more aware of our negative manifestations and their effects on others, but we also reach a point where we are acting from the consciousness of conscience and negative aspects of personality are eventually eliminated (or so the story goes). As I said, this is a difficult process. Duchamp said that the artist is a mediumistic being. He senses, feels and suspects many things; but quite mechanically (as a result of his own 'accident of birth'). And yet if we are honest we understand very little because we do not really understand ourselves. This is the function of psychological alchemy. This is why it is essential (of the nature of essence) to be more than an artist. Being 'an artist' is merely an expression of personality.

Duchamp, by dealing with such empty signs as the Ready-mades, drew attention away from the art work and placed the attention squarely on the artist. Fortunately for us (and indeed for Duchamp) he presented us with a surface so transparent that we are free to interpret what we will.

In the future, to be 'only an artist' will not be enough. Duchamp died in 1968. As artists we owe him everything and we owe him nothing. I think that is an appropriate way to settle the account, and one that he would have found quite satisfying.

Regardless of Duchamp's contribution to the 'stripping bare' of Art's illusions, and in spite of his contribution to the broadening of Art's context (and let's face it, within our own specific contexts we can only do so much) one still has to ask whether such a broadening of activity is desirable or useful per se. Art in any form, be it painting, video, performance etc., is still in most cases an isolated, self-indulgent expression of artists making art for other artists. His indifference, which we admire as an intellectual strategy of non-identification and which intrigues us in its similarity to Eastern philosophical thought and Western alchemical doctrine, is perhaps his most redeeming quality. Being an artist and yet expressing an indifference to Art both as a system of values and as a milieu when most artists identify with Art as their sole 'raison d'etre' can teach us a lot about the true roots of our motivation, whether we are traditional in our expression, whether we are 'avantgarde', or whether we claim to be animated by 'social conscience'. What I have in mind is an activity appropriate to the sensitivity and sensibility of artists, but which is Art no more than say, if we were all bankers, we would have to call it banking. Duchamp's influence on contemporary art is unequalled, but

regardless of the place he rightly enjoys as a leading light of post-Formalist aesthetics, from this writer's perspective he seems to be, as "only an artist", something of a sociological fossil.

As his good friend Picabia wrote in 1922; "Those who possess a truly creative faculty need only express themselves through themselves. The skills they have acquired are only a means to exteriorize themselves more completely in relation to others. They need not look for a personality, a new process, a new representation: the innovation is within them, because there are neither new art nor new men, but simply men with the gift of feeling, then expressing, what others never suspect in their environment ."

And further, in a comment on art education which is as pertinent today as it was in 1922, bearing in mind today's typical artist/educator, who still presents himself as the traditional stereotype;

"Art schools resemble schools for engineers - engineers who invent nothing, but know by heart what others have invented, and who often work to overwhelm very precise machines under the pretext of making 'something else'. Thus certain artists seek to perfect, to arrange the work of men of genius; they diminish that element that might shock the public; they dress that work in chastity belts or bathing suits ... However, the true genius is not a fashion, is not a type, does not invent himself: he is. Genius is not a curiosity, but the direct manifestation of life."

If we can deflate the Duchampian balloon which we all, as members of the art community, have helped to inflate (hopefully to the point of bursting), then the rest of art history which is contained within this metaphor will evaporate. We might then be able to concentrate on the transformative potential of a creative involvement with our collective and interactive psychological life, and thus move our context not only outside of the exclusive realm of Art, but also move it away from that of a noun to that of a verb...

...Duchamp sidled slowly up to the bar. His gun, smoking lazily, made its final, post-erotic gesture. It seemed like an eternity. Rose Selavy thought he was moving far too quickly.

"I am, after all, only an artist" smiled Duchamp ironically, still trying to put her at her ease.